

Quest For The Skies

Sujit John | TNN

Aircraft have something called a fuel computer, which helps the fuel system interact with other parts of a plane, including its navigation system and the engine. It also regulates the movement of fuel to maintain the centre of gravity of the plane. If people move from their seats, the computer recalculates the centre of gravity and moves fuel in the appropriate direction.

Before the launch of a new aircraft model, the fuel computer is tested in a rig that is specially designed for it. For the Airbus A350 that is currently under development, the rig has been created by a company called Quest Global in Bangalore. Quest did everything from conceptualization to building of the rig, including hardware and software. It took two years to build, has one lakh interconnections, 11 different types of printed circuit boards and 57 km of cables, and was shipped to Airbus's UK location in July last year.

For Ajit Prabhu, 39, and Aravind Melligeri, 41, who founded Quest as an out-sourced engineering services company in 1997, such work now is becoming par for the course. They have built a similar rig for the A350's landing gear tests. They are working for the Boeing 787. If an aircraft part develops a crack, Quest determines whether it should be repaired or replaced. It tests blades, casings and pipings on the exterior of the engine to see if they can withstand the temperature and stress when the plane takes off.

It works with companies like GE, Pratt & Whitney, Rolls Royce, Hamilton Sundstrand, Siemens and Toshiba. And though aerospace accounts for a good proportion of the work, they also work in areas like oil & gas, power turbines, and transportation.

"Earlier we used to work with GE at the manager level. Today we pilot ideas together, we tell them what to do, we work with them to accomplish that," says Prabhu.

Prabhu and Melligeri grew up in the small town of Hubli in Karnataka. Melligeri's father died young. Prabhu's father used to lease a fruit tree for Rs2 a day and made money by selling the fruit. "We come from poor families, studied in a Kannada medium school, sitting

on the floor with a slate. The first time I spoke English was in the US," says Prabhu. Melligeri went on to do engineering at KREC Suradhkal and Prabhu at BVH Engineering College in Hubli. Both then headed to the US for higher studies and began working there, Melligeri at Ford and Prabhu with GE.

Prabhu was still on his student visa when he thought of starting his own venture. "I asked my brother in the US to join me, but he said we were there to study, and that if I was determined I could ask Aravind. 'He is as crazy as you are', my brother told me."

Prabhu's manager at GE gave Quest its first contract. The GE business for Quest grew so fast that eventually he hired his own manager in GE. Together they brought GE's process discipline and execution focus into Quest.

And they did most of the work out of India, which not only helped lower costs but also enabled a quick scale-up because of the talent available.

The Enron trouble hit GE hard and, hence, Quest. Fortunately, just before that, Quest had received funding from PE firm Carlyle, and that money was used to fund its losses. That episode was a huge learning experience. "We learnt how to manage cash flows, delivery," says Prabhu. Many from their families also chipped in with money at that point, all of which was converted into equity. "It's turned out to be the best return on money for them. Carlyle also exited with a three-time return on their investment," says Prabhu. In December last year, the \$120-million Quest won a \$75-million funding from Warburg Pincus, which is being used to exit the early investors, retire the company's debt and make fresh investments.

Melligeri is now spearheading an aircraft components manufacturing business and launched a SEZ in Belgaum for that purpose last year. It has a joint venture with Magellan Aerospace for a surface treatment facility and a JV with France's Setforge for a forging facility. Quest manufactures floor components and door components that go into the A380 and the B787. "We are now investing in people; just hired a UK national as CTO. This business is capital intensive and a long-term play," says Melligeri. The expectation is that over time, customers will ask Quest to do everything from design to manufacture.

ARAVIND MELLIGERI & AJIT PRABHU
FOUNDERS, QUEST GLOBAL



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Aravind Melligeri



Aravind Melligeri (left) and Ajit Prabhu