

Harvinder Singh

PSI Incontrol chairman gets ...

By EUGENE MAHALINGAM
eugene@thestar.com.my

As a child, Harvinder Singh had a knack for taking his toys apart. This, naturally, was a concern for his parents. But little did they realise the young man's talent for disassembling things would spur him to head PSI Incontrol Sdn Bhd, which is today a leading supplier of protection, control and automation control room systems for substations, hydro power plants, tunnels, railways and oil and gas pipeline control rooms.

"I was a curious child and always loved gadgets. My parents would buy me a toy and I would play with it on the first day. By the second day, I'd dismantle it. My parents thought I was very destructive," Harvinder tells *StarBizWeek* with a laugh.

Harvinder's curiosity about how things worked eventually earned him a degree in electrical and electronic (E&E) engineering.

Tough beginnings

After completing his Form Five at St John's Institution, Harvinder went on to study the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) or Higher School Certificate (HSC) as it was known then, but dropped out soon after.

"I felt the HSC was too academic and just not what I wanted to do."

Harvinder pursued his passion in engineering and in 1983 earned a diploma in E&E from ITJ College.

He went on to study at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland and earned an E&E degree. He returned to Malaysia in late 1985 when the country was in a recession and recalls being jobless for about a year.

"I had to do anything and everything just to earn money and keep my head above water," Harvinder reminisces, adding that with the help of his brother, he started a tiny retail business selling educational toys.

"I started to do direct selling and imported toys from Hong Kong and Taiwan. My brother, a pilot, had connections in those countries and was able to help me."

Harvinder says he even set up small booths in shopping complexes across Klang valley to promote his toy business. Harvinder also had a hand at selling insurance for Great Eastern, becoming one of their top sales representatives within six months.

"It was a tough period for me as I was practically on my feet from 7am right up to midnight – selling insurance and at the same time manning my retail booths at malls. However, this was also my most formative year as the experience and struggles brought out the skills in me that I never knew I had."

As he toiled day and night, Harvinder sent out over 100 job applications within the span of one year. Unfortunately, no offer was forthcoming.

Then, in late 1986, Harvinder was recruited to become a trainee draftsman with the ABB group, a Switzerland-based company with operations in Malaysia specialising in power and automation technology.

Harvinder felt so privileged to

be inspired

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join ABB, which is today one of the largest engineering companies in the world, that he told the management he was willing to work there for nothing but engineering-related knowledge in return.

"I was passionate about engineering and was willing to work for free. I just wanted the experience," he recalls, adding that he was finally given a monthly salary of RM400.

Slowly, Harvinder moved up the ranks – from a trainee to a full-fledged engineer in eight months. In 1990, he was moved to technical sales. Harvinder was also instrumental in introducing the first generation of digital protection systems for substations in Malaysia, which was considered a revolution at that time.

So impressed was the Swiss-based outfit with Harvinder's work performance that they asked him to oversee their entire Asean operations. By early 1997,

Harvinder grew ABB's regional business reaching RM100mil in sales, boosting his reputation in the process. The company even offered him a position in Switzerland, but Harvinder declined – he loved Malaysia too much!

That same year, Austria-based engineering outfit VA Tech SAT, a competitor of ABB, approached Harvinder and asked him to be their managing director.

"VA Tech SAT was not present in Malaysia and they wanted me to help them with their expansion plans into this country and region," Harvinder turned down the offer.

Around that time, Harvinder recalls having a discussion with the managing director at ABB Malaysia on his (Harvinder's) future prospects within the company. What his boss told him was not what he wanted to hear.

"My boss told me that I should consider opportunities outside (ABB). I was shocked and had sleepless nights as I never ever considered a career outside the company and hearing that from my boss freaked me out!"

Meanwhile, VA Tech SAT was still not done with Harvinder just yet. A month after they had approached him with the job offer, the Austrian company came up with a new proposal for Harvinder – a joint venture (JV) with the man himself!

Harvinder was shocked by VA Tech SAT's proposal.

"I thought they were joking, offering a JV to an individual. I told them I'm not a company. But they told me that where ever in Asean that they went, customers knew me and trusted me. VA Tech SAT said 'we're prepared to put our money



BORN: Sept 5, 1962 in Kuala Lumpur
PERSONAL: Married with four children
HIGHEST QUALIFICATION: Bachelor of Engineering, Strathclyde University
CAREER: Chairman of PSI Incontrol Sdn Bhd
NOTEWORTHY: Winning the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2008 Award
FAVOURITE FOOD: Tehu sambal, nasi lemak
FAVOURITE PLACE: Golden Temple, India
HOBBY: Self development, playing the bagpipes
VALUES: Humility, integrity
INSPIRATION: My mother and brother

East Asia for the electrical power utility sector in Malaysia.

The TNB Metro Regional Control Centre now operates more than 30,000 substations in Klang Valley and Selangor.

VA Tech SAT's growth trajectory hit a snag in July 2005, when Austrian partner VA Tech was acquired by Siemens AG, a global powerhouse in E&E engineering. Harvinder was at that time a competitor of VA Tech.

Initially, Harvinder considered a continuation of the JV with Siemens but within a short time, he realised that the Siemens business model was significantly different from VA TECH. In July 2006, Harvinder negotiated an exit strategy and purchased Siemens' stake in VA Tech SAT. The deal however came at a huge cost.

"We had to change our name from VA Tech SAT to Incontrol Tech as Siemens took over the brand and products. We had to look for new partners because our previous clientele had been taken over entirely by Siemens," he says, adding that 2007 and 2008 were tough years for Incontrol Tech.

"It was a life and death situation because by 2006, we had orders of close to RM100mil. It was a big challenge getting the customers to change the product offerings but at the same time, retain the existing running contracts. I also had to reassure my staff that despite the tough times, we would survive."

Fortunately, Harvinder's customers were supportive of him and his company and during the crisis period from 2007 to 2008, just one key staff member left.

"All in all, it made us stronger.

Our team stayed together and found new solutions around the challenges that we faced," says Harvinder.

By 2009, Incontrol Tech was "back on its feet" and Harvinder was contemplating listing the company. Then, in April of that year, an opportunity came knocking in the form of Germany-based PSI AG, a world leader in control room technology.

Its chief executive officer, Dr Harald Schrimpf contacted Harvinder and told the latter that PSI was interested in a potential merger.

"Schrimpf said PSI wanted to grow in Asia-Pacific and knew that we wanted to grow internationally and asked if we would consider a merger," recalls Harvinder.

Naturally, Harvinder's reputation preceded him. When he asked Schrimpf why the German wanted to merge with Incontrol Tech, Schrimpf said he wanted to work with someone "he could trust."

Harvinder didn't take too long to tell Schrimpf that the deal "was on."

"We did a share swap with PSI AG and ended up listing in Germany. In the process, I acquired shares in the German company," says Harvinder.

Following the merger, Incontrol Tech became PSI Incontrol, with its headquarters in Sungai Buloh, Selangor. The company today employs nearly 200 people and has a presence in more than 10 countries.

Harvinder says PSI Incontrol's long-term plan is to become the "king of control rooms."

Outside the office

Because he works long hours during the week, Harvinder says the weekends are exclusively for his wife and four children. When he does have time for himself, Harvinder leads an all-Sikh bagpipe band, Sri Dainmesh Pipes & Drums or popularly known as the Malaysia Sikh Band.

"It's all voluntary and the upkeep of the band is done mainly by my brother and me," he says, adding that it costs about RM5,000 just to purchase one bagpipe or drum. Additional funding to maintain the band comes from fees charged for performances.

"We have about 25 bagpipe players and 25 drummers in the band," says Harvinder, adding that the band has played in many countries all over the world.

According to Harvinder, the Sikh band was formed as part of an initiative to keep youths engaged in positive activities, especially after their schooling days.

"Many of them take up these activities (such as playing the bagpipes) in school but once they leave (school), there's no continuity."

Harvinder, who was a recipient of the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2008 Award under the technology category, also conducts motivational talks. He says he likes empowering people and finds it a pleasure seeing them succeed.

"I try, in my own simple way, to make life better for people. I work with all communities and live by the philosophy of, if you can't see God in all, then you can't see God at all."



The smart tunnel project, whose control systems are supplied by PSI in Control, is one of the top 10 civil projects in the world today.

Smart inroads

Technology

By JAGDEV SINGH

THE smart tunnel that runs underneath the city centre is a marvel of modern civil engineering. Its uniqueness is its dual purpose – apart from diverting flood water from the city, it also acts as a traffic artery to channel motor vehicles in and out of the city centre.

Opened in 2007, it has served its intended roles well but many do not know the people behind the mammoth tunnel.

One such person is Harvinder Singh, whose company PSI in Control Sdn Bhd supplied the control systems that check the tunnel 24 hours a day.

"It is one of the top 10 civil projects in the world even until today. The icing on the cake was that the project consultant told us the control systems were among the most sophisticated he had ever seen for a tunnel," said Harvinder, 40.

"We were really proud of that as it was a Malaysian design."

Harvinder's company PSI in Control, where he is chairman cum managing director, is a specialist in control systems. Control systems are used to monitor just about any building, railways, tunnels, ports, airports and a host of other operations. The smart tunnel is not the company's largest job but Harvinder pointed out that it was among the most complex the company had undertaken as it had to build interfaces and integrate so many systems, some of which had never been designed before.

The largest job the company has bagged is the geographical information system for Tenaga Nasional which costs close to RM50mil over four years. Its purpose is to build a geographical footprint for all of TNB's assets. "They have transmission lines, power plants, substations, land banks. We are putting all this information on a map so they can see it and check whatever information they want to know," he said.

Harvinder's journey to where he is today is a success story that will resonate with most Malaysians. The father of four started work for a multinational engineering company in 1985. Passionate about engineering and design which he did for the first three-and-a-half years, Harvinder soon found himself doing sales.

PSI in Control, a company owned by a Malaysian and specialising in control systems for buildings, tunnel, ports and more, is carving a niche in a vital sector.



"Local support is key. One of our advantages is our ability to respond quickly to a client's request," says Harvinder Singh. — AHMAD IZZAFIQ ALIAS/ The Star

"I never saw myself as a sales person and initially found it challenging. But the job went extremely well," he recalled.

Harvinder's career took him into the region in 1991 and later he was responsible for Asea Brown Boveri's (ABB) operations in Asia. At the end of 1996, he was head hunted for VA Tech, which was then the largest tech conglomerate in Austria. They proposed he become their MD and start up operations in Asia but he turned the offer down as he was then regional manager for ABB for Asean and comfortable with his job.

To his surprise, they came back two months later and offered a joint venture which took him by surprise.

He accepted the offer but realised the challenges before him. He had to leave a cushy job and start from scratch. He operated out of his home for the first few months and later hired his first six engineers.

The joint venture with VA Tech started in 1997 with Harvinder a 49% shareholder in the company. In July 2005, Siemens took over VA Tech in Europe and offered to buy out Harvinder. He declined and instead convinced them to sell him 51% of the company.

In 2006, Harvinder merged his company

with PSI AG, a leading German technology company, which he had dealings with since 2002. Today, he is a major shareholder of PSI AG.

His reason for always wanting to be involved in engineering was his passion for such work. He could have accepted the lucrative offer from Siemens to buy out his share but decided against it as he wanted to build Malaysia as an engineering centre.

"Germany, being an industrialised and developed market, has a tremendous amount of technology and we wanted to leverage off that while providing a low-cost development centre in Malaysia and move into the Far East, Asia Pacific and Middle East markets," he said.

Today, his operations based in Malaysia has to compete with the giants of the industry such as Siemens, Alstom and ABB but the one advantage Harvinder has is local engineering capability, quality and price.

"Local support is key. One of our advantages is our ability to respond quickly to a client's request," he said.

Global foray

Apart from Malaysia where it has won big jobs from Tenaga Nasional, Prasarana, and work on the Seremban-Gemus stretch of the electrified double tracking project, the company has found success overseas.

In Thailand, it has delivered seven control centres for Thailand's Provincial Electricity Authority and also just won the job for the city of Bangkok.

It has landed jobs in Iran and has received a contract from the city of Muscat in Oman.

"Customers are more appreciative of companies such as ours as we are small, fast and adaptive," he said.

His success won him an award in Ernst & Young's entrepreneur award of the year in 2008 in the technology category.

"Winning the award gave me a confidence boost and validated a lot of the thinking processes, teamwork and synergies in the organisation we have built," he said.

"It also gives confidence to the customers that they are working with a capable company that is recognised on a national and international platform. The award gave the whole team a morale boost. Our success reflects on the whole team and not just me alone. It was a

validation for all of us."

Despite the time-consuming nature of managing a growing business, Harvinder makes it a point to delve into the other aspects of life, namely, giving back to society.

He is involved in a number of activities involving the Sikh community, and on every Saturday for the past 25 years, Harvinder has been practising with a non-profit and volunteer bagpipe band, which he helped establish in 1985.

"It is a platform for us to provide an outlet for young adults and school leavers and build leaders and leadership qualities," he said.

Harvinder and his brother Sukdev Singh also established the non-profit Sri Dasmesh school in KL in 1990.

Their objective was to provide quality education based on the Malaysian education syllabus and after 10 years, the school is winning awards today.

He said the school is among the top three private schools in terms of results and attributes a lot of its success to the hard work of the CEO, Madam Jawinder Kaur, who is a qualified accountant. She is assisted by Harvinder's wife Ravinder Kaur.

"For the past 10 years running the school, we have lost RM1mil but what is important for us is to provide a solid foundation on a holistic basis for the kids," he said.

Harvinder's social work was also seen in the tsunami-devastated Aceh in 2005. Harvinder was saddened by tragedy that hit Aceh and used radio ham operators to establish contact with the affected areas.

"I joined the Global Sikhs and became the mission director and established a rescue and relief team. For almost two months, I was fully engaged in running this rescue operation," he said.

"In total, we sent 240 people over a period of four months and more than US\$12mil worth of goods and medicines. We were recognised by the United Nations for the work we did," he said.

It is difficult to balance between family, work and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but it is a juggle Harvinder has managed to pull off.

"This is a challenge everybody has. For me, the priority is to build sustainable things with leaders who can operate independently," he said.

By Jagdev Singh, 31 August 2011