In a fast-moving world, digital transformation is fundamentally changing the way we live and work and emerging trends are shaping the way organisations operate. Adapting to these has become imperative for all businesses—small, medium and large. Driving on this digital path, Chennai-based Zuper aims to empower organisations through their expertise.

Speaking at Madison Square Garden in New York (September 2014), Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi appealed to the Indian diaspora there to come back home and add to the country’s talent pool. “Mr Modi’s speech was thoughtful, patriotic and inspirational. Working with top MNCs like Microsoft and AT&T, I had lived abroad for 14 years. I felt a strong desire to do something meaningful for my country,” says Mr Anand Subbaraj, CEO, Zuper.

A year later, the December 2015 floods that hit Tamil Nadu brought him back home to visit his family. He witnessed several services-based businesses being impacted by the floods. They not only incurred heavy infrastructure damages but also lost years of business history and contacts. The losses were especially significant to the service businesses because of their rudimentary and ad-hoc methods of handling core business processes. Mr Subbaraj considered technology as a solution to this problem. He says, “A lot of service businesses were visiting the homes of their past customers (that they remembered) to recollect phone numbers, and past service history so that they could rebuild the business history and contact information. I was amazed by their sincerity but felt this was an manual process that needs to be addressed. My brother-in-law (Karthik) and I discussed the situation and realised the importance of digital transformation, not just in rural India but in every business that was not leveraging the power of technology.” This is how Zuper’s journey began.

**WHAT THEY DO**

Zuper was launched in Chennai in August 2016 as an enterprise mobility platform—enabling organisations to manage, modernise, and transform field and remote
workforce—and started operations in February 2017. Their aim is to bridge the digital gap for organisations by providing solutions that transform customer experience and improve workforce utility. It gives them the option to organise, automate and digitise their field business by efficiently managing their customers and employees through one platform. Mr Subbaraj says, “With the ‘uberisation’ of various businesses, the massive growth in the on-demand economy, and IoT, it is important to provide the best experience to customers. There is absolutely no tolerance for mediocre service. Customers no longer want to wait for a four- to eight-hour window for a service technician; they expect up-to-the-minute information about events, want to be updated on the service, and more importantly, want to be assured that the job will get done during the first visit itself.”

Zuper offers an end-to-end platform to bring together the power of people, process, product, and promise with mobility, and IoT—for managing field workforce efficiently, reducing operating costs and customer churn, and improving customer loyalty. They have been in the field for a little more than a year, but already has an impressive list of clients. “Organisations using Zuper have increased workforce utilisation by over 50%, reduced service turnaround time by over 35%, increased customer adoption and profitability by over 45%, operating more efficiently and reduced costs by over 30%,” Mr Subbaraj adds.

**BUSINESS MODEL**

Zuper offers a comprehensive and modern field service management platform. It is a mobile-first, cloud-first B2B software as a service (SaaS) offering for organisations, irrespective of shape and size. Their modules include remote timesheet management, inventory management, smart scheduling and dispatch, work order management (online and offline), real-time location tracking (online and offline), safety and security for consumers and employees, and analytics and reporting. Organisations can pick and choose the ones they want to deploy. Mr Subbaraj adds, “The remote timesheet management module comes with facial and voice biometrics. We are the first platform in Asia to offer voice biometrics-based timesheet management of workforce. Apart from this, capabilities are deeply embedded in the rest of the workflow allowing organisations to perform real-time identity verification ensuring the right employee is at the right customer location. In a market like India, we came across situations where the user’s productivity was impacted due to flaky network connectivity. To counter this issue, we also offer offline mode support for the most critical operations to eliminate the dependency on network connectivity; and the users can perform most of the tasks in a completely offline environment on a mobile device of their choice.”

**THE TECHNOLOGY**

Zuper is built on a micro-service architecture pattern leveraging the best practices of mobility, cloud and distributed computing. It is a suite of independently deployable, small, modular services where each service runs a unique process and communicates through a well-defined, lightweight mechanism to serve a business goal and thereby enables scalability on-demand. They have a predictive analytics engine that helps organisations forecast their work-orders, and schedule smartly. They also use Content Delivery Networks to ensure high availability and minimal latency. They have obtained a provisional patent and IP protection for their ML-based smart scheduling and intelligent and automated diagnostics system.

**REVENUE GENERATION**

They have been bootstrapping so far with the primary goal of validating the market opportunity, building a strong product that meets customer requirements, and driving customer acquisition. Their revenue run rate for 2017-2018 was US$ 200,000. Based on the strong pipeline of customers and word-of-mouth referrals, they are targeting a revenue of ₹10 crore in the next 24 months. “We are seeing a tremendous growth of >30% month over month. We will start our funding rounds soon. The goal is to raise a pre-Series A round by Q2 CY 2018 and scale the business. We plan to go for a Series-A round by Q4, CY 2019.” Zuper has more than 40 clients across ten different cities in India and Singapore, and is deployed in more than 500 client sites catering to around 6,000 end users.

Being a B2B startup, Zuper initially targeted SMEs. However, setting the right business model became one of their major challenges as the team went through several iterations to get the model and the price right to ensure it is a win-win situation for SMEs. Mr Subbaraj adds, “We initially offered the entire feature set as part of the platform. This was great to demonstrate and showcase the richness of the platform but not all
features were useful for all businesses. We had to pivot to a tier-based framework and offer features in a pay-as-you-go model. And it started resonating much better with the customers.”

The other challenge was that SaaS was still in the nascent stage in India, which meant that SMEs did not easily adapt to paying regularly for using a product as they are used to paying one-time or using services for free. “This is an ongoing challenge, but with the evolving market, decision-makers are looking at leveraging the right technology to automate and operationalise their businesses.” Lastly, they also had to overcome resistance to adopting technology—if not from the business owner, then from the employees or end users who are either intimidated by tech and feel it is a threat to their job, or just averse to change.

**MARKET OPPORTUNITY IN INDIA**

Over the last twelve months, Zuper has travelled across the country from Madurai down south to Chandigarh in the north. For them, India offers a vast market opportunity. There are several industries like home services, maintenance, installation and repairs, facility management, HVAC, retail logistics, BFSI, pharma, pest control, construction, automobile, and manufacturing that can leverage their platform, improve the efficiency of after-sales servicing and improve customer experiences. Mr Subbaraj says, “We are a small team and do not want to stretch too thin. We are laser-focused on a subset of the industries and our goal is to be the market leader in these before targeting more. There are going to be over 50 million field workers in India by 2020. About 80% of the field workforce does not leverage any technology, or the deployment is fragmented and ad-hoc. With the digital wave sweeping the country and the emergence of platforms like Uber, Ola, WhatsApp, Amazon, and Flipkart disrupting the market, business decision-makers across small, medium and large enterprises have realised that they need to modernise and re-imagine the business processes to provide the best experiences to their customers, and stay competitive. In India alone, this is a US$ 5 billion market opportunity. We have met over 500 small, medium, and large businesses to validate our hypothesis. This helped us significantly to clarify our thoughts, get a better understanding of the scenario, and gain deep knowledge of service businesses and the mindset of the owners.”

**THE FUTURE**

Zuper is planning to launch in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Middle East. They will be executing their services through a channel partner programme that enables individuals and companies to sell their products for a commission. The decision has been taken to boost their sales, and gain access to competitive markets. They plan to expand to the North US in Q1 CY 2019.

Zuper is creating an operating system for field and remote workforce management. Their goal is to continue evolving the platform and provide the latest technology. The future of field workforce management is IoT-enabled connected devices and smart homes. They aim to offer a connected platform that automates all points of interactions across different functions to help organisations to operate with the highest level of efficiency.
A road trip through the forests of Central India is a treat for nature enthusiasts. As the forest prepares for the parched summer months, it acquires hues of yellow, ochre, russet, and golden. The inimitable dhak or ‘flame of the forest’ (Butea monosperma) provides a flash of fiery orange to the landscape. At Pench National Park and Tiger Reserve too, these are the views that greet you in the month of March.

The park derives its name from the Pench river that divides it into almost two equal halves, flowing north to south as it joins the Kanhan river, which pours into the Wainganga river in Maharashtra. This is the only tiger reserve in the country that straddles two states—Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The forests are located on the southern slopes of the Satpura ranges, comprising mixed deciduous species with teak (Tectona grandis) as the primary species.

At this time of the year, the teak stands bare, forming a cushioned bed of dried leaves. We started with the evening safari that took us down long-winding roads. Looking for the elusive tiger in this landscape seemed less daunting with the trees stripped bare of foliage. But when the guide pointed to a leopard resting in the

In Mowgli’s Land

Stretching across Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, Pench National Park is known for being the inspiration to Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book. Rich in flora and fauna, this teak forest is also a tiger reserve and home to over 285 resident and migratory birds, including endangered species of vultures.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: SUSHMITA MANDAL