

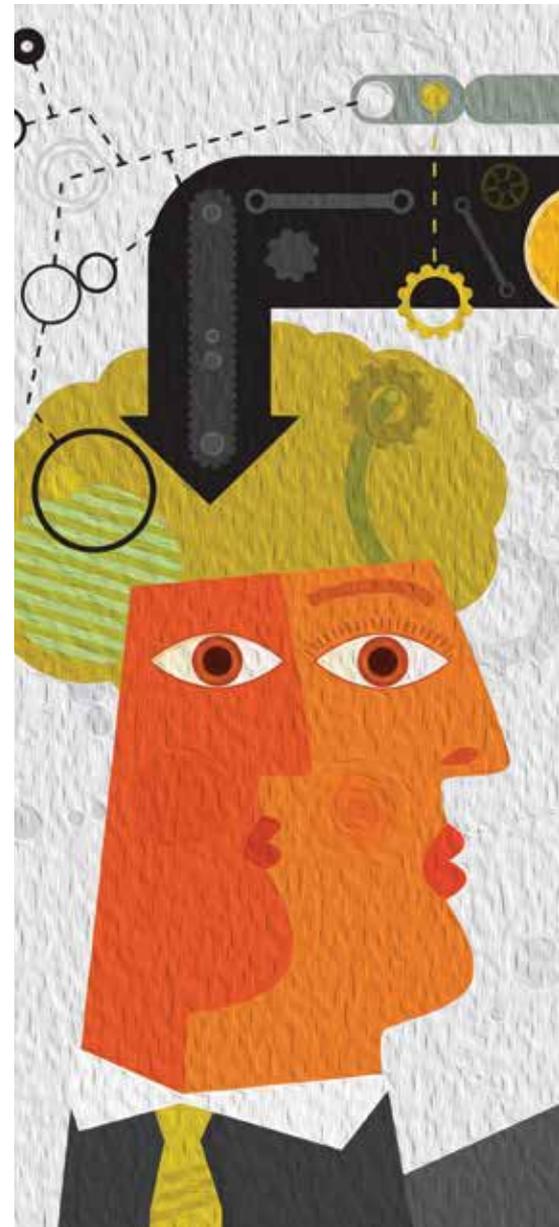
VIRTUALLY YOURS

Brickwork India pioneered the concept of Remote Executive Assistant and Virtual Office, a knowledge outsourcing suite of solutions and services. In the process it has set new benchmarks in the BPO industry and made the world take notice. **BY SANGITA THAKUR VARMA**

Can you imagine an office without the super efficient executive assistant (EA) multi-tasking between phone calls, client appointments, file management, sending emails, booking flight tickets and accommodation among other things and yet at your elbow in an instant with a pad ready for dictation? Unflappable, poised, trustworthy, reliable, etc, etc—the adjectives to describe this person are just not enough to bring out the invaluable services s/he brings. However, such EDs are rare and not all companies can hire one, especially startups or small companies. Brickwork India comes to the rescue of just such hapless CEOs. It provides you with a REA i.e., a Remote Executive Assistant™.

Brickwork India is not just the pioneer of the virtual assistant services concept but the most famous one as well. It has prominently featured in two global bestsellers—*The World is Flat*

by Thomas Friedman and the *4-Hour Work Week* by Timothy Ferris and is the India Representative for Fairfax County Government (USA). What gives the cutting edge to the company in this competitive arena is their path-breaking concept, REA™, a trademark application, launched in early 2005. The idea fuelling the development of this service was “simple but powerful”, as says Vivek Kulkarni, Founder and Chairman, Brickwork India. He had observed that while in India most senior executives have a lot of help, in developed countries like the US, Europe and Australia, secretaries are available to only a few senior executives. The middle management and often some senior management as well, have to depend on either a shared assistant or manage on their own. “The idea of a REA™ germinated from the needs of large global organisations to free up their executives from non-core, routine and process-driven activities and instead repurpose their



time towards more strategic and business critical activities,” he explains.

The concept was new and avant-garde and instantly caught the imagination of the global community. The idea to provide basic to most complex business assistance sitting at a distance had not yet been conceptualised of by the fast growing outsourcing industry. The media blitzkrieg that followed saw the company feature in top dailies, TV shows and print publications. At the centre of the hype was one former top officer of India’s administrative



but the routine nature of the work did not excite Kulkarni. “I was convinced that there was a market for executive assistants,” he says. With this conviction, he started a small division within B2K with just five virtual assistants in 2004 and offered REA. In 2005, Kulkarni sold his stake in B2K to launch Brickwork India. B2K by then had scaled into a 400-employee strong company and REA™ had gained Hollywood success, thanks to author, journalist and editor at large at *Esquire* Magazine, A J Jacob. Jacob’s tryst with outsourcing to Brickwork India’s virtual assistant Honey, and Asha of another Indian outsourcing firm, inspired him to pen his experiences in an article, which then inspired the movie *My Outsourced Life*. Inspired by the book *The World is Flat*, Jacob had decided to outsource his life for a lark—from writing mails to his editor, buying grocery to complaints against his wife to writing his articles. As he famously

feather to its cap when the Oregon Senator Frank Morse, a Republican, outsourced his speech on *The Impact of Globalisation on Oregon Economy* to it. Yet, another novel territory had been breached by the company, which expanded the outsourcing areas with each new assignment it undertook.

By 2011, Brickwork India too had built a strong staff base of around 200 people and was serving 2,000 clients across the globe ranging from sole proprietors to Fortune 500 companies, from its state of the art facilities in the technology hub of Bangalore. “Our 10 year journey has been exciting and one filled with learnings,” says Kulkarni, adding, “We started with 5 REAs and now have over 300 REAs with strong leadership in place. In addition, the company has a large ecosystem of consultants and partner vendors, for domain specific projects.”

Kulkarni’s experience of more than 30 years in building brand Silicon City in different verticals but especially as the Information Technology and Biotechnology Secretary, wooing global IT giants to set up bases in Bangalore, had given him a sharp insight into what offshore companies required from Indian IT talent. The Wharton Business School alum put to good use his connections and his varied experience to later launch Brickwork Ratings in 2008. Kulkarni gives the rationale for this new venture, “I have always been passionate about the world of finance and being a Wharton graduate in Finance, I set up India’s 5th and only domestic credit rating company.”

Meanwhile, he continued innovating the REA™ services with a vision to be the world’s virtual office. The company by now had firmly embarked on an illustrious journey based on Kulkarni’s creative insights. The flexibility of the REAs with diverse skillsets is such that they can be aligned to each client’s requirements. It can be scaled down to a support level for large organisations and scaled up to a consulting level for startups and entrepreneurs. “We

services—the pioneer—Vivek Kulkarni.

In 2000, as the IT Secretary of Karnataka, Kulkarni is credited with reinstating Bangalore’s glory as the Silicon City of India. In that year Karnataka launched the state’s new Millennium IT Policy—Mahithi—aimed at taking technology to the masses. The rest as they say is history. Taking an early retirement in 2003 and rich insights, Kulkarni floated a technical support centre—B2K (Bytes to Knowledge). With clients like Yahoo and Microsoft, the business was fine,

said, he “outsourced his neurons” and it proved to be the best move ever. Notwithstanding this comic take on outsourcing to virtual assistants, what Brickwork had actually achieved was instant fame and worldwide recognition for the quality of its services. The fact that Jacob’s efficient virtual assistant was just a BCom, did not take away from the enviable IIT and IIM grad knowledge base of Brickwork India. The outsourcing craze was at its peak in the USA and in 2006, Brickwork India added another

have over 25 different skillsets spread across our REA teams, right from chartered accountants, engineers and MBAs to software developers, graphic designers, accountants to liberal arts graduates. This enables us to be a one-stop shop and support all the functions in an organisation—accounts, finance, HR, sales, marketing, operations, customer service, IT & MIS,” informs Kulkarni. Under the umbrella of REA™, Brickwork has three business verticals—admin services, desktop research services and IT services. Under admin services, it provides

business and accounting support professionals who take care of all the day-to-day routine back-office work, accounting and book-keeping services, etc; the desktop research services vertical has a team of business analysts comprising MBAs, CPAs and engineers, specialising in providing insights and solutions to clients to make better business and investment decisions, and under the third vertical of IT services, software engineers and graphic designers provide clients technology assistance ranging from simple support to highly creative website design, real time application software and mobile apps.

The company that had coined the term REA, innovated and evolved it further to include diversified services. “We have crafted four kinds of Remote EAs to match any requirement that a business may have: Knowledge REA, Technical REA, Admin REA and Back-office REA,” says Kulkarni. Now the company is working on a new concept of “Centre of Excellence”. The reason being, as Kulkarni explains, “We found that executive assistants



Innovative Matrimony: Vivek and Sangeeta's perfect partnership is behind Brickwork India's success.

across geographies work in a highly fragmented environment. There is no common support or a common thread that holds them together to reinvent the executive assistant support where we augment the onsite EA support.”

REA has enabled the “4-hour work week” famously for Brickwork India’s outsourced clients. When asked if it has done the same for him, Kulkarni laughingly admits, “While we have enabled 4-hour work week for our clients, Sangeeta and I work at least 50–60 hours a week. Because of our unique and complex model, the business requires a lot of attention and keeps us on our toes.” Sangeeta Kulkarni is the CEO and Co-Founder of Brickwork India. Elevated to her current post in 2012, Sangeeta had been earlier working as COO and has brought about far-reaching changes in the company—firstly, by rebranding the REA specifically for large corporates as a “Virtual Office”, which brought more Fortune 100 clientele to the company’s fold and secondly, by derisking the company’s business.

Though Kulkarni declined to share the names of his clients due to confidentiality clause, he added, “Today the teams support top management-level executives of two of the world’s largest pharmaceutical firms, a big US-based hedge fund, a Fortune 100 food processing company as well as one of the world’s largest engineering and design multinationals, just to name a few. In addition, we have worked with at least 15,000 individual customers.”

The first Indian virtual assistance company to receive the ISO 27001:2005 certificate for data security and confidentiality, Brickwork India, as the first mover in this space, had no precedents to learn from. “Our initial incubation period was consumed in refining the concept and being nimble to address diverse client needs. Today, we have mastered the art of servicing all kinds of clients,” says Kulkarni. With a vision to scale up to become the preferred partner for Fortune 1000 clients and a one-stop shop for SMEs, Brickwork India continues innovating for a global presence, with plans to open centres in geographies across the world. ■

(Based on interview & research)