Sandeep Kishore

Living Digital

**An Interview with Sandeep Kishore,
Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, Zensar Technologies**

EDITORS' NOTE *Sandeep Kishore joined Zensar as CEO and MD in early 2016 and also serves as a Management Board member of RPG Enterprises, Zensar's parent company. The Board hired Kishore to reinvent a 55+ year old public company to make Zensar modern and relevant to its stakeholders in the new age. Kishore took a very different approach to change and first focused on making Zensar a 100 percent digital company before venturing out to its clients to help them in their enterprise-wide digital transformation programs. His approach of Living Digital – being 100 percent digital themselves first, not only provided Zensar's 10K+ associates globally (they call themselves Zensarians) with the right environment, it also super charged them to help their clients in a much more meaningful manner that connects and creates significant business impact. Under Kishore's leadership, Zensar's digital-led transformation is now a case study at Harvard Business School. Zensar is among the very few publicly listed companies to have transformed to a 100 percent living digital business. Under Kishore's leadership, the company's first R&D lab, ZenLabs, filed 25 patents within the first year. Kishore is an alumnus of globally-renowned IIT Bombay. Prior to joining Zensar, he worked at HCL Technologies for more than 25 years, where he built multiple billion-dollar businesses. Earlier, he was the Corporate Vice President and Global Head of Life Sciences, Healthcare and Public Services. Kishore is a prolific poet, having authored and published two books of Hindi-English poems,* Your Shadow Wants to Walk Alone *and* Old Seeds of a New Tree. *He is also the co-founder of Har Asha Foundation, a non-profit organization.*

COMPANY BRIEF *Zensar (zensar.com) is a leading digital solutions and technology services company that specializes in partnering with global organizations across industries on their Digital Transformation journey. A technology partner of choice, backed by a strong track-record of innovation, a credible investment in digital solutions, and an assertion of commitment to a client's success, Zensar's comprehensive range of digital and technology services and solutions enable its customers to achieve new thresholds of business performance. Zensar, with its experience in delivering excellence and superior client satisfaction through innovative technology solutions, is uniquely positioned to help clients surpass challenges around running their existing business most efficiently, helping in their legacy transformation, and planning for business expansion and growth through innovative and digital ways. Zensar's global revenue and net income in their most recent fiscal year 2019 were $567 million and $45 million, respectively. Zensar has 10,260 associates globally across 27 locations.*

Will you discuss the history and heritage of Zensar?

Zensar is an amazing organization. We have been a part of RPG Enterprises for a very long time, and we have been publicly listed since 1963. We have a very rich heritage, are very people-focused and are exceptionally aligned to the communities that we work in.

The board was looking to bring in new leadership, essentially with the point that, even though the company had done well, we had clearly missed several market opportunities for the new world. The market had just moved past us, and it was a serious time for the board to actually take a decision on where we needed to go to be relevant for the future.

I was a rank outsider. I was then working at HCL Technologies, running their Life Sciences, Healthcare and Public Services businesses – a billion-dollar-plus business – and when the Chairman of the Board of Zensar and RPG Enterprises, Harsh Goenka, reached out to me, I wasn't originally sure whether I wanted to accept the role.

But what really intrigued me was when he made the statement, "We are a 50-plus-year-old, publicly-listed company." I thought to myself that if you added the word "technology" to publicly-listed, there were very few companies in the world that had been publicly-listed technology companies for 50-plus consecutive years on one of the largest stock exchanges in the world, the Bombay Stock Exchange. It would be a fascinating opportunity to make an organization of that heritage relevant, and that's what excited me to join Zensar and RPG Enterprises.

How important was it to communicate your vision and strategy internally?

It was very, very important. It took a bit of time for everybody to align. Organizations are built with connective tissues, so it requires going through a few cycles for that trust to build. I have been blessed with our people, our Zensarians, who are very committed and very sharp. They understood the purpose of being digital, and today our company runs 100 percent digitally. If you actually search the app stores on your mobile phone for Zensar, it will amaze you how much of our universe runs native digital, native mobile, and native cloud.

What is the big idea? Since we are a digital services and consulting organization, we have to effectively ensure that we connect with our clients and their rapidly changing business and, hence, technology world. The route we have taken to impact this change is by developing the connect around our own change journey and that we know what it takes to affect enterprise-wide digital programs and make them achieve business results, and if we as a 55+-year-old public company can go through this process of change and make it work, we also believe we can make it work for our clients.

Is it challenging to differentiate in the industry?

The market is very competitive. There are many companies that claim to be able to do this work. At Zensar, we position ourselves and we go to market as a disruptor, as a challenger and as an innovator, which is our unique positioning.

Large organizations are not necessarily hung up on the concept that you need to have 200,000 people to get the job done. We are the right-sized organization. We are neither too big nor too small. We have 10,000 awesome Zensarians worldwide who have all been an effective part of living digital, and with platforms and tools they create the connect to change for our clients.

Another element is that we ask our customers whether they think they could actually do this on their own and whether they really know what it takes to change in this area. We remind them that most companies just hire consultants and move from one to the next to the next playing with technologies. We come from a position of expertise and relevance because our Zensarians live digital every day. Everything we

do is digital. My CMO runs the entire marketing organization from his mobile platform so when he goes and talks to others about how effectively we can dynamically allocate campaigns, resources, and measure effectiveness and show it in real time, it connects.

Will future growth come from acquisitions or from developing new products?

I think it will be from both. We have done four acquisitions in the last two and a half years, and we have done one divestiture. For the scale and size of our company, we have done some pretty amazing deals.

Change needs to be visible. Change needs to be persistent. And change is something that must align with the market. So we acquired competencies, not scale. As you start to build the business, you have to think about what you need to build and what you are able to buy.

Everything in the world is built around the human experience. No matter what your favorite platform is – Amazon, Disney, Uber, Airbnb, or any other platform – every platform needs to appeal to at a human level.

User experience and user interface were the last wave of digital. However, this has quickly moved to providing the ability to engage at a personal level. Every platform has to engage you and connect with you. This defines the human experience aspect. The reason these platforms connect with you is not just because they are built nicely, but because they are enabled by artificial intelligence. You stay on the platform because the platform helps you decide, intuitively, before you are actually seeking that information. The platform, based on your own behavior of searching, engaging, and transacting, constantly engages with you.

So it's about the human experience, enabled by artificial intelligence, and delivered through secure, smart, interconnected platforms. This is the only way that you can make digital platforms enterprise-wide scalable. Otherwise, it just remains in pockets. From sales to HR, to manufacturing, to supply chain, to marketing, everything has to communicate, and artificial intelligence works best if it's interconnected. Even within our own organization, all of our platforms are native digital, native AI, and unbelievably beautiful for you to engage with.

As Zensar's workforce has grown to 10,000, how important has it been to ensure that the workforce is diverse and inclusive, especially with such a diverse client base?

Diversity and inclusiveness, and the training in this for all Zensarians to make sure that we are relevant each day today and tomorrow, is my number one priority. We have 42 nationalities who work within our organization, so we are exceptionally committed to this. We just received an award from People Matters in India for being among the top 300 leading companies on skill and competency development. In South Africa, where we have trained 500 interns, Tomorrows Trust recognized us for being involved and giving back to the community in the country. We also do that in the United States, where we concentrate on bringing a diverse population onboard and training them in the digital skill development competency set.

Zensar's offices in Pune, India

The only true way for us to be global is to be diverse. We can't just do this with one or two nationalities. It just wouldn't work.

How do you describe what it means to be a Zensarian?

It's very deep within us on a philosophical level. The reason for that, as I mentioned earlier, is the only way for sustainable change is if you take all Zensarians along on this mega-change journey. Everyone has to feel it and own it. There are many ways in which you drive it. One is through not just talking digital. It's breathing, living, dreaming, making it happen, and that is why our platform is so important.

When we started this change journey, we were zero percent digital. Today, 52 of our business processes are 100 percent digital. There are over 34 different digital platforms. Within our organization of 10,000 Zensarians, our platforms have been downloaded internally more than 2.2 million times. There are over 950+ releases of these platforms. That means every platform has gone through over 30 releases. There have been more than 30 million sessions and it is growing disproportionately.

We are not perfect, but we continue to change. We fail more than we succeed internally, but that is how you succeed externally. You must build an open, communicative, transparent culture. To foster this, we have an amazing and one of a kind platform called ZenVerse. Harvard Business School did a whole case study on Zensar about cultural transformation, more than digital and technology transformation, because when you're changing a 55+-year-old public company, it's about working with the fabric and making everybody a part of the change.

How important it is for you to spend time with clients?

It's always been at the core and should be that way. It is more important now than it has ever been because of the change that is happening all around us. I live in Silicon Valley. I have my finger on the pulse of what's impacting our clients.

About two years ago, we invested in a very special undertaking we call ZenLabs, our innovation and research hub. The concept is that when we work in a consulting organization, we are continuously engaged with our clients, but then the fundamental question is, what are you actually doing with the clients? We should be effectively solving their business and technology problems for today and for tomorrow. If there is a business process or technology change, you have to solve it because there is a production deadline and a product launch deadline and you have to release it.

Hence, over a long period of time, most consulting organizations get aligned with thinking in the short to medium term. If we want to be relevant to our society, our community, our clients, and ourselves, we need to be investing outside of that curve. Product companies do this very well. So we invested in a research and innovation organization within Zensar which we call ZenLabs. It is a 100 percent organic initiative which we funded internally. In two years, we have now filed 56 unique patents. Globally, we have now filed close to 100 patents. Innovation is the core to keeping relevant today and tomorrow.

Are you able to take moments to enjoy the process and celebrate the wins, or is it always about what's next?

We celebrate a lot. We have a lot of fun times across the organization. With everything, you have to make sure the element of fun is permeated across the organization. It is a critical part of finding the balance and as Zensarians we do that well. ●