



Sajan Pillai

EDITORS' NOTE Sajan Pillai is also a member of UST Global's Board of Directors. Previously, Pillai served as Co-Founder of Softek Systems in India as well as an engineer in one of India's top three consulting services companies. Pillai also was the architect and managed several large software systems for MCI Telecommunications in the United States and, subsequently, held senior management positions in Tanning Systems, a U.S. based software solutions company. Pillai serves on the boards of multiple nonprofit organizations including the California Science Center, the Global Virus Network, Centro Fox in Mexico, and PEACE One Day Corporate Coalition. Pillai was recently chosen as one of the elite 100 CEO Leaders in STEM by STEMConnector.

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What is your vision for Step IT Up America?

When I look at our nation's talent crisis, it's primarily around not having enough talent in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

What makes it worse is that we only graduate 120,000 kids a year with STEM-related degrees. Out of the overall workforce, 27 percent

Step IT Up America

An Interview with Sajan Pillai, Chief Executive Officer, UST Global

are minorities and women, yet in STEM, it's 3 percent.

We need to have proactive ways of bringing in specific tangible steps to hire, train, and bring the workforce under one single valid team as opposed to handing it to another agency who may hand it off to another agency.

So we wanted to come up with a framework – start small but scale fast – to tackle this problem that many other agencies have tried to track nationally, but to do it at a local level.

Information technology is the biggest job creator in all of STEM. So what if we take this field and connect it with women in inner-cities who did not have the fortune to go to a larger university? We can connect those dots by using UST Global's ability to train human resources and make them into human capital. As we demonstrate to larger companies in those cities that it's possible, I can go back to the corporations and ask if they will give these girls a shot because we will support them not only in hiring and recruiting but also in making them successful, backed by our global workforce. So they're not taking any real risks.

I have done this in Mexico, India, and Africa, so why can't we do this in the U.S.?

We came up with Step IT Up — the "IT" stands for Information Technology. We selected 10 cities and the idea is to hire 100 kids in each city and in 10 months, we will put 1,000 kids to work. We will then scale that out.

This will require the sponsorship of local mayors, governors, and the corporate coalition. The response has been amazing.

Are you going to work with partners?

I'm a big believer in coalitions, so I'm partnering with the network of community colleges and creating corporate coalitions in each city. The first program will be launched in Atlanta. I already have two major players there signed up, and I will have more.

Then we have the local administration — the mayor and the governor are participating.

Collaboration is the way to move these things quickly.

How will you identify the people?

We are going to inner-cities to seek out African-American women, and we're looking at nontraditional ways to find talent.

We're talking to the churches, because in many communities people turn to them for guidance, and we're talking to community college administrators and faculty. We're not going the

traditional route — we're going through the socially viable ways of defining who would stay in the program and who would likely be successful.

The idea of seeking women is that women are the agents of change in most societies. If I can get the women interested and help them realize that they can get into high-paid jobs, imagine what they would do for the community?

To do that, I have to revamp traditional thinking. Today, looking at major jobs, it's about what type of degree you have. For new knowledge economy jobs, you need basic education but you also need aptitude and attitude, and you learn 90 percent of what you need on the job.

This shift is ideally suited for these communities because they don't have the luxury to obtain a four-year advanced degree. But they are capable, so if you bring the jobs to these kids, I'm certain there will be a profound shift.

There is also traditional thinking that low income means low IQ. I have found this to absolutely not be the case.

Is there enough of an understanding of the correlation among technology, STEM, and jobs?

There is a lot of discussion at the government level that the biggest crisis for the country might be the talent pipeline in STEM. The odds of you getting a job if you are STEM-qualified versus non STEM-qualified is an order of magnitude. Seven out of the 10 jobs in the future will be STEM related.

First of all, STEM jobs are not cool — so the role modeling is absent, particularly among minorities.

Second is the notion that you need a four-year degree with a math or science major. We set the standards too high so most kids who want to go into STEM don't think they can compete. They go into the arts which is easier.

Third is that the traditional faculty are so limited and they can't scale, so we have to come up with new instructional mediums and ways of delivering STEM education.

There is no understanding that if you get trained in STEM, your odds of finding a high-paying job is 45 percent higher.

Is the private sector where the action will have to happen?

I'm a big believer in free market and the fact that the largest consumers of talent are corporations and small businesses.

Major retailers pay attention to their supply chains. But for the most important supply chain – which is human capital – most corporations have no real planning. They think it is the university’s job or the government’s job. This type of thinking might be the cause of a major crisis.

By 2030, the U.S. is targeting energy independence. There is a revolution in oil and exploration with shale oil and many other technologies that are rapidly evolving. So the technology is there. The problem is that you need almost three million STEM-educated people to make this a reality and we’re only producing 180,000 STEM-related kids overall.

If corporations are to be successful, we have to go deep into our supply chain, look at human resources, create human capital from it, and transform them into global talent since most corporations are global.

The reason we are also involved is that the mission of our company is “Transforming Lives Where We Operate.” By training people on technology, creating jobs, and bringing peace to those communities, we can create a sustainable business model where we operate. We have proven this in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and we can prove this in the U.S.

Is this primarily a U.S. issue or a global issue?

It’s a global issue. Some countries are much more aware of how to solve these problems. India has done a fairly good job of educating at the primary and secondary level; it’s a lot of the reason why India’s progress is defined by their educational system.

The number of technologists and mathematicians coming out of Israel is incredible because there is a deep-rooted value system for it there.

I see this in Latin American countries; for example Chile – there is a tremendous amount

of government-level focus. The policies are there and there is a human capital development organization at the national level.

So governments are proactively addressing this, but most do not because this is not a one-term phenomenon.

Human capital development is not a 90-day spectrum, which CEOs focus on.

So we want entrepreneurs – people who are committed to having a sustainable business – to take proactive steps.

Do you have to put the metrics in place around a program like this?

Like many CEOs, I believe that the corporations that are more socially responsible in a practical manner will win out in the war for talent and intellect, and even in terms of attracting investment.

When you look at companies like ours, we are in the business of talent arbitrage; we are in the business of creating talent.

We understand the dynamics and the cost it takes to invest and create that talent. The model that we’re talking about developing is not only a social cause but a business cause, because we can produce information technology products in the U.S. with tremendous advantage at equal cost to what it takes to produce in Asia. It’s just that nobody has done it to scale. So this is a tremendous business opportunity as well.

Did you know early on that this would work?

At the beginning, we knew that there was a war for talent because we attract computer scientists and engineers – those who are highly qualified. People whom we are trying to attract can get a job pretty much anywhere in the world. Many can be successful anywhere. But to be really significant, there are only a few companies they can go to.

This is the opportunity we give them. We’re not necessarily the highest paid masters, but there is a deep social component that the next generation wants.

So this has to be a long-term commitment?

Our plan is to create this in 10 cities to begin with, and then I want to go national state-by-state.

I want to start small and scale fast. The program’s success will get other players to collaborate with us. We want to do this as a joint program and give credit to the local companies that participate in it.

I believe in starting something focused because a lot of the government programs tend to be long-term and large-scale, and that requires years of planning.

This is not about inventing something new but is based on real social studies that have been done. We think this can be successful, but we also want this to be sustainable so it’s not just targeted to minorities. We have many other sections of society that should participate in the knowledge economy, like veterans. If they know this can happen, it gives them hope and the opportunity to make the right choice up front, because they know this is possible.

Is the goal then, to provide training in this, but to do it in a realistic way?

Yes, and in a very simple way. The whole training program takes four to six months.

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We’re taking a kid, and in four to six months, he’s going to get into a very high-paid job and be fully supported. These jobs pay anywhere from \$30,000 to \$50,000, and they offer the potential to earn several times that over the next few years. There is also stability, and it’s a portal to the future.

Once one kid in a family gets through this, there will be others that will want to do it.

How did you develop this passion that seems to drive everything you do?

Business is interesting, but the purpose is more important than the tactics – without purpose, it’s an empty machine.

We can be successful in many ways, but it’s not the same as being significant. Having a purpose drives the soul and spirit, and that is reflected in the company and in other people: they say, we’re doing something that matters.

If it’s not just about the quarterly results, it brings out the best in people.

We attract the type of customers that are involved, which means they’re more sustainable customers.

Is it tough to be patient?

It’s frustrating sometimes to look at the opportunities and know that so little can really go far, if only you focus on it. Doing things in a quick manner will drive results.

When people know you have a genuine purpose, help comes from everywhere. I tend to channel any frustration I have into doing something tangible.

What is the secret to keeping this pace?

If you can see impact, it’s a high. At that point, I’m not really sure if business is work, science or art. The fact is, I truly enjoy what I do. ●