

“I’ll be glad to support anybody pursuing open source entrepreneurship opportunities”

“Once I get the taste of the comforts provided by a large company, I might not be able to start my own.” This thought was what helped **Dr Devasia Kurian, managing director, *astTECS**, on his successful entrepreneurial journey. Having banked a lot on open source, he speaks with **Baishakhi Dutta, senior business journalist, *Electronics Bazaar***, on the immense opportunities that open source offers to the industry, and how young entrepreneurs should adopt it to prosper in their respective fields.

My favourite things

Favourite music: Semi-classical

Favourite films: A Beautiful Mind, Hunger Games, Rain Man and Drishyam

Favourite books: Zero to One, Liar’s Poker, Angels and Demons

Favourite actor: Mohanlal

Hobbies: Playing badminton, chess, watching movies and reading



Childhood and background

I was born in 1966 in a village in Kerala called Nalukodi, in Changanacherry. It is located in Kottayam district. My father was a PWD engineer and my mother a housewife. I started my schooling at Sacred Heart English School, Changanacherry. After that, I did my B.E. (electrical and electronics), and then an M. Tech (computer science) from TU, Berlin. This was followed by an MBA from TAPMI, Manipal (I was the gold medal winner); and an M. Phil and finally a PhD from Christ University, Bengaluru.

My wife, Leena Kurian, is a successful entrepreneur. I have three children – Anu, my eldest daughter, is doing her MS in TU, Berlin. My son, Abu, is currently in his third year of engineering, and my youngest daughter, Ann, is in Class 10.

The start

I always wanted to become an entrepreneur. In fact, I did not want to go for my higher studies in Germany, as I wanted to start my own company. Anyhow, thanks to my uncle Thomas Kannenkeril (who lives in Germany) compelling me to do so, the higher studies have helped me in becoming a successful entrepreneur.

On finishing my MS, I worked for a while. After that, I got the idea of studying for an MBA. This phase of learning after a few years of work experience changed my outlook towards many things. I started reading again and my management outlook changed drastically. After another break, I did my M. Phil and PhD, which also helped me to get familiar with the latest available technology. I would definitely recommend further studies to everyone, even if these are taken up part-time.

Entrepreneurship was my passion. Throughout my corporate career, I pursued this goal relentlessly. I

did not even apply for a job in a large company, as I believed that once I enjoyed the comforts offered by a large company, I might not be able to start my own. In 2007, at an opportune moment, I started *astTECS. I think persistence and patience got me to where I am today.



Only real challenges
result in real joy.



Telecom: My passion

Telecom is always a bit more intellectually challenging than many other fields of computer science like databases, enterprise applications, software engineering, etc. Once I was introduced to this field, I got my intellectual stimulation from it. In telecom, every day you have a new problem to solve. Whether it is a call centre for a new taxi service or a support centre, telecom services in the cloud or in the integration of AI in enterprise voice communication are still evolving and are quite exciting.

When I started working, my first task was to resurrect a crashed project for German Telecom (Deutsche Telekom AG), which our company had failed to complete. We worked 16 hours a day (including Sundays) for six months and completed the project successfully. Believe me, I enjoyed every moment of this journey and the eventual success. German Telecom paid us the entire amount due and much more, additionally. They even hired me as a consultant for USD 1200 per man day for quite some time.

In the Indian telecom industry, I am trying to develop an enterprise telecom product brand based on open source, since this is the trend across the globe. Most of the Indian

companies are majorly into telecom services. So this is where we are trying to make a difference. Leading the team to bring about the change is one of my major contributions to the industry.

The challenges of management

Jack Ma says, “Hire the right people, not necessarily the best people.” Also, as an entrepreneur, you might not be able to always hire the best people, as your resources are restricted. So, the idea is to motivate and get the best out of the people you have. Motivation is very personal. What motivates one person might not motivate somebody else. So how I deal with my team is by talking to people individually, finding out what motivates them and then trying to address those needs.

My idols

Prof. Sigram Schindler, who is the owner of Teles AG in Germany, which was my first workplace, has been a major inspiration in my life in terms of technical excellence and hard work. Under Dr Schindler’s leadership, Teles AG has grown from a company of 30 employees to a strength of 450, apart from going through a successful IPO. On a personal front, my father V.K. Devasia has inspired me by his high level of integrity.

Qualities that attract me to people

There are many qualities that make a man perfect. However, for me, integrity, intelligence and hard work play a big role and, therefore, I look for these qualities in other people.

Advice to budding entrepreneurs

Hard work is the only mantra for entrepreneurship. If you do not enjoy working 12 hours or more a day, join

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a larger corporate and enjoy that way of life. Most of today's young entrepreneurs are enamoured by the money. That is the wrong track. You need to enjoy the 'experience of creation' and also the 'experience of execution'. Ideas are abundant nowadays—I can provide a hundred ideas to anybody who wants to become an entrepreneur. The key is, how meticulously and efficiently will you be able to execute the vision. Once you are able to do that, the money will come. Nobody will take away anything you deserve.

Talking about other key factors that will help entrepreneurship, I believe you need to be someone who also enjoys team work. Everyone needs to enjoy these things and not consider any one of them as a burden.

Open source opportunities are immense. Each and every domain provides entrepreneurship opportunities with open source concepts. Budding entrepreneurs should look into open source in their respective domains. I would be glad to provide support for anybody pursuing open source entrepreneurship opportunities.

The road ahead

I am a technical person and am also in the core management team. In technology, a lot of new things are happening every day and it is not very easy to cope with these rapid changes. It is also difficult to go in depth into tech aspects as well as manage the company at the same time. So that is something I am trying to delegate more. I want to have more bandwidth to explore the changing technological patterns and enjoy the new fields like artificial intelligence, machine learning, etc.

We are also working with call centres where, by listening to the conversation, the quality of the call is to be checked. At present, there are

no widespread tools to control and check this. It is still being done manually. There are many new voice-recognition and speech-recognition technologies that can be applied to this field to automatically get the results. These are all technologies that are in the nascent stage and a lot of research is happening across the world. So the more time I get to spend on these types of advancements, the more chances there will be to create new products.



You need to enjoy the 'experience of creation' and also the 'experience of execution'.



*astTECS is a homegrown Indian brand serving the enterprise telecom market. My team and I would like to take it to the global market—an Indian product story to compete with the global bigwigs. *astTECS envisages creating a global telecom company based on open source.

This conviction comes from my belief in what Bill Joy, a computer scientist from Sun Microsystems, famously said, "There are always more smart people outside your company than within it." This points towards an era of collaboration—getting bright minds to work together to create superior products. Open source provides exactly this environment.

Apart from this, telecom is a vast area and there are huge entry barriers in terms of the IP created by very large incumbent players. Operating from India, we do not have the resources and time to overcome these barriers easily. Open source ensures a level playing field for all players. ☐