



# “My Mind Is Still Young”

*Ajai Chowdhry, the 56-year-old Chairman of HCL Infosystems, began his entrepreneurial career selling hand-held calculators before moving on to what became India's first personal computer (PC) manufacturing business in 1978. Almost 29 years on, Chowdhry has, along with his more famous colleague Shiv Nadar and four others, built up his company into a Rs 11,000-crore hardware empire that employs 4,760 people. A firm believer in innovation, he feels research and development holds the key to surviving in the insomniac, ever-changing business of information technology hardware. Reflecting this belief is HCL Infosystems' motto: "Make PCs simpler and see your sales soar." The last part of the motto has been tangible enough. **Ranjana Kaushal** caught up with this Jabalpur engineering graduate to find out what makes him tick. Excerpts.*

#### Could you tell us something about your early life?

I belong to a family of civil servants. My father belonged to the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) and frequently got transferred. So, my childhood was spent in different parts of the country and I got to see a lot of small towns and cities. Consequently, my schooling was never at one particular place—I did not stay at one school beyond three years. Finally, in 1967, when my father got posted at Jabalpur, I got admission to the B Tech Electronics and Telecommunications course in Jabalpur Engineering College. After four years of fun-filled college life, I passed out in 1971 and began looking for a job. I came to Delhi and appeared for several interviews along with my other batchmates. I got interview calls from three companies and got selected in all the three. Of the three companies that made me job offers, I chose to join Delhi Cloth Mills (DCM). The company was planning to start its data business and needed a sales executive in Mumbai. This was my first job and the salary—Rs 600 a month.

#### How did you and other founding members of HCL get together and how was the company born?

During my four-year stint with DCM, I met Shiv Nadar, Arjun Malhotra, DS Puri, YC Vaidya and Subhash Arora. They were my co-workers. Finally, we decided to do something on our own. After long discussions in the evenings and much planning, all of us quit our jobs with DCM in 1975, with the dream of starting a microprocessor plant. We decided to enter the trading business for one year and then progress from that to manufacturing. We started with the trading of hand-held calculators and, in a few months, succeeded in changing the rules of that market. We brought in products priced in the Rs 500-2,000 range, something unheard of in those days. We notched up serious sales volumes and made some decent money. Now, with a capital of Rs 1.6 lakh in hand, we decided to enter

the manufacturing business. I also invested Rs 11,000 from my savings from the DCM days and borrowed money from my mother. She gave me her savings and asked what would I do with the money. All I could tell her at the time was I was starting my own business. The six of us applied for a manufacturing license in Uttar Pradesh and entered into a tie-up with the government there. In 1976-77, we set up our unit in a shed at Noida. We designed a computer on our own and marketed it under the label of Hindustan Computers Ltd. Our team would visit the IITs and engineering colleges to find buyers for our computers. While the technocrats in these colleges believed in our products, they insisted that the delivery should be on time. We met that condition—I remember going around in a battered old Fiat car to IIT Madras to deliver the computers.

#### How and when did the idea of launching a personal computer come to HCL?

On one hand, while we were busy selling our products, our R&D work did not stop. In 1978, we launched our own personal computer, developed in-house. This was three years ahead of even IBM. In fact, Apple launched its PCs at around the same time as we did. Our R&D operation had 20-30 people at that time. Another development helped us: In 1978, the central government asked multinationals to dilute their equity holdings in India. This was not acceptable to most IT MNCs. IBM packed up its bags and left. Their leaving the country proved a boon for us. Also, Indian consumers needed products that were easy to handle and the PCs launched by us were positioned like that. Our ad campaign in early eighties drove home the point: "Even a typist can use a PC." By 1986, we were the country's biggest IT company. In the same year, we entered into a joint venture with Hewlett-Packard (HP) for manufacturing desktops. In 1997, HP bought out HCL's interest in our joint venture and became a marketing organisation for the computers made elsewhere. Thereafter, HCL went ahead and created its own high-end products with Intel and AMD as partners. The result was Beanstalk, a brand of high-end PCs. By 2004, we blew the lid off the country's grey market in IT hardware with our line of sub-Rs 20,000 PCs and easy installment schemes accompanying them. The equated monthly installment we offered were as low as Rs 499. So I guess, you can say we really created the market for PCs in India.

**“ We started with the trading of calculators & in a few months, succeeded in changing the rules of the market ”**

**How did the partners go in for the division of labour that has shaped the HCL Group's looks today? Is there any synergy between the businesses?**

There is no synergy between the two companies. It is just a common group name that we retain. In 1994, I took over reins of the company from Shiv Nadar. The company's turnover now is Rs 11,000 crore, up from the extremely modest figure of Rs 400 crore in 1994. We took a clear call that we will not look at the software business. Also, my focus was never on the global markets. I always wanted to focus on the Indian markets and here I am. My focus is completely on the hardware aspect of our group's business. But yes, in certain projects HCL Technologies and HCL Infosystems do bid jointly.

**“Two things that drive away stress for me are reading and music”**

**How do you maintain a work-life balance?**

I was dating my wife-to-be, Kunkun, when we started HCL. She was aware of my hectic lifestyle before we married. So spending long hours at office has never been an issue with her. Even through my long absences from home, my children and family have not objected. In fact, they are proud of me. My elder son, Kunal, is now a consultant with Accenture. He is married and settled in London and the younger one, Akshay, is studying communications at the Los Angeles University in US. I try giving quality time to my family rather than quantity time.

**What are your hobbies and how do you de-stress? Your favourite holiday destinations?**

Two things that drive away stress for me are reading and music. I enjoy listening to old Hindi songs, jazz, classic and rock music. I also like watching movies at home with my wife on our home theatre system. I liked the new James Bond movie Casino Royale. I don't take long holidays. Instead, I like going for short breaks somewhere in the hills. Uttranchal is my favourite holiday destination in India. Abroad, London is my favourite place. I get to stay with my family and enjoy the cool weather.



**When do you plan to retire? And, following up on that, who will be the next boss at HCL Infosystems?**

*(Laughs)* I am not old right now. In fact, my mind feels quite young. But as far as the succession plans of the company are concerned, at the Chief Operating Officer level we have already passed on the baton. We now have trained a group of youngsters at the senior management level ready to take on larger responsibilities when the time comes. My children will not join the company—I hold 2% stake in the company and will continue working as long as I can. The DNA of the company is strong enough to take on any managerial challenges.

**What books are you reading these days? Also, your favorite food and drink...**

I read a lot of fiction. I like reading books written by Michael Frederick and James Rollins. I just walk into book stores and pick up books that interest me. I have a well-stocked library of books and videos. I also patronise and collect a lot of art work. When it comes to food, I prefer Indian cuisine. And, oh yes, I enjoy drinking whisky. ☐

Source: OutlookBusiness | Feb 5, 2007