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Case Study: Akraya, *SI Review* November 2008

By Julie McCoy

In 2001, when the dot.com crash hit, the technology company for which Amar Panchal was working was laying off people. He suddenly found himself with two choices: He could either switch roles at the company or start his own. Not normally one to take risks, the Indian native decided to take a chance. In 2002 he opened Akraya, an information technology staffing company that today has offices in Sunnyvale CA and Pune India.

A Growing Company

Opening a technology staffing company at the same time the tech bubble burst wasn't easy, but Panchal was up for the challenge. "Everyone else had given up," he explains. "I was one of the few people actually calling on customers." And his efforts ended up paying off. Akraya, which means "commerce" in Sanskrit, generated \$20 million in 2007. The goal is to hit \$30 million this year, according to Panchal.

In fact, the company is doing so well that it continues to add internal staff at both its Sunnyvale office and its office in Pune. As of this summer, Akraya's Sunnyvale office had a staff of 22 people. Its office in Pune, a metropolitan city near Bombay, had a staff of 20 people. The majority of staff is from India, but a few non-Indians work for the company as well.

Staff Know the Industry

Akraya only hires recruiters who have a computer science background since the company is IT-focused. This makes the company better equipped to understand its clients' technical challenges as well as gauge candidates' technical skill sets.

A Passionate Group of People

Staff love what they do so much that they don't even consider it work, comments Sonu Ratra, company president and Panchal's wife. "You're coming to something you want to do, something you love," she says.

It's All About Having Fun, Celebrating Success

Akrayan culture emphasizes having fun at work -- there's a pool table in the office -- and celebrating success, says Ratra. Akraya makes a point to celebrate success at both the individual and corporate level. For example, if a recruiter makes six or seven placements a month, he or she gets an iPhone. And "if they do 10 then of course there's something else," Ratra points out.

Clients Large and Small Akraya's clients include giants such as Sun Microsystems, Cisco, eBay, Yahoo, Facebook, Amazon, Genentech, Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Standard and Poor's, Hitachi Data Systems, and Comcast, as well as smaller companies such as Jasper Wireless and Reardon Commerce.

Ravi Narayanaswamy, senior program manager at Sun Microsystems, says he likes that Akraya always keeps him informed. "Even if they aren't able to find the right candidate, they keep me updated," he says. "They keep me in the loop." He thinks Akraya does a good job of "filtering," or going through all the candidates for a particular position and choosing the best ones. He appreciates that Akraya tries to accommodate his budget and never tries to sell to him, he says. He points out that Akraya has given pay rates to his workers without passing on the cost to him as a client. On a scale of 1 to 10, he'd give Akraya a 9.

Many of Akraya's customers said they love the company, but were unfortunately unable to go on the record due to corporate media policies.

Says one client, "We've been very impressed with the quality of candidates we've gotten through them. Anytime we have a need, I call Sonu. Several candidates we've gotten through Akraya have worked out so well that we've hired them full-time. They're the best we've run across so far. They really know what we're doing and not only the skill sets we need but also the type of person that would fit in the group culture-wise.

We've been working with Sonu directly for so long that we get excellent service. We've been very pleased. We know that they screen candidates. When they present someone to us, we know they're going to be good. It's hard to describe exactly what we're looking for. The real value is establishing a long-term relationship with a staffing company. The candidates seem to enjoy working for Akraya as well."

Adds another client: "They have exceeded and met my expectations. It's nice because they understand the job market. They have full knowledge of the caliber of candidates we need. They have consistently been providing me with excellent candidates that match the job requirements. They get it. It's nice to work with someone who understands."

"My experience has been nothing but positive results from them. What I do appreciate is their management style, the way they build results with us as well as their employees. It seems they truly value the professional services they provide as well as their internal team and contingent workers. Some provide the service and just leave. They're a little more personable yet professional at the same time, which makes them stand out from other populations."

Workers Are Happy, Too

Danelle Oravetz, who was in the construction industry for 10 years and ready for a change, says Ratra helped her re-work her resume to make it more generic so that the skills she had acquired in the construction industry could be applied to IT work. And now Oravetz is working at Genentech.

"I would recommend Akraya any day of the week," she says. "I absolutely love working with them. They're good with attention to detail. I'm very happy. I would recommend them. I'd give them a 10 (on a scale of 1 to 10). I've had an enjoyable experience. I don't have any problems with them. They're a good company."

Laurie Huth, who also has been working at Genentech through Akraya, says she likes not only the freedom and flexibility of being a contract worker but the benefits Akraya provides. Akraya offers its workers healthcare and 401(k) benefits, for example.

Huth says she can't think of anything she wants that she's not getting through Akraya or anything the company has done wrong that she wishes it would change. "It's a great company to work for and work with," she says.

Utpala Sharma, who has been placed at a job at Cisco through Akraya, says she appreciates that Akraya always pays her on time. Other staffing companies she's worked with weren't so great on that front. "I'm very happy," she says. "I like the fact that they are very professional. I think I would give them a 10 (on a 10-point scale)."

Altaf Hakim has been working at Toyota Financial Services through Akraya since 2005. "I'm getting the salary I want and all the benefits," he says. "They've been very good. I have no issues to date. When you call and leave a message, you get a call back in a few minutes. ... They've been good on what I've wanted."

Different Strengths

Pachal's strengths include the operational, technical and sales side of the business, while Ratra's strength is business development. She promotes Akraya at diversity forums and meets with procurement and diversity suppliers to sell Akraya as a diverse company.

Panchal and Ratra, who work together on a daily basis, say they don't have any difficulty separating the husband-wife relationship and the business relationship. "At the end of the day, we're professionals. If you're professional, you know what you're doing. It's easy to sort it out."

Their Backgrounds Are in Technology

Prior to launching Akraya, Panchal worked at a company called TekEdge, which is no longer in existence. Panchal -- who studied software engineering in his native India and also earned an MBA there -- found he was using his software experience at TekEdge but not his MBA, so he decided to open Akraya to make the most of that degree.

Ratra, on the other hand, worked at Genentech as a resource manager before joining Akraya. She managed staffing issues and worked with vendors at Genentech, so she knows and understands the company's needs, she explains. Ratra, who holds an HR degree from her native India, also earned an HR certificate at the University of California, Berkeley.

Combating Illiteracy in India

Akraya contributes to several nonprofit organizations whose focus is on helping India. For example, this year Akraya was a gold sponsor of the 10th annual Race for Literacy, which is held in an effort to combat illiteracy

in India. Just how bad is the problem? Almost 40% of the population in India remains illiterate. Despite India's recent economic boom, the country's literacy rate is growing just 1.5% a year.

Additionally, Akraya supports orphanages in India through an organization called Faith Ministries.

Finding Time to Enjoy the Great Outdoors

Running Akraya is a more-than-full-time job for Panchal and Ratra, who also have a young daughter, Ananya. Nevertheless, they still find some time to enjoy life. Panchal, for example, enjoys a number of outdoor activities including tennis, hiking, windsurfing, rollerblading and skiing.

Akraya is the story of two immigrants who have come to the United States, become entrepreneurs and made successful lives for themselves. They have truly lived the American Dream and are proof that you can achieve what you want as long as you work hard and don't give up.

Company: Akraya

Founded: 2002

Headquarters: Sunnyvale CA and Pune India

Revenue: \$20 million in 2007

Web site: www.akraya.com