

# How digital tech helped small tech firms deal with pandemic

Cloud enabled flexibility; digital marketing helped attract customers

Shilpa Phadnis & Sujit John | TNN

Small and medium enterprises are the bedrock of the economy. In the tech industry too, they form a substantial part of the revenue and employee base. And many in that segment demonstrated their mettle during the pandemic by embracing a digital playbook. Last week, we partnered with Nasscom and its SME Council for a discussion on how successful SMEs adapted during the pandemic, and how they have used emerging digital technologies.

## Reimagining businesses

Sameer Jain, founder & CEO of Net Solutions, which builds digital experiences for clients, said the industry, the processes, and the nature of work changed dramatically during the pandemic. "We had to reimagine a lot of things. We were so used to working from offices, and now we had to reimagine what it looks like when no one is coming to the office. In a lot of industries people are back, but not in our industry," he said.

When employees work remotely, there are challenges around how you manage productivity and engagement, how one ensures stickiness with employees and collaborate better and co-create for customers.

Sriram Subramanya, founder & CEO of digital solutions firm Integra Software Services, said the challenge of protecting data when employees are working from home was very different from that when everyone was in

## SMALL, MEDIUM firms change the WAY THEY WORK

"I think the biggest change was not working from home, but that working remotely meant there were challenges with security and infrastructure requirements.

We pivoted to digital marketing. We adopted tools like Slack, tools for HR and sales, to keep track of metrics.



**Sameer Jain**  
FOUNDER & CEO, NET SOLUTIONS

Pandemic was a bitter-sweet experience. It woke the entire industry from a long slumber. No customer would have earlier allowed a back-office employee to operate from home, but under these circumstances, they had no choice but to give you a go ahead.



**Jhankhana Desai** | FOUNDER & MD, KSERVE BPO

office. Acquiring new customers, he said, became a challenge.

Many SMEs realised adaptability and agility was the name of the game. The cloud became a solution to several of the challenges. The big cloud service providers were seen to have excellent cyber protection capabilities, better than what the SMEs could do by themselves. The cloud also enabled seamless ways to get in touch with customers that were previously difficult to access. But everyone cautioned that you have to really monitor cloud consumption to ensure costs don't balloon.

Uma Venkatraman, founder & CEO of IxSight Technologies, a data engineering and data science solutions firm, said when the pandemic struck, customers wanted to understand our digital technology blue-

print for making a quick transition. "We have large customers in the BFSI space, and they were asking if we have a DR (disaster recovery) site. We found that server rooms were in the office, and at one point, there were rains and there was a fire, servers and UPS went down. There was a curfew that time. Overnight, we reacted like an emergency, shifted everything to the cloud and did a DR on that. We needed to have that kind of responsiveness. Our customers allowed us to access servers online and it was a boon," she said.

## Cloud a saviour

Jhankhana Desai, founder & MD of KServe BPO, said they started preparing four days before the publicly announced lockdown. "The first thing we did was host the data centre on a private cloud and create

There's more attrition in the mid and senior level because the industry and employee experience is changing to a family experience. We have to create more talent supply and we are extending Nasscom's FutureSkills programme to SME member companies.

**Sriram Subramanya**  
FOUNDER & CEO, INTEGRA SOFTWARE SERVICES



Initially we had not moved onto cloud as we are an IP company. We took some time to move from a physical office to a cloud data centre. Today, we offer our products as APIs. Cloud has made it easier to reach out to global customers.

**Uma Venkatraman**  
FOUNDER & CEO, IXSIGHT TECHNOLOGIES



light applications to work on the phone. We didn't have the financial muscle to procure laptops overnight, or send laptops to people's homes. So we took help from vendors and transitioned everything to the cloud with permission from our customers. Our teams became increasingly innovative, they started masking customer numbers, there was more monitoring. Our customers were happy," she said.

Desai said during the pandemic, KServe's business went down by half. But cloud helped scale the business. "Cloud provides a good BCP (business continuity plan) and disaster recovery site. During that time, many of our customers hadn't paid for over a year because of cash flow issues. We built a rural centre in Ahmednagar because cloud enabled us to do so. And it

lowered our cost," she said.

Subramanya said for their BPM (business process management) business, they looked at the on-prem and cloud model, but for their products division, it was only cloud. "We could scale up and down quickly without any capex investment," he said.

Jain said firms like theirs had many opportunities as many of their customers wanted to be digitally savvy. But while they benefited from better margins by working from home, and no money spent on travel, smaller firms had greater challenges in meeting demand compared to the larger firms that have deeper pockets, and big benches. "Most SMEs don't have frontends in the western world where most of our customers are, and the engagement with them has been poor, as we haven't met them," he said. Digital technologies helped overcome the issue to some extent. "We pivoted to digital marketing, looked at outbound ways to reach out, used content marketing and case studies to position ourselves as thought leaders in our industry," he said.

Subramanya said his company looked at new areas and products to invest in, including emerging technologies like AI, NLP. Those are really beginning to pay off now. "BPM firms are getting into related products and tech," he said.

The tech talent shortage has been another big challenge for SMEs. Talent in new digital technologies has also become expensive. For some of the smaller companies, it's been an existential crisis.

Venkatraman said you need to make quick decisions about hiring. Desai said there's more attrition in the WFH cohort, as they are disengaged. Efforts need to be made to engage them better. Subramanya said they are extending Nasscom's FutureSkills programme to SME member companies in order to help them get better talent.