VENTURE

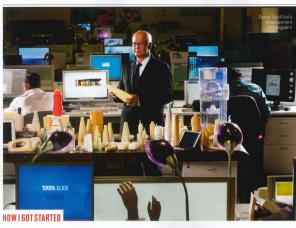Dev at Tata Elxsi's
headquarters
in Bangalore

HOW I GOT STARTED

The Man for All Seasons

Madhukar Dev has ensured that Tata Elxsi keeps reinventing
itself to keep pace with changes in policy and technology.
Interview by Kunal N. Talgeri

TATA ELXSI WAS MEANT TO BE *a computer hard-
ware manufacturer in pre-liberalised
India. As its global partners Elxsi and
Silicon Graphics wound up, it recast
itself as a global services venture in
software design and visual computing.
Managing director Madhukar Dev has
seen the launch of two new specialist
divisions for industrial design, and ani-
mation and video effects at the Banga-
lore-headquartered company. The story:*

64 / FORTUNE INDIA *October 2013*

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

---

venture / HOW I GOT STARTED

I JOINED TATA ELXSI in 1991, when it
began operations, and have been
managing director for 10 years now.
Elxsi used to make supercomputers
in the late '70s and mid-1980s. The
Silicon Valley-based company, which
had sold seven supercomputers in
India, saw a bigger potential here.

Because of stringent regulations,
importing computers was a huge
challenge in those days. So, the com-
pany teamed up with Tata to manu-
facture the machines here.

But, by the time the manufactur-
ing licence came in 1989, Elxsi had
folded up in the Valley and semicon-
ductors had brought an end to the
supercomputer era.

Tata Elxsi India took up the task
of supporting Elxsi's global cus-
tomer base, for which we released a
new version of its operating system.
To use the manufacturing licence,

we started scouting for the hottest
technologies to make powerful com-
puters for India. In 1991, we tied up
with California-based Silicon Graph-
ics and started SGI Systems. By
1993, as a result of liberalisation, we
became Silicon Graphics' distributor
and value-added reseller. The Elxsi
business had declined to almost nil.

The value-addition business
involved supporting applications in
which Silicon Graphics was strong,
such as computer-aided design
(CAD), and film and video ap-
plications. Our customers were all
first-time users, so they needed a lot
of support. We undertook projects
on our equipment to show them the
capabilities of the software.

In the next five years, the new
crop of users had become familiar
with the latest tools, making ap-
plication support redundant. So we

moved into content development
and design. By the mid-1990s, we
also started offering embedded
electronic product design services.
We now design chips and hardware,
and write every layer of software and
develop the user interface. We have
started offering these services across
the globe.

Today, around 70% of our business
comes from embedded electronic
services, up to 15% from industrial
design services, and 5% from ani-
mation and visual effects. The rest
comprises integrating hardware and
software for virtual-reality projects.

Creativity isn't confined to animat-
ed content and visual effects. There's
a lot of creativity in figuring out, say,
the next-generation user interface
in home electronics products. That
requires the same level of innovation
as visualising a 3D character. ⬛