

# Journey to success

When a small componentry feature enhancement idea had customers engaging globally, Vijai Babu Madhavan and his team knew they had to do everything possible to bring it to market.





I totally loved this journey: conceiving an idea, validating it directly with customers, refining it, getting investment, building PoCs, building the team, building the product, and ultimately – most importantly – solving customer challenges.



**Left:** After a visit to Brainshare, Vijai and a few colleagues took a road trip around Utah.

**Below:** With US and India colleagues at the Utah offices, after Brainshare 2013.



**W**hat? Say that again," said the IT director of a major Canadian customer as he pulled his chair closer to the table. It was the first time he had spoken.

They were a long-time, loyal Novell customer. Four of us from Novell had just spent the last hour listening to their IT people describing how well they'd deployed the solution and the high availability they were enjoying from it. They even offered to share the deployment recipes and best practices, and become a reference customer for others in the region. All great feedback. Being the architect of the product I was basking in the glory.

As we were wrapping up we mentioned a new concept we were trying to validate – integrating our Open Enterprise Server deeply within Microsoft ecosystem. That was when the IT director broke his silence.

He explained that he was chairing a task force in the larger organisation to build the vision and strategy for the IT infrastructure for the next five to ten years. They were evaluating various vendors and their #1 criteria was deep integration within MS ecosystem. In his mind he had already scratched off Novell as we did not support that capability.

That is when we realised how big this product could get – or how much business we could lose if we did not get it to market quickly.

When we explained that they could continue using the IT investments they had made and enjoy the highly available infrastructure they had built while embracing MS ecosystem, he said, "You may still have a seat at the table".

This was a huge revelation for me. While, on one hand, many of the administrators we talked to were perfectly happy, there was a huge disruption happening with the decision-makers at a different level. 'Buyer feature vs user feature' was ringing in my head.

At dinner that night I talked with my road trip team about

how severe the problem of non-integration with the MS ecosystem was in the field and how big this breakthrough could be. We reworked our pitch. As we delivered our proposition to a cross-section of customers, it resonated with most of them. The customers' need for deep integration with MS eco system was becoming evident.

This was right after Brainshare 2013, and we spent the next few weeks visiting various customers across the US and Canada. It was one heck of an experience. Every day we would wake up in a new hotel in a new city, and drive some distance to meet a new customer; then drive further and meet another customer; then drive back to the airport and fly to another city; check-in to another hotel; and wake up the next morning to meet a new set of customers. A few days into the road trip I was starting to lose track of time and space. I was exhausted.

To make it worse, we thought it would make financial sense to road trip across the US and Canada and then fly out of Canada back to India, instead of going back to Salt Lake City, where we had started. This meant we had all our international luggage with us during the entire trip, and we don't travel light.

After a brief stay back in India we packed our bags again, this time for Europe. Although I had lived in the US and visited much of Europe many times, it was my first time in the UK. I woke up on the first day and went to the breakfast room as I would normally in the US. It took me some time and many strange looks to realise I was the only one wearing pajamas.

Culture differences aside, most of our customers were thrilled with what we were proposing, and we identified some who were willing to work with us on the journey. Back in India, we formulated a plan, submitted a proposal, secured initial funding and kick-started the project.

To make it a cohesive experience for our customers we needed to re-architect the system, change and build multiple components, and write a few millions lines of code.

This required changes across the entire stack, all the way from the on-disk media format through to the user interface layer.

Knowing what to build is one thing; making it a reality is quite another. It was the biggest and most complex project since the product was created more than a decade before. I had not built anything of this scale and complexity, and the SWAT team was young, comprising engineers from different areas.

We started building the structure and prototypes to validate our assumptions. In parallel, we had multiple calls with customers across the globe. The level of customer line-of-sight and engagement – from the initial contextual enquiry phase through the development and subsequent deployment – was unprecedented in the history of this part of the organisation.

Many technical and operational decisions needed to be made on a daily basis – most without adequate data because we did not have the time to collect all the data needed. We also faced the normal challenges that plague big projects – competitors stole key employees, and the initial customer engagement and leadership teams who had backed the project had all but gone. The new team in charge

had different priorities. And there were attempts to derail the project. We had to evangelise hard internally, so all the customer engagement feedback proved very handy.

"Your baby is ready to go!" The sweetest words I ever heard came from the engineering manager on the day we were due to release the product to the market. She could not have verbalised my feelings more precisely – my baby was taking its first steps.

Who knew that a feature enhancement of a small component – used in less than 5% of the customer base – could generate US\$6 million worth of business in the first 18 months alone?

I totally loved this journey: conceiving an idea, validating it directly with customers, refining it, getting investment, building PoCs, building the team, building the product, and ultimately – most importantly – solving customer challenges.

I knew many engineers rejected job offers from other companies and stayed back to work on this interesting and complex project. It also provided opportunities for some to rise to the occasion and really shine. We pulled off one of the most challenging projects ever. It was tough and it was fun – and it was the ride of my life.

***The level of customer line-of-sight and engagement – from the initial contextual enquiry phase through the development and subsequent deployment – was unprecedented in the history of this part of the organisation.***

