

# Isuru: The face of BPO business in Sri Lanka

*An inspiring account of rural BPOs and the young people behind them from the troubled island nation of Sri Lanka who chose the path less travelled*

When I first met Isuru Seneviratne in late 90s (in cyberspace) he was a twelve year old student. Life was not always sympathetic to this eldest of a family of three. Flickr still has a photo showing young Isuru and his sister assisting their parents in poultry. His father was a farmer – then the sole breadwinner of the family. Most farmers do not have a fixed income. Isuru's father, on an average, made less than USD 75 per month, and nothing in some months. Growing up in a village surrounded by thick jungle, 40 km to the nearest town, and never having seen even a telephone, it looked like Isuru had his fate sealed. A way to not follow his parents' footsteps to agriculture was joining the security forces. There is a thirty year old ongoing war in Sri Lanka and most village boys find the security forces an attractive career option. Isuru chose neither of the options.

Ten years later, Isuru leads the first rural BPO in the island. It has eleven seats and is expanding fast. The barrier to expansion is the difficulty in finding staff and training and not the lack of business. Today, Isuru and his sister together earn a fixed monthly income of USD 300. Not comparable with the salaries of the urban call centre agents, but with low costs of living involved, it is far more than it sounds. In addition to supporting his younger brother's education, Isuru has also bought a motorcycle, a dream his father could never fulfill. At 22 years, he is also the bread winner of the family.

Isuru's story cannot be detached from that of OnTime Technologies, the BPO he leads. It starts with Kapila Gunawardena from FARO (Foundation for Advancing Rural Opportunities) visiting the village of Mahavilachchiya several years ago



Isuru and his team OnTime Technologies, Mahavilachchiya

to observe students having completed education from Horizon Lanka Academy, their village IT training centre, another first in Sri Lanka. The students needed assistance in finding suitable jobs after completing their training.

FARO's idea was to setup a BPO company in Mahavilachchiya – in the middle of a jungle. Nirosh Ranathunga and Isuru Seneviratha were selected from the village to communicate with Gunawardena, who arranged a meeting for these two young men with Michael Chertok from Digital Divide Data, a BPO company based in Laos. They were accompanied by Chandima Gunawardana and Sumana Liyanage of FARO. After the meeting FARO decided to train Nirosh and Isuru at Digital Divide Date in Vientiane, Laos and Datamation Group in Delhi, India. ICT Agency, the apex body for ICTs in Sri Lanka formed under the World Bank funded e-Sri Lanka program, covered the travel and accommodation costs of the two for the entire period of three months.

OnTime was formed in early 2007. Nirosh and Isuru designed a business plan with the guidance of FARO. Horizon agreed to provide computers, their broadband connectivity and office space. LankaCom,

a well known ISP provided another virtual private network connection free of charge. OnTime started business with two operators (Nirosh and Isuru) for a job assigned by John Keells Holdings one of the largest conglomerates in Sri Lanka. Dialog Telekom, the largest mobile operator was the next client.

Isuru is not alone in the game. Jayantha Wickramaratne of Panamura Nenasala, Embilipitita (a telecentre setup under the World Bank funded e-Sri Lanka program) provides e-commerce services using the e-Bay model through the site <http://www.ecseva.lk>. Advertisements placed by service providers are made available to the large base of the site's users. The website also has space where users can request for bids to complete a job that they may have. The job is offered to a bidder through a competitive bidding process.

Selvaratnam Sri Kanthan of Koslanda Nenasala too runs a rural BPO service for local and international clients. Partnered with N Lingua Services of New Delhi, a voice transcription and translation service, his Nenasala employs Koslanda residents to translate and transcribe audio files from Tamil or Sinhala into English, or vice versa. Web Design is another service he offers.

This does not mean everything runs perfectly. There are so many issues to be addressed. (For example Isuru can do a better job with a link of higher capacity than his present 256 kbps one) Still these courageous and innovative young men and women bring us hope in difficult times. ■

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