

'Chugh'ing all the way

Date: Thursday, March 04, 2010

In early 1981 Navneet S. Chugh, came to the U.S. with his sick mother for her bladder treatment. Chugh, since his young days wanted to go to the U.S. and his mother's illness came in as a blessing. Once in the U.S. Chugh didn't want to go back to India- he didn't.

Chugh had just earned a chartered accountants degree (here known as Certified Public Accountant) in New Delhi, India and was expected to practice accountancy by his parents but he willed otherwise. He wanted to settle and work in the U.S. He couldn't do that with a month's travel visa. There was only one loophole. He could stay back in the U.S. if he joined a university. He did exactly that and joined the West Coast University in Los Angeles to study CPA.

Five years later, in 1986, armed with a CPA and Master's in business, he started the Chugh Firm. Chugh, now 44, took to law sensing massive potential, and breaks into a smile when he recalls the small Chugh Firm that is celebrating its second decade of fruitful existence. The Chugh Firm is one of the largest providers of services in corporate, immigration, taxation, litigation, and mergers and acquisitions matters to global giants across America and in India.

What's more, Chugh's decision to turn to law has been rewarded with astounding success. "I sensed the huge scope of corporate work like setting up new companies, estate planning and doing wills amongst others. That is where I wanted to be." Today Chugh makes his living mainly as an attorney serving clients in places as diverse as Silicon Valley, New York and affiliate offices in Chennai and Bangalore, India, based out of Los Angeles. "We have lots of clients all over the world. And we affiliated with a firm in India for three reasons- We want to be a truly global law firm, we want to work for U.S. multinationals in India, and we want to work for Indian companies coming to the U.S.," says the tall and lanky Chugh.

Twenty years since, Chugh says, "We partner with the client's enterprise and walk the journey with them." He says the Firm is a prominent player in representing clients from a cross section of emerging markets that include technology, products and people.

Chugh, the son of a former public relations manager to former Indian President Giani Zail Singh, says his way of practice and method of working with clients as partners has enabled the Chugh Firm to elevate its clients as market leaders. "Our bridge extends from our offices in the west coast and east coast of the U.S. and all the way to India. This bridge has enabled us to seamlessly integrate resources, people and expertise in providing the best of services to our valued clients."

The wheels are in motion and a majority of the Firm's 1500 clients are in the technology space. He says more than 50 percent of the top 100 Indian companies doing business in the U.S. like Wipro, Mphasis, IBM Daksh, Infotech Enterprises, Satyam, HCL, Tavant Technologies and Honeywell Technology Solutions, to name a few are his clients. Among the U.S. companies, his biggest client is Keane that is an IT company with more than 10,000 employees.

The Chugh Firm today has a 95-member team that includes 34 attorneys and CPAs. Each of their divisions that include immigration services, corporate law, employment law, transactional work, computer law, tax law, litigation and mergers and acquisitions has been strong in its own right. However their immigration services has been the most popular among Indians in the U.S. "Our immigration division

processes over 6 percent of the total U.S. H-1B quota of 65,000,” says Inderpreet Sawhney, partner of the Firm who oversees the Santa Clara office.

The immigration team at Chugh is the largest practice team to have shifted gears. “It (immigration team) offers phenomenal quality and time-efficiency, even while handling high volume immigration cases on a day-to-day basis,” Chugh plugs in. With the immigration levels in the U.S. at an all-time high, post 9/11, there have been instances of non-immigrants being unfairly treated by the law. Chugh’s team of immigration legal professionals, with a wide experience in U.S. business immigration, specializes in nonimmigrant visas as well as permanent residence cases.

To understand how other departments in Chugh works, one needs to look at their corporate law section. Chugh, himself an attorney and an accountant, says a wide range of industries seek Chugh’s services in organizational, operational and transactional matters. “Our advice is a comprehensive blend of business strategy, in-depth industry specific legal knowledge and cross border tax minimization. We are uniquely positioned in advising our clients on collaborations and technology transfers.”

With great companies, of course comes, great consolidation, so one knows how to play it out. The Firm, by experience, has acquired expertise in M&A transactions by successfully leveraging its cross-border specialization and experience to develop an international M&A practice. “The division combines the attorney owner’s practice with its cross border experience and expertise with the domestic laws/regulations and research capabilities to devise innovative structures for M&A,” says Chugh.

The Firm practices what it preaches to clients as in September last year, they merged with the Law Offices of Rachna B. Malkana, a real estate boutique law Firm in Iselin, New Jersey. “First of many acquisitions,” says Chugh.

Chugh helps setting up industries in employment, tax and legal services Chugh, on its part, has a full range of tax services that goes well with its legal services. Ramesh Patel, Firm partner and chair of tax, says the Firm is more qualified to deal in taxation jobs as they update themselves on all developments in the international arena and in areas regarding characterization of income, interpretation of permanent establishment in the ever-changing technological stratosphere, and apply their expertise to a wide range of areas including advance rulings and advice in the field of e-commerce. “Our advice on domestic tax issues includes direct taxation, indirect taxation, service tax, recent transfer pricing legislations apart from cross border international tax issues.”

With many global companies abounding in India, it’s but natural for the Indian companies to adopt international human resource practices, a new concept in corporate India. Employee stock options are being doled out to retain the employees. Indian corporates have evinced the need of formulating comprehensive HR policy and procedure manuals. Chugh says with two affiliate offices in the southern Indian cities of Bangalore and Chennai- the hotbed of Indian IT revolution, the Firm is well versed in advising on matters like pension, welfare benefit plans and employment discrimination laws. “We also advise clients on major industrial disputes including employer-employee problems, re-organization, and changes in the work force, terms and condition of employment.

Big jobs can bring big troubles. So, Chugh has an expert team of litigation solvers who recognize the client’s problems. “We recognize that defending or prosecuting a lawsuit can be disruptive and expensive to a client’s business. Thus, often our litigators are called upon to provide advice and counsel before claims are filed. We work closely with our clients to develop a litigation strategy that is directed to achieve the best result with the most cost-effective legal strategy,” says Paul Saghera, Firm partner and chair of litigation.

With so many services and a phenomenon of having operations where your customers are, the company was India bound in 2004 with the alliance with Universal Legal- in Bangalore. Universal Legal helps U.S. based companies in India or those launching Indian operations, with laws of the land and allied services to Indian companies that want to go the U.S. Besides a broad range of services offered both in the U.S. and in India from a common pool of resources and people, the Firm further caters to some very specific

needs like setting up companies in India, doing due diligence, employment matters, real estate and rules and regulations in concurrence with foreign exchange regulations. On the real estate front, the company focuses on entire gamut of the realty market including joint venture development, development of townships, development and promotion of real estate, lease and sale documentation.

It is not all about work at this Firm. "It is about three special things," says Amrik Ahluwalia, who has been with the Firm for over a decade, "Fun, learning, and giving back."

Besides H-1 petitions, filing tax returns and helping clients with telemarketing and outsourcing issues, the Firm ensures that all employees have fun all along. The Friday lunch is a regular feature at the Firm in all offices. The Friday lunch is not just a pizza and coke affair, in fact, Coke or any such drinks are a strict no-no. It is all about healthy living at the Firm. Walk into the kitchen at any Chugh office, and you will see multi-vitamins on top of the water-cooler, and if you visit the office any day at 3:30 p.m. be assured that you will be offered the 'fruit of the day.'

The Firm misses no opportunity to host a celebration. Winning a case, meeting Firm goals, end of tax season, all are celebrated creatively. "The highlight of the year is the Firm trip," says Ahluwalia. Every year, the Firm takes all of its employees and their families on a 3-day trip. It is an all-expenses paid trip where all employees get to see their colleagues outside of office. "When the retail economy and peoples' moods were really low in the months following 9/11, Navneet came up with the idea of giving out a middle of the year shopping bonus to everyone. The whole Firm went to the mall in the middle of the day and spent the afternoon shopping and eating ice-cream," says Hersh Shah at the Iselin office.

"The top priority item in the Firm agenda's is professional development of its employees," says Jean Borja, a 12-year veteran of the Firm. The emphasis on taking classes, and courses and enrolling all staff for their next college degrees is maddening, says Borja. "IBM spends \$3,000 per employee per year on training, and so do we."

"As far as giving back is concerned, if there is a social cause in town, we are involved," says Nandu Patel, a partner in the Santa Clara office. "One percent of the Firm's revenue is allocated to charitable and social causes," says Patel and adds, "Almost everyone in the Firm is involved with a social cause."

"This attitude of giving back starts at the top with Navneet," says Manisha Aurora, a corporate and tax lawyer. "From starting an Indian bar association in LA in 1995 to becoming the first president of the wildly successful National South Asian Bar Association (NASABA) in 2003, to starting the first TiE chapter, outside of Silicon Valley, in Los Angeles in 1997, and the International Indian Bar Association in 2005, there is no end to the inspiration of giving back from our managing partner," adds Aurora.

"It is just a part of our life here," Sawhney says, who is now a vice president at NASABA and has been president of SABA both in LA and the bay area.

"Of all the causes he has been involved in, I have never seen Navneet as passionate about anything as he is about the American India Foundation (AIF), on whose board he sits and is also a trustee," says Sonia Sidhu an immigration veteran of the Firm. "The biggest project of the Firm is the annual AIF gala in Los Angeles in which we all get involved," Sidhu adds. "By the end of this year, we would have helped raise over a \$1 million for AIF from Los Angeles, and the goal keeps increasing every year," adds Sidhu.

A two-decade-old saga has just begun to unfold and Chugh has already had much more than his slice of the American Dream. Today this hugely successful Firm is so much rolled into one.
