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ISSUE X

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LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

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COVER STORY

Surendra Sharma

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SURENDRA SHARMA ON CREATING A GLOBAL MARK

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Editor's Note

In a business landscape defined by global opportunity, continuous innovation, and evolving leadership, every edition of Corporate World Magazine is a chance to recognize the individuals and ideas making a meaningful impact across industries worldwide.

Our Edition 10 – August Issue proudly features Surendra Sharma on the cover, whose journey reflects the power of global ambition, strategic thinking, and perseverance. Through his story, Winning Abroad, Building Ahead: Surendra Sharma on Creating a Global Mark," this edition explores how vision, adaptability, and a commitment to excellence can transform international opportunities into lasting success.

This edition also brings together the journeys and perspectives of distinguished professionals including Gerda Oberholzer, Albert-Jan (Arjan) van der Sloot, Prashant Kapila, Mansour Najafi, and Ankit Gupta. Across diverse industries and leadership roles, their experiences highlight the importance of expertise, innovation, resilience, and purposeful leadership in shaping sustainable growth.

Beyond individual journeys, this issue reflects on the broader forces transforming today's corporate world—where leaders are increasingly expected to think globally, embrace change, and create value that extends beyond immediate business outcomes. Each profile offers a unique perspective, yet a common message connects them all: meaningful success is built through the courage to evolve, the vision to move forward, and the determination to create a lasting impact.

We invite you to explore Edition 10 of Corporate World Magazine and discover the stories, insights, and leadership perspectives shaping the future of global business.

Wishing you an insightful read.



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COVER STORY

WINNING ABROAD, BUILDING AHEAD

SURENDRA SHARMA ON CREATING A GLOBAL MARK

Surendra Sharma on taking Advance Infrastructures from proven Indian execution to a larger international play.

Surendra Sharma has spent more than three decades around pipelines, infrastructure projects and the demanding business of getting things built. His career has taken him from project sites in India to Malaysia, Bangladesh, Georgia and Australia, before he moved into leadership at Advance Infrastructures Pvt Ltd (AIPL). A civil engineer with experience in project and risk management, Sharma has seen the industry from the ground up.

The company has taken another significant step in its international journey by securing a major project in Abu Dhabi, adding greater weight to its plans for the Gulf and giving Sharma a new challenge — turning international opportunity into sustained growth. According to a MEED report, China Petroleum Engineering & Construction Corporation (CPECC), the main EPC contractor for ADNOC Onshore's South East off-plot facilities project, has awarded AIPL a subcontract for pipeline construction and associated works at the Asab and Sahil oil fields.

In this conversation with Corporate World, Surendra Sharma, Chief Executive Officer, AIPL speaks about the Abu Dhabi breakthrough, what it takes for an Indian EPC company to compete abroad, and the importance of people and execution.



Q. AIPL has secured a major project in Abu Dhabi. What does this milestone mean for the company's larger growth plans?

This recent subcontract is an important milestone in our international journey. Estimated at $74.3 million and with an execution period of 21 months, the project involves pipeline construction and associated works at the Asab and Sahil oil fields in Abu Dhabi's Southeast cluster. It gives us an opportunity to demonstrate our capabilities on a larger international platform and creates a foundation for pursuing more opportunities in the region.

The project is being executed under China Petroleum Engineering & Construction Corporation (CPECC), the main EPC contractor for the wider South East off-plot facilities project. The scale of the overall development makes this particularly significant for us. The project involves work across several oil fields, including the installation of more than 270 kilometres of flowlines and the tie-in of over 150 wells.

The biggest change has been the confidence we have gained in our ability to operate in international markets. Entering a new geography is never simply about winning a contract. You have to understand the market, regulations, clients and local practices and, importantly, build the right team.

Our experience in the GCC has helped us understand these aspects much better. It is certainly a proud moment, but winning the contract is only the beginning. The real test is execution. That is where our focus is now.

Q. What makes international EPC projects different from the projects you have handled in India?

International projects require a much greater understanding of local regulations, documentation, compliance, procurement practices, manpower requirements and cultural nuances. You cannot assume that what works in one market will automatically work in another.

> ***The objective has never been only to build projects. It is to build an organisation that can keep building long after any one individual has stepped away.***

My own experience of working on projects in countries such as Malaysia, Bangladesh and Georgia has helped me appreciate this. You learn to adapt without compromising on the standards you have set for yourself.

Q. You have spent a large part of your career on project sites. Has that experience changed the way you lead a company today?

Definitely.

When you start your career as an engineer, you are focused on completing the task in front of you. As you move into larger responsibilities, you realise that successful execution depends on hundreds of decisions made by different people.

My years on project sites taught me the importance of planning, communication and taking ownership. They also taught me that a problem rarely gets solved by simply passing it up the hierarchy. Someone has to take responsibility and find a practical solution.

As a CEO, I try to carry that thinking into the organisation. I want people to have ownership of what they do. At the same time, they need the freedom to communicate problems early. In infrastructure, hiding a problem never makes it smaller.

Q. AIPL has collaborated with several big players in India. What have these collaborations taught you about running a business?

They have taught us the value of reputation.

Through our experience collaborating with clients such as IOCL, GAIL, and HPCL, we have been involved in projects which were difficult and time-consuming. It does not take much time for us to realize that technical expertise is just not enough. The client has to see that you will be reliable during tough times.

For us, this has meant being consistent on the aspects of safety, quality, timelines, and communications.

Q. Does moving into international markets change the culture of a company?

It should, but without losing the fundamentals.

When you enter a new market, your people have to become more adaptable. They have to understand different ways of working and become comfortable with diversity in teams.

At the same time, certain things should never change — your approach to safety, quality, ethics and accountability.



Q. Saudi Arabia remains another important market for AIPL. What role does it play in your larger strategy?

Saudi Arabia is a very important market for us because of the scale of infrastructure development taking place there.

Our joint venture, Advance Saudi Co. Ltd., with Mubarak Al Suwaiket Oil & Gas Services, was established with the objective of building a stronger local presence. The idea is not simply to bid for projects from outside the country. We want to develop local capabilities, invest in people and equipment, and build an organisation that can participate meaningfully in the Saudi market.

> **Winning the contract is only the beginning. The real test is execution.**

The Saudi market also requires a long-term approach. There is tremendous opportunity, but there is also strong competition. You have to demonstrate capability, compliance and commitment to the market.

Q. Technology is changing infrastructure rapidly. How much of AIPL's future will depend on it?

Technology will play an increasingly important role, particularly in project planning, monitoring, communication, documentation and safety.

But I don't think technology replaces execution experience. It makes good execution more efficient.

For example, better digital systems can help management identify delays or deviations earlier. Data can improve planning and resource allocation. Remote monitoring can provide better visibility of projects.

The important thing is to use technology because it solves a problem, rather than adopting technology simply because it is available.

Q. Safety is one of the biggest concerns in large infrastructure projects. How do you ensure that it remains a priority as the company grows?

Safety has to be part of the culture, not simply a department.
You can have excellent safety manuals and procedures, but ultimately it comes down to how people behave on the ground.

Supervisors have to take ownership, workers have to be trained and management has to demonstrate that safety will never be sacrificed to meet a deadline.

A project can be delayed and recovered. A serious accident can change lives permanently. There is no commercial justification for compromising on safety.

Q. What has been the biggest leadership lesson of the last few years?

That you cannot build a large organisation around one individual. When a company is small, the founder is involved in almost everything. As the organisation grows, that becomes impossible and, frankly, undesirable.

Your responsibility as a leader changes. You have to build people who can make decisions, develop systems that support them and create an environment where accountability is understood.

I have increasingly focused on building a team that can take the organisation forward rather than trying to personally control every aspect of it.



Q. After decades in the industry, what still excites you about the business?

The fact that every project is different. You can have a technically similar project, but the terrain, people, logistics, client requirements and challenges will be different. There is always something that requires you to think differently.

And there is a certain satisfaction in seeing something physical take shape because of the work of your team. A pipeline, a piece of infrastructure or an entire project remains long after the meetings and paperwork are over.

That is what attracted me to engineering in the first place, and that part has not changed.

Q. What do you want AIPL to look like five or ten years from now?

I want AIPL to be recognised as an Indian company with genuine international capability.We don't want international expansion to be about putting flags on a map. We want to build a business that can consistently execute complex projects in different markets.

That means strengthening our technical capabilities, investing in people, adopting useful technology and building strong local partnerships.

Most importantly, I want the company to remain credible. Growth is important, but how you grow is equally important.

Q. And personally, what would make you feel that you have built something meaningful?

If the organisation can continue to grow and perform well without depending on me personally, that would be a meaningful achievement.

I would like to see young engineers and professionals within AIPL take on larger responsibilities and eventually lead projects and businesses of their own.

I started my career on project sites. I know how much you learn when you are given responsibility early and allowed to solve real problems.

If we can create that kind of environment for the next generation, while building an Indian EPC company that can compete confidently in international markets, I would consider that a worthwhile legacy.

For me, the objective has never been only to build projects. It is to build an organisation that can keep building long after any one individual has stepped away.

LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

Empowering People, Enabling Progress: Building a Future-Ready Workforce

GERDA OBERHOLZER
FOUNDER OF GEOFUNDA

With more than 30 years of experience across the education, healthcare and workforce development sectors, **Gerda Oberholzer, Founder of GEOFunda**, speaks to Corporate World about building future-ready talent, recognising experience as a powerful asset, and creating learning ecosystems that empower individuals while strengthening organisations and contributing to sustainable economic and social progress.



Beginning her career in the medical field, Oberholzer played a pioneering role in developing clinical training initiatives before expanding her expertise into workforce development, accreditation, assessment and quality assurance. Her contributions have also helped advance professional standards through her work within GEOFunda and serving as a committee member with the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) and the Labour Law and Labour Relations Association.

> *When we invest in people and value what they bring, we build stronger organisations and a more inclusive, future-ready society.*

Today, as the Founder of GEOFunda, Oberholzer is driving innovative approaches to workforce development through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Continuing Professional Development (CPD), accreditation, and quality assurance.

Guided by the values of integrity, excellence and respect, she believes meaningful education extends far beyond qualifications—it builds confident professionals, strengthens organisations and creates more resilient communities.

Q1- With more than three decades of leadership experience spanning education, healthcare and business development, what inspired you to establish GEOFunda, and how has your founding vision evolved in response to the changing needs of today's workforce?

GEOFunda was founded on a simple but powerful belief: education should do more than transfer knowledge. It should unlock potential, recognise experience and create meaningful opportunities for individuals and organisations.

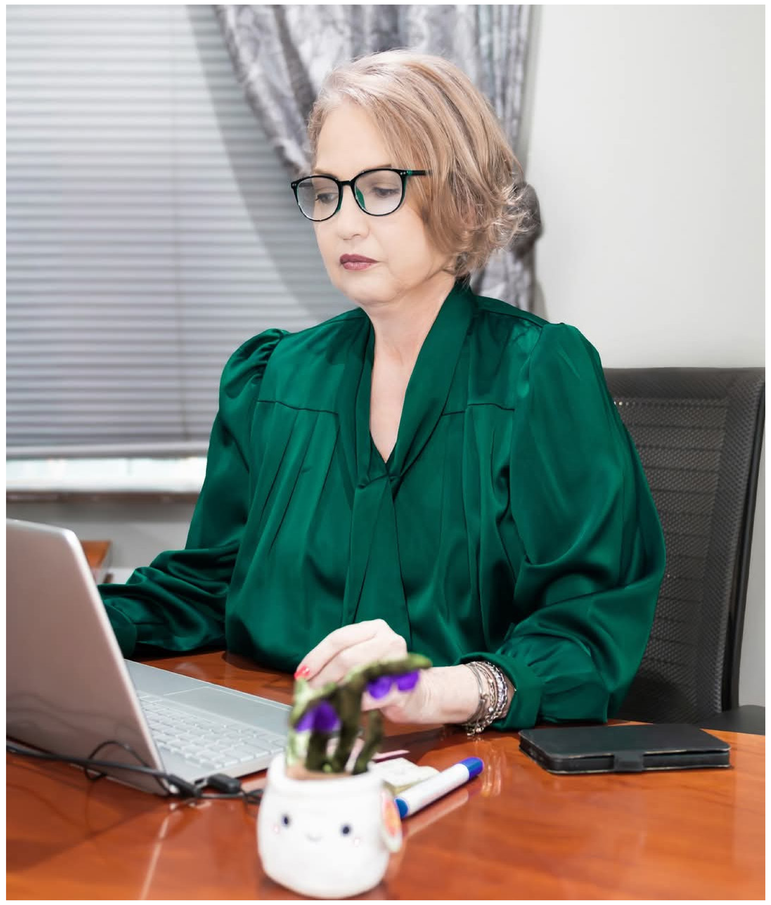
Throughout my career, I encountered highly capable people who were held back because they lacked access to relevant learning opportunities or formal recognition of the skills they had gained through experience. This inspired me to establish an organisation that bridges the gap between education and genuine workplace needs.

Over time, our vision has evolved from delivering training programmes to providing integrated workforce development solutions that include Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Continuing Professional Development (CPD), accreditation support, assessment and quality assurance. While we have embraced digital learning, flexible delivery and customised programme design, our purpose remains unchanged: to make credible, accessible and practical learning a catalyst for competence, confidence, career mobility and organisational growth.

Q2- GEOFunda has built a strong reputation for delivering impactful learning and development solutions across diverse industries. What strategic principles enable the organisation to consistently deliver relevant, future-focused programmes in such dynamic sectors?

Our approach is built on five principles: relevance, customisation, collaboration, quality and measurable impact.

Rather than offering standardised solutions, we begin by understanding each client's industry, workforce challenges and strategic objectives. This enables us to design programmes that combine sound educational principles with practical workplace application.



We also collaborate closely with employers, professional bodies, academic institutions and subject-matter experts to ensure our programmes remain aligned with industry standards, regulatory expectations and emerging trends. Quality assurance is embedded throughout the learning journey—from programme design and facilitation to assessment, learner support and evaluation.

Ultimately, success is not measured simply by programme completion. It is measured by whether learning changes behaviour, improves performance, strengthens organisational capability and enables organisations to respond confidently to change.

Q3- As industries undergo rapid transformation driven by technology and evolving workforce expectations, where do you see the most critical skills gaps emerging, and what role should organisations play in cultivating a culture of continuous learning?

The most significant skills gaps are emerging where technology intersects with human capability.

Digital literacy, artificial intelligence, data-driven decision-making and adaptability are becoming essential. At the same time, qualities such as emotional intelligence, ethical judgement, communication, critical thinking and resilient leadership have never been more valuable.

Technical expertise alone is no longer enough. Employees must be able to learn continuously, unlearn outdated practices and apply new knowledge in changing environments.

For organisations, this means treating learning as a strategic investment rather than a compliance exercise. Leaders should model curiosity, encourage responsible experimentation, provide continuous development opportunities and integrate learning into everyday work through mentoring, coaching, CPD and reflective practice.

The organisations that thrive will be those that create safe environments in which people can question, learn, adapt and innovate.

Q4- Your expertise spans Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Continuing Professional Development (CPD), accreditation, assessment, and quality assurance. How do these pillars collectively strengthen workforce capability and contribute to sustainable organisational growth?

These are not isolated functions—they form an interconnected workforce development system.

Recognition of Prior Learning acknowledges knowledge and competence gained through experience, creating opportunities for further education, professional recognition and career progression. Continuing Professional Development ensures that knowledge and skills remain current as industries, technology and professional expectations evolve.

Accreditation provides credibility by confirming that programmes meet recognised standards, while assessment provides evidence that learners can apply their knowledge and competence effectively. Quality assurance safeguards the integrity, fairness and consistency of the entire process.

Together, these elements help organisations identify existing capability, close priority skills gaps, build stronger leadership pipelines, improve succession planning, strengthen regulatory confidence and develop a workforce equipped with recognised, relevant and transferable capabilities.

Q5- Integrity, excellence, and respect are deeply embedded in GEOFunda's philosophy. How have these values shaped your leadership approach, and how do they influence the organisation's long-term relationships with clients, learners, and industry stakeholders?

These values are not simply statements—they shape every decision we make.

Integrity means maintaining high standards, providing honest guidance and protecting the credibility of learning and assessment processes. Excellence requires continuous improvement and a commitment to delivering meaningful outcomes rather than merely completing projects. Respect means recognising the experience, dignity and potential of every learner, client and stakeholder.

These principles have shaped my leadership style, which is grounded in accountability, collaboration and service. They have also enabled us to build long-term relationships based on trust, transparency and shared purpose. In learning and development, trust is fundamental. By consistently living these values, we have built a reputation based on the quality of our work, the integrity of our processes and the results we help our clients achieve.

Q6- As you look toward the future, what is your long-term vision for GEOFunda, and what enduring impact do you hope to make on leadership development, professional education, and the future of workforce transformation?



My vision is for GEOFunda to become a recognised leader in innovative, ethical and accessible workforce development across South Africa and beyond.

We will continue connecting education, professional recognition and workplace transformation through customised learning, digital innovation, RPL, CPD and robust quality assurance systems. Equally important is our commitment to expanding access for individuals whose experience, capabilities and potential may previously have gone unrecognised.

Ultimately, I hope our impact will be measured not only by the qualifications people earn, but also by the opportunities they gain, the confidence they develop, the careers they build, and the positive contribution they make within their organisations and communities.

Our commitment remains simple:

Empower people. Embrace innovation. Lead with purpose.



LEADERSHIP INSIGHTS

Engineering the Future: A Four-Decade Journey

of Maritime Leadership, Innovation and Resilient Growth

Albert-Jan (Arjan) van der Sloot represents a generation of leaders who have witnessed and actively participated in the transformation of global maritime and engineering industries

With more than four decades of international experience across maritime operations, engineering, consultancy, energy and technical services, **Albert-Jan (Arjan) van der Sloot** has built a leadership journey defined by adaptability, technical excellence and entrepreneurial vision.

From serving in the Royal Dutch Navy and managing complex international projects to leading **Q2CC** and creating new pathways for business growth in China, his career reflects the power of continuous learning and strategic transformation.

In this exclusive **Corporate World Magazine** interview, Arjan discusses the defining milestones of his career, his participatory leadership philosophy, navigating post-pandemic business challenges, embracing sustainability and technology, and his vision for the next generation of maritime and energy leadership.



ALBERT-JAN (ARJAN)
VAN DER SLOOT
GLOBAL MARITIME LEADER



"Leadership in maritime is not just about navigating the seas- it's about navigating change, people and purpose."

Q1. Your professional journey has undoubtedly been shaped by a series of experiences, challenges, and achievements. Could you take us through the key milestones that have defined your career and brought you to where you are today?

My professional journey began in 1984 with six years of operational service in the Royal Dutch Navy, where I gained valuable international exposure across the Caribbean, North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and Southeast Asia. Following my honourable discharge in 1990, I moved into the marine coatings industry with Courtaulds Coatings – International Paint and subsequently joined Tecson Rotterdam BV as a coating inspector and corrosion engineer, working on diverse international projects.

Alongside my professional responsibilities, I invested more than 11 years in specialized education, professional diplomas and industry certifications, developing expertise in intercultural management, strategic business development, engineering management, crisis management, troubleshooting and cost management. In 1995, I entered the technical services industry in China, taking on roles including shipowner's representative, country manager, project manager and technical service manager with various organizations, including Fortune 500 companies. In 2011, I established my first company in Hong Kong while also serving as Managing Director of Qingdao Yanlin Underwater Contractors Co., Ltd., and in 2014, I became CEO of Q2CC (Qingdao Quality Control Consultants). Each chapter of my career contributed to the technical knowledge, international perspective and entrepreneurial mindset that define my leadership approach today.

Q2. Every successful leader has a unique approach to inspiring people. How would you describe your leadership philosophy, and how do you keep your team motivated, focused, and resilient during periods of uncertainty or change?



I believe in a participatory and value-based leadership style rather than a traditional top-down approach. I consider every employee a valuable stakeholder in the organization and encourage my teams to align their decisions and actions with our shared core values. When making important decisions, I combine my own experience and knowledge with the ideas, feedback and perspectives of my colleagues, because collaboration can unlock stronger solutions, creativity and problem-solving capabilities. I also believe that people perform better when they feel respected, trusted and comfortable expressing their opinions.

In today's environment of digital transformation, market disruption and constant change, creating a culture of openness and ownership is essential to maintaining resilience and engagement. At Q2CC, I therefore strive to create an environment where employees are encouraged to contribute, challenge assumptions and consider different perspectives, because a motivated team is ultimately one of the strongest drivers of sustainable business performance.

Q3. Looking back at your leadership journey, what is one decision that significantly transformed your organization, and what valuable lessons did that experience teach you about leadership and growth?

In 2023, many businesses were still dealing with the economic consequences of COVID-19 and sluggish market conditions, so we recognized that Q2CC needed to become more efficient and responsive. We streamlined our processes, reduced costs and improved productivity while restructuring communication and collaboration between departments. We also expanded our service portfolio in response to growing demand for local, multidisciplinary engineering support and introduced sustainability measures aimed at reducing waste and improving surface preparation and coating application methods to minimize environmental impact.

At the same time, we strengthened supply chain management and embraced digital marketing to enhance customer engagement and market visibility. This transformation taught me that growth is not simply about increasing revenue; it is about creating an agile organization that can respond quickly to changing customer expectations and market realities. In a rapidly evolving business landscape, operational efficiency, sustainability, digital transformation and customer-centricity must work together to create long-term competitiveness.

Q4. You have been selected for the Honorary Doctorate Recognition from Dunster Business School. What does this recognition represent for you personally, and how does it reflect the impact you have worked to create throughout your career?

I am grateful beyond words to receive an Honorary Doctorate Recognition for my work in Maritime and Energy Leadership. My professional journey has extended over more than four decades and has included many unexpected challenges, opportunities

and turning points. My career did not progress through a simple or predictable path; it involved long working hours, continuous education, international assignments, relocation and the courage to make significant professional decisions.

I often worked 12 to 16 hours a day and was prepared to make personal sacrifices when circumstances demanded it. I never avoided challenges and consistently looked for opportunities to apply my knowledge in new environments while acquiring new skills and experience. Whether choosing a new position, pursuing further education, relocating to another country or establishing my own businesses, I made those decisions consciously. For me, this recognition represents appreciation for a lifetime of professional commitment, continuous learning and contribution to the maritime and energy sectors.

Q5. Success often comes from making difficult choices. Can you share a pivotal moment when you had to make a bold or unconventional decision for your organization, and how that decision influenced its future direction?

In 2025, Q2CC faced a significant challenge as rising local salaries coincided with client demands for lower project pricing, making it increasingly difficult to sustain our existing business model. Since many client interactions were already taking place through email, telephone and video conferencing, I made the strategic decision toward the end of 2025 to close our physical office while continuing the company's operations.

At the same time, I pursued a personal ambition that I had carried for approximately 35 years by establishing the first Dutch Holland House Bistro and Bar in Qingdao, China. The venture unexpectedly became an important business-development platform, attracting clients from the marine, oil and gas and offshore industries. These relationships subsequently generated new opportunities for our engineering and consultancy business. Instead of constantly approaching clients for projects, we created an environment where clients could approach us. This experience reinforced my belief that innovation sometimes comes from completely changing the way you connect with your market and build relationships.

Q6. As someone who continues to push boundaries in your field, what are the most important goals and priorities you hope to achieve over the next five years?

My primary objective over the next five years is to expand Q2CC's presence in maritime, oil and gas, offshore and newbuilding projects throughout China. We want to strengthen our market position while continuing to provide clients with reliable technical expertise, engineering support and high-quality consultancy services. Looking toward 2030, we intend to appoint a new Managing Director who can lead the company into its next phase of growth and development.

Empower people. Embrace innovation. Lead with purpose.

Effective succession planning is important because sustainable organizations must be capable of evolving beyond the leadership of one individual. At the same time, I plan to maintain a daily presence within the business, continuing to engage directly with clients, engineers and industry representatives. My vision is to build a resilient and future-ready organization that combines technical excellence, customer trust and strategic growth.

7. The future belongs to those who help shape it. As you look ahead, what vision are you working toward, and what changes or innovations do you believe are necessary for your industry to evolve and thrive alongside that vision?

I see exciting opportunities ahead for Q2CC, particularly in technological innovation, environmental protection and high-tech applications that complement our core business. The maritime, oil and gas and offshore sectors are undergoing significant transformation, and organizations will increasingly need to integrate advanced technology with engineering expertise and sustainability objectives. I believe future competitiveness will depend on the ability to improve operational efficiency, environmental performance, safety and quality while remaining responsive to changing market requirements.

For Q2CC, our goal is to remain close to these developments and identify practical opportunities where innovation can create measurable value for our clients. The future will belong to organizations that can combine deep industry knowledge with digital transformation, sustainability, innovation and an agile mindset.

Q8. Beyond your professional achievements and leadership journey, is there a message, belief, or personal insight you would like to share with our readers that reflects who you are and what drives you every day?

My message is simple: strive for financial freedom. Financial freedom provides people with the opportunity to pursue their passions, develop their strengths and choose an environment where they can make a meaningful contribution.

For me, success is not only about professional recognition or financial achievement; it is also about having the freedom to work with people you respect, contribute your knowledge, serve clients with integrity and spend meaningful time with the people you care about.

When financial independence is combined with purpose and passion, it creates the freedom to make choices based on values rather than limitations. That freedom can ultimately help individuals create greater impact in both their professional and personal lives.



A career shaped by continuous learning, strategic transformation, and the resilience to lead through change.

9. If you could leave one lasting piece of advice for aspiring professionals and future leaders, what would it be, and why do you believe it matters in today's rapidly changing world?

To succeed in today's dynamic business environment, leaders must be flexible, adaptive and willing to continuously learn. The external environment can change rapidly through shifts in markets, competition, technology, customer expectations and broader economic conditions, and leaders must understand these changes before making strategic decisions. It is important to remain aware of what is happening beyond the organization and to recognize when existing approaches are no longer effective.

I believe leaders should regularly challenge their assumptions, listen to their teams and adapt their leadership style according to circumstances. In an era of digital transformation and constant disruption, adaptability is no longer simply a desirable quality—it is a fundamental leadership capability.

Those who remain curious, resilient and responsive will be better prepared to transform uncertainty into opportunity and create sustainable growth.

10. When your professional legacy is discussed years from now, what impact would you hope people remember you for most?

I would like to be remembered for my innovative ideas, excellent customer service and unwavering commitment to quality. These three principles have consistently guided my professional approach throughout my career. Innovation allows organizations to discover new possibilities, customer service creates lasting relationships and quality builds credibility and trust.

Ultimately, I hope my legacy will be measured not only by the businesses or projects I have been associated with, but by the positive value created for clients, colleagues and industry partners.

If people remember me as someone who continuously searched for better solutions, maintained strong relationships and never compromised on quality, I would consider that a meaningful professional legacy.

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Engineering with Purpose:

Leadership, Integrity and the Vision for Viksit Bharat



Prashant's journey offers a compelling perspective on what modern engineering leadership can look like: technologically progressive, human-centric and firmly grounded in integrity.

In an exclusive interview with **Corporate World Magazine, Prashant Kapila, Managing Director of Intercontinental Consultants and Technocrats Pvt. Ltd.**, shares insights into his 26-year journey in engineering and infrastructure, his people-first leadership philosophy, commitment to integrity, and vision for a technology-enabled and future-ready India. He reflects on the evolving role of engineers, the importance of human potential in the age of AI, and the leadership values shaping his journey.

Q1. From being fascinated by airport runways as a young student to leading a prominent consulting engineering organization, what experiences have shaped your professional journey?

I have been fortunate to grow up surrounded by engineers, with my father being a Civil Engineer who worked for the Airports Authority of India before establishing his own consulting engineering organization. From a young age, I always wanted to design and help build a greenfield airport, and what fascinated me most was not the building, lounges or terminals, but the runway—the long, powerful strip capable of withstanding immense pressure and forces from aircraft taking off and landing on it. I completed my schooling at Modern School, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, followed by my Bachelor's degree from RV College of Engineering, Bangalore, where living independently became a significant learning experience. I subsequently pursued an M.Sc. in Civil & Environmental Engineering from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, USA. After returning to India, I joined Intercontinental Consultants and Technocrats Pvt. Ltd. and, as of June 30, 2026, have completed 26 years with the organization. During this journey, I have successfully handled business development, travelled extensively across the world and had the privilege of experiencing different cultures and perspectives. These experiences have strengthened my professional capabilities while teaching me one of the most valuable lessons in leadership—the ability to understand and connect with people at every level.

Q2. In an increasingly people-centric business environment, how do you build trust, collaboration and accountability within your teams?

One of the most important lessons my travels taught me early in my career was the ability to listen. Leaders are often expected to have answers, but sometimes the most powerful leadership skill is simply giving people the space to speak and be heard. My



> "Use technology to bring in efficiency and speed, but at the same time continue to invest in your people."
>
> — Prashant Kapila

leadership style has always been collaborative. I encourage colleagues to explain the issue they are facing, share their perspective and then work together to reason through the way forward. This approach allows people to grow professionally while also creating an environment where I remain approachable and accessible. I want my colleagues to see me as someone who is part of the team, while respecting the experience and guidance I bring. In today's workplace, where collaboration, empathy and trust are increasingly important, I believe leaders should create an environment where people feel valued, heard and empowered to contribute meaningfully.

Q3. What leadership principle has played the biggest role in shaping your long-term career and the legacy you want to build?

One of the most important decisions a leader should make early in their professional journey is to understand the path they want to take and the kind of legacy they ultimately want to leave behind. Leadership is not simply about the position one occupies; it is about the example one sets through everyday actions. Your team is always watching, and therefore every decision contributes to the culture and standards you create. I knew early in my journey that I wanted to build a long-term career with ICT, and I worked toward that goal by taking on different responsibilities while earning the support and trust of my colleagues. This experience taught me that meaningful leadership is built through consistency, credibility, relationships and perseverance. In an era increasingly driven by instant results, I continue to believe that sustainable success comes from investing in people, building trust and remaining committed to a long-term vision.

Q4. You have received for Honorary Doctorate Recognition from Dunster Business School. What does this recognition mean to you personally?

I am grateful for this recognition from Dunster Business School. For me, it is a validation of the age-old belief that hard work eventually pays off and that we must continue striving for success without taking anything in life for granted. I have always believed in giving my best to whatever responsibility I undertake and continuing to learn along the way. Recognition is certainly encouraging, but I believe the real value lies in the journey—the challenges faced, lessons learned, relationships built and contributions made. This recognition therefore serves as a meaningful reminder that sincere effort, perseverance and a commitment to doing things well can create lasting impact. It also motivates me to continue contributing to the engineering profession and the larger development ecosystem with the same sense of purpose.

Q5. In an industry where short-term

opportunities can sometimes conflict with long-term values, how have ethics and integrity influenced your most important decisions?

I believe every leader must understand early whether they are pursuing short-term gains or long-term, sustainable growth and legacy. Throughout my career, I have encountered situations where an opportunity may offer immediate benefits but could require compromising one's ethics or integrity. I have always ensured that whatever work we undertake is driven by integrity and ethical decision-making, both in project delivery and in our professional relationships. This commitment has helped us establish an unmatched reputation in our field, and we are often entrusted with critical projects of national importance on a sole-source basis because clients know that once we accept a responsibility, it will be delivered with quality and on time. In my view, reputation is one of the most valuable assets an organization can build. Financial performance may fluctuate, but trust earned through consistent integrity creates relationships and opportunities that endure.

Q6. Over the next five years, what professional priorities do you hope to advance for yourself, ICT and the wider engineering community?

Over the next five years, I want to work through the various professional associations with which I am associated or which I am leading to restore and strengthen the prestige of engineers in society. Engineering is one of the foundational professions supporting infrastructure, economic development and nation-building, yet India still does not have an Engineers Bill. I would like to contribute toward ensuring that this receives the attention it deserves and work toward establishing an appropriate legislative framework at the earliest. As India progresses toward becoming a more developed and globally competitive nation, the role of engineers will become even more critical. We need to ensure that engineers are not only recognized for the technical value they bring but are also empowered to contribute more effectively to policy, infrastructure planning, innovation and national development.

7. As India accelerates toward Viksit Bharat, what changes do you believe are essential for the consulting-engineering and built-environment sector to become more innovative and future-ready?

As the Managing Director of a consulting engineering company working primarily in the built environment, I believe our industry has tremendous potential to embrace new technologies, innovate and contribute meaningfully toward the vision of Viksit Bharat. However, technology alone cannot transform the industry. Our clients and the wider ecosystem must also evolve in how projects are procured, financed, designed and managed. There needs to be greater openness toward innovation, faster decision-making and more progressive approaches to project delivery. If we want to achieve development at the scale and speed required, quality, integrity and efficiency must remain at the core of the process. Emerging technologies can provide greater speed, precision and productivity, but real transformation will happen when technology, people, processes and client expectations evolve together.

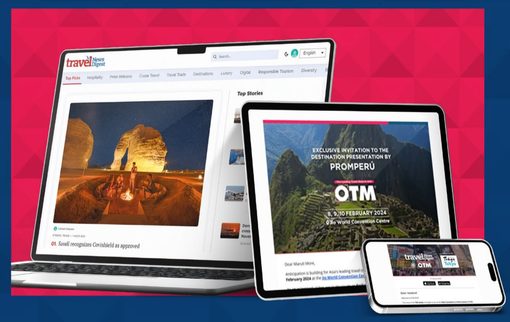
Q8. Beyond professional milestones, what personal philosophy keeps you grounded and gives meaning to your success?

I believe it is extremely important for every professional to establish a meaningful goal, but that goal should not be purely monetary or materialistic. We should also take the time to listen to our inner voice and understand what genuinely makes us happy. When we work toward that inner happiness, many other aspects of life naturally begin to fall into place. For me, fulfilment also comes from maintaining balance across the different roles we play—as children, spouses, parents, friends and professionals. Once you learn to balance these responsibilities, you can achieve a greater sense of inner peace and perspective. In today's high-pressure professional environment, success should not simply be measured by titles, income or achievements. True success is about creating a life in which professional contribution and personal fulfilment can coexist meaningfully.

Q9. With AI, automation and emerging technologies transforming industries, how can leaders ensure technology empowers people rather than diminishes human potential?

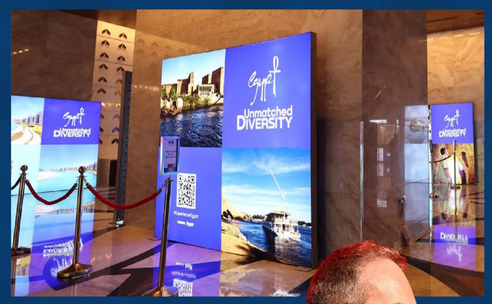
The world is changing at an extraordinary pace, sometimes so quickly that we struggle to keep up with it. There is also an increasing tendency to depend on technology for almost everything, but we must remember that it is human intelligence that created these technologies in the first place. The power of the human brain should never be underestimated or made redundant because we blindly rely on technology and its outputs. As leaders, we must find the right balance between adopting emerging technologies and developing our people. In consulting engineering, our people are our greatest asset and will remain so regardless of how sophisticated technology becomes. We should use technology to improve efficiency, speed and productivity while continuing to invest in human capabilities, creativity, critical thinking and professional development. The future should not be about replacing people with technology; it should be about using technology to empower people to achieve more.

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BUILDING STRENGTH THROUGH INNOVATION

MANSOUR NAJAFI

CEO OF HORMOZGAN CEMENT

Mansour Najafi, CEO of Hormozgan Cement, speaks to Corporate World about leading with resilience, embracing innovation, and building a future where operational excellence and sustainability go hand in hand



The cement industry has long been the backbone of infrastructure development, playing a critical role in shaping economies and supporting urban growth. Today, however, the sector is navigating a rapidly changing landscape where efficiency, sustainability, and technological advancement have become just as important as production capacity. Leading through this transformation requires not only technical expertise but also a clear long-term vision.

Few understand these evolving dynamics better than Mansour Najafi. With more than 30 years of experience across the mining and cement industries, he has built a career centred on operational excellence, strategic leadership, and continuous improvement. Throughout his journey, he has held several executive and managerial positions, gaining valuable experience in navigating market fluctuations, regulatory changes, and the growing demand for sustainable industrial practices.

Today, as the CEO of Hormozgan Cement, Najafi continues to focus on modernising operations through technology, strengthening quality standards, and creating a culture that values innovation, accountability, and people development. His leadership philosophy is rooted in the belief that long-term business success is achieved by balancing profitability with responsible environmental stewardship.

In this conversation with Corporate World, Najafi reflects on his leadership journey, the company's competitive strengths, and his vision for the future of sustainable manufacturing.

Q. What inspired you to pursue a career in the cement industry, and what has kept you passionate about this sector throughout your journey?

I began my professional career in the mining and cement industries more than three decades ago, driven by a genuine interest in industrial development and creating long-term value. What attracted me to the sector was the opportunity to contribute to an industry that plays such an important role in economic growth and infrastructure development.

Over the years, that motivation has only grown stronger. Every challenge has been an opportunity to expand my technical knowledge, improve operational efficiency and develop people. For me, the most rewarding part of this journey has been contributing to sustainable growth while creating lasting value—not only for the organisation, but also for the communities and industries we serve.

Q. Looking back on your career, what have been the defining moments that shaped your leadership philosophy?

Working in different executive and leadership roles has taught me that lasting success depends on transparency, accountability and informed decision-making. Throughout my career, I've experienced changing market conditions, economic uncertainty and evolving regulations. Those experiences reinforced the importance of remaining adaptable while staying focused on long-term objectives.

They also shaped my belief that organisations perform at their best when business goals are aligned with individual growth. As a leader, I believe in empowering people and creating an environment where individuals feel responsible for contributing to the organisation's success.

Q. Hormozgan Cement has earned a strong reputation in the industry. What do you believe sets the company apart from its competitors?

Our greatest strength lies in our commitment to quality, operational excellence and sustainable production.

We continuously invest in modern technologies, intelligent monitoring systems and process optimisation to improve efficiency and maintain high standards. At the same time, we believe innovation doesn't come from technology alone—it also comes from investing in our people through training, research and a culture of continuous improvement.

This balanced approach enables us to remain competitive in both domestic and international markets while consistently delivering products that meet customer expectations.

Q. How do you balance profitability with environmental responsibility while ensuring sustainable business growth?

For us, profitability and environmental responsibility are closely connected—they are not competing priorities. We focus on improving productivity through automation, advanced



technologies and data-driven decision-making while simultaneously investing in greener technologies that reduce our environmental impact. By improving efficiency, minimising waste and making better use of resources, we create value for the business while meeting our environment commitment. Sustainable growth comes from finding that balance, where operational excellence supports both economic performance and responsible manufacturing.

Q. Quality is often the defining factor in the cement industry. How does Hormozgan Cement ensure its products consistently meet international standards?

Quality is central to everything we do. We rely on advanced automation, intelligent monitoring systems and data analytics to maintain consistent process control and product performance throughout the manufacturing cycle. These technologies allow us to identify opportunities for improvement while ensuring reliable product quality.

At the same time, we continue to invest in research and development, employee training and continuous improvement initiatives. Quality is not simply about meeting standards—it's about creating a culture where excellence becomes part of every process and every decision.

Q. What advice would you offer the next generation of engineers, managers and entrepreneurs hoping to build successful careers in manufacturing and heavy industries?

Never stop learning. Technology, markets and industries continue to evolve, so curiosity and adaptability are essential throughout your career. While technical knowledge provides a strong foundation, success also depends on sound judgement, integrity and the ability to work effectively with people. I would encourage young professionals to think long term rather than focus only on immediate results. Invest in continuous improvement, embrace innovation and build strong teams based on trust and collaboration.

Ultimately, sustainable success is built by people who are willing to learn, adapt and pursue excellence with consistency.

From QR Codes to AI: How Authentication Technology Is Reshaping Consumer Trust

By- Ankit Gupta
President of the Authentication Solution Providers' Association



For a long time, the conversation around counterfeiting in India has focused on what happens after a fake product enters the market- raids, seizures, consumer complaints, brand damage. What it has focused on far less is the infrastructure that could prevent that entry in the first place. That gap, more than anything else, explains why the problem has proven so persistent.

The ASPA-CRISIL State of Counterfeiting in India 2025 report, found that 89% of urban consumers have purchased a counterfeit product at least once- near-universal exposure. Consumers perceive that 29% of products available in local markets are counterfeit, representing a significant trust deficit in the marketplace. 74% believe the problem has worsened in their region over the last twelve months. And when asked how they identify a fake at the point of purchase, nearly two-thirds still rely on packaging quality, branding and visual appearance — sensory cues that a well-resourced counterfeiter can replicate with relative ease.

Consumer vigilance has improved: 67% of respondents now feel confident identifying a counterfeit, up from 55% in 2022. But confidence and capability are not the same thing. More meaningfully, the 2025 data shows a significant attitudinal shift. 50% of consumers say they would never knowingly buy a counterfeit product, and the share who cite unavailability of genuine products as a reason for purchasing fakes dropped sharply from 36% in 2022 to just 13% in 2025. Consumers want genuine products. They deserve the infrastructure to find them.

Yet the same report flags a troubling counter-trend. The share of consumers who would buy a counterfeit only because they were unaware it was fake has risen from 27% in 2022 to 51% in 2025. Counterfeiters are not getting weaker. They are getting more sophisticated. Visual inspection is not a verification system. It is a guess. The answer lies not in making consumers more suspicious but in giving them tools and giving manufacturers the supply chain architecture that are genuinely difficult to defeat.

The QR Code Was Just the Beginning

The widespread adoption of QR codes marked the first real inflection point in accessible authentication. A QR code on packaging does more than identify a product. When linked to a serialised database, it creates a verifiable digital identity for every individual unit manufactured. Each scan generates a record. A duplicate scan, or a scan from an unexpected geography, raises a flag. The consumer with a smartphone becomes a node in the brand's authentication network without needing any specialised knowledge or equipment.

The ASPA-CRISIL data shows that 40% of consumers already check QR codes before purchasing healthcare products. In a country with over 800 million smartphone users, the infrastructure for mass-scale digital authentication already exists in people's hands. The question is whether manufacturers are building the backend that makes those scans meaningful.

But QR codes in their static form have real limitations. A static code presents the same destination to every user. It cannot personalise, adapt, or detect when it has been cloned and redistributed. This is where dynamic, NFC-enabled and AI-integrated authentication changes the picture entirely.

A dynamic QR code, for instance, can track how many times it has been scanned, from where and by whom. If a code for a batch of pesticides shipped to Punjab is suddenly scanned 400 times across Rajasthan, the system registers an anomaly in real time. NFC-enabled packaging takes this further, embedding a chip that cannot be duplicated the way a printed code can, allowing a farmer or retailer to tap their phone against a product and receive an instant, tamper-proof verification.

Where AI Changes the Equation

Artificial intelligence addresses a challenge that QR codes alone cannot solve: detecting counterfeiting patterns before fake products reach the consumer at all.

Two AI capabilities are particularly powerful here. The first is machine learning on scan patterns. AI systems can analyse the scan behaviour of millions of product units simultaneously, building a baseline for what normal consumer interaction looks like by region, time of day and purchase cycle. Any deviation, unusually concentrated scans in areas with no distribution, a single code activated across multiple cities within hours, or patterns consistent with organised retail fraud triggers an alert. In agrochemicals, where 75% of counterfeit purchases trace back to local retailers and peak-season demand creates systematic supply chain vulnerabilities, this kind of real-time anomaly detection can flag compromised retail nodes before the next sowing season begins.

The second is image analysis. AI-powered visual inspection tools, now accessible via smartphone, can analyse microscopic elements of packaging, print density, hologram geometry, label texture and compare them against authenticated references stored in a brand's database. What once required a laboratory can increasingly be performed at the point of sale in seconds. The ASPA-CRISIL data shows that 34% of consumers check holograms before purchase. Giving those consumers an AI-backed verification layer transforms a passive habit into a meaningful checkpoint.

Alongside these capabilities, AI-powered track-and-trace systems are reshaping supply chain visibility end to end. By mapping every product unit from factory floor to last-mile delivery, these systems can identify at which node in a complex, multi-tier distribution chain a counterfeit first entered — information that is invaluable for enforcement, supplier accountability and future prevention.

Physical Features Must Anchor the Digital Layer

Digital solutions are only as strong as the physical security features they are anchored to. A QR code printed on ordinary packaging can be peeled off and reapplied. A hologram can be imitated. What counterfeiters find far harder to defeat is the combination of both: tamper-evident films that destroy themselves on opening, security labels with embedded micro-optical elements, light-sensitive inks that change appearance under UV, and low-cost transponder tags that authenticate through radio frequency rather than visual inspection. When these physical features are integrated with a serialised digital identity and AI-powered monitoring, the counterfeiter faces a multi-layer challenge that no single technique can overcome.

Trust Is a Commercial Asset

The ASPA-CRISIL data shows that consumers are willing to pay a 12% premium for guaranteed genuine healthcare products and a 14% premium for genuine agrochemicals — the highest across all categories surveyed. At ASPA's recent TAF Connect, a leading pharmaceutical company shared that implementing authentication and traceability solutions alongside consumer awareness initiatives resulted in a 13% increase in sales. An agrochemical company highlighted that effective authentication implementation could help prevent 5 to 10% production losses. Authenticity is not just protection against loss. It is a value that the market is actively pricing.

Brands that deploy intelligent authentication, layering physical security features with dynamic digital identity, AI-powered anomaly detection and blockchain-backed provenance are not simply reducing counterfeiting exposure. They are building a verifiable trust signal that competitors without such infrastructure cannot replicate. As the saying goes, Ek aur ek Gyarah. The greatest protection comes when physical security, digital verification and AI-driven intelligence work together, multiplying each other's effectiveness.

India's counterfeiting problem will not be resolved by awareness campaigns alone. It will be resolved when authentication technology becomes as standard a part of product design as quality certification — when a farmer in Uttar Pradesh scanning a label before buying a pesticide gets the same confidence that a patient in Mumbai gets scanning a medicine pack. The tools to make that possible exist today. What the moment requires is for Indian industry to treat authentication not as an afterthought, but as the foundation on which lasting consumer trust is built.

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