

History drives future

Industry veteran Raj Shah is building Convergent

By **KERRY FELTNER**

For 25 years, Raj Shah learned the telecommunications business at ICS Telecom Inc., the firm his father, I.C. Shah, founded in 1976.

Today he has adapted that knowledge to growing his own firm, Convergent Telecom Inc., which was launched in 2002 but began business operations in 2013.

Convergent has 12 employees and expects to grow revenue by 25 percent this year. It plans to add another four people, including two hires in Rochester, officials said. The firm's employees work remotely; Shah and his wife, Adrienne Hendershot, are the only two local employees.

Shah serves as president and his wife is national project manager.

The firm deploys enterprise hosted and premise phone systems. It is focused on serving medical centers, the federal government and colleges and universities. Convergent's clients include the University of Missouri, the University of Virginia and the Department of Justice.

The telecom business is one Shah grew into after a variety of roles throughout his career.

He started with ICS Telecom as a technician and became CEO in 2010. The company was a telecom provider of voice, data and network services.

"It was always kind of in the cards," he said. "I always enjoyed it, always enjoyed working for my dad. He was a tough boss, but I learned a ton from him, and I enjoyed the business. Then ultimately we started discussions (that) maybe an acquisition makes sense to help us grow."

To expand the firm, the father and son duo sought out new opportunities. Both felt that merging with another company would help expand its offerings and help the company get into different markets.

On July 2, 2013, ICS Telecom was purchased by Frontrunner Network Systems Corp., a subsidiary of Williams Telecommunications Corp. Frontrunner ranked third on the Rochester Business Journal's most recent list of telecommunications equipment providers with 56 local employees.

Raj Shah remained at the firm through the buyout but found he wanted to change course after a couple of months with the new company.

"My plan was to stay with the newly formed organization because it brought some different resources and things into the company that we didn't have. Ultimately, culture-wise it wasn't quite the same fit," Shah said. "I decided this probably isn't the right thing for them or me."

The University of Missouri started working with Convergent in April



Photo by Jeff Witherow

Raj Shah is founder and president of Convergent Telecom. His wife, Adrienne Hendershot, is national project manager.

2016. The school needed help transferring telephone services from legacy systems to a Cisco Unified Communications platform.

"Their experience and capabilities working with higher education institutions—particularly those with academic medical centers—was a main contributor to our decision to engage with Convergent," said Kevin Bailey, director of customer service and support at the University of Missouri. "Raj and Adrienne showed us how their processes and experience would allow the University of Missouri to successfully meet our goals on time and within budget."

The project is expected to be completed in 2018.

"Convergent is providing project management and staff augmentation, which is allowing us to meet our timelines with very few issues so far," Bailey said. "We are very happy with Convergent's capabilities and their dedication to helping us meet our

goals with a high degree of quality and professionalism."

At the University of Virginia, Convergent helped to replace some 22,000 phones over 16 months.

"Convergent demonstrated a deep understanding of telecommunications—both digital and analog service—keen attention to detail and stellar customer service," said Dana German, deputy chief information officer at the university. "While they possessed all of the technical skills required for our project, their outstanding communication and customer service skills were what really set them apart."

Technology's quick pace has left some in the telecommunications industry scrambling to keep up, Shah said.

"A lot of the colleges—they're using 1980s technology," Shah said. "It's just not high on their priority list, but eventually it has to be."

The market for telecommunications in Rochester has matured. That presents

new challenges for local firms, Shah said.

"Rochester, it really is a small town," Shah said. "I've maintained a lot of those connections over the years. (It) has been great to bounce ideas off people. Even though we're working out of the area, we still have prospects here."

"This was the telecom mecca for a long time. A lot has changed. There's just not enough business out there for everybody," he added.

Convergent is the result of decades of learning and observing the telecommunication industry. Shah believes his company is poised to compete.

"I think we did have a dream, and we followed it, and it's come to fruition," he said. "Even though it's been difficult at times, my wife and I both feel that we would do it all over again in a heartbeat."

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