

The journey of India's first rural BPO

An IITMIC incubated company case study





CEO Manivannan J. K and the Leadership along with the DesiCrew team

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DesiCrew's journey began as a small, but ambitious idea that planted its roots in the mind of Saloni Malhotra, a young engineer hailing from Delhi. A young woman with an audacious dream that brought her from Delhi to Tamil Nadu. Leaving behind a flourishing tech career, her passion for the social sector fueled her search for a way to seamlessly connect the dots between Rural, Business, and Technology. Subsequently, a chance meeting with Prof. Ashok Jhunjhunwala, IIT Madras proved to be the pivotal thread connecting these dots, markedly changing the trajectory of her life forever.

What began in 2005 as a project at IIT-Madras, seemingly divergent from conventional Indian sectors, took the form of a Private Limited company registered in 2007. Today it has evolved into a 1000-people strong entity offering AI & ML solutions to cutting edge technology platforms. Beyond their achievement of transcending geographical boundaries, working at the forefront of innovation, DesiCrew has undoubtedly achieved its simple, innate mission: to bring opportunities and income to rural India.

The catalyst for Saloni's paradigm shift came in 2005 when she attended a lecture by Prof. Ashok Jhunjunwala in Delhi, one of the only few visionary individuals promoting the concept of a “social business”.

Most companies at that time working with rural workers were only exploring the artisan industry. The other model creating waves in the Urban India however was outsourcing where the country was witnessing a flourishing BPO sector.

**I have
a dream!**

The first step in a 1000-mile journey

Saloni Malhotra

Founder, DesiCrew



Against this backdrop, Saloni posed a pertinent question: If jobs could traverse from the Bay Area to Bangalore,

why not extend the same trajectory from Bangalore to Kollumangudi?

Was it possible to turn this model on its head?

Combine rural manpower with communication technology to start “outsourcing” work to villages?

Inspired yet excited by the daunting challenge that lay ahead, she decided to seek mentorship under Prof. Jhunjunwala, joining as a Project Associate at IIT-Madras. Armed with only a suitcase and an innate belief in the potential of the right infrastructure and comprehensive training in replicating the triumphs of urban-based BPO centers in rural landscapes, Saloni took a giant leap of faith in making her dreams, a reality.

Her vision was underpinned by the notion that Technology could play a transformative role in enabling skilled resources to operate from villages. The confluence of operations in rural delivery centres and the ensuing reduced costs made it an advantageous proposition for potential customers. This way, DesiCrew’s Impact Sourcing Business Model could generate employment that seamlessly interconnected Technology and Business while making a profound Social Impact.

To validate the commercial viability of her idea, over the next two years she journeyed to villages in Tamil Nadu, delving into potential business models applicable to the region. Her investigations unveiled a poignant reality – while numerous graduates resided in villages, they were compelled to migrate to urban centers for employment. This ordeal was even more pronounced for young girls, revealing a gendered imbalance. The silver lining however was that – most youngsters in Tamil Nadu villages, as compared to other parts of the country were college graduates who could speak English – a promising sell for the BPO business model.

DesiCrew officially materialized in February 2007, with its inaugural center finding footing in Kollumangudi, a quaint village nestled within Tamil Nadu, kicking off with a modest team of 5 members focused on Data Entry tasks. Fast forward 16 years, and the Kollumangudi center burgeons with over 400 employees, steering initiatives spanning Finance & Accounting, Digitization, Natural Language Processing, and Testing processes. A trajectory marked by innovation, inclusivity, and substantial societal transformation.

Journey map

2020 - 2022

FTEs - 1500+

- DesiCrew Solutions Inc.
- Projects to collect Audio data in 22 languages.
- Facial Data Collection across 3 Continents.

2017 - 2020

FTEs - 850+

- System Migration project for a Bank across India & Mauritius
- Began ML and AI Services: 1)QaOnCloud: Software Testing & 2)Accountifi: Automated Accounting

2012 - 2017

FTEs - 400

- Started NLP Services
- Social Audit by SAN (Glasgow)
- Won over 11 awards

2009 - 2012

FTEs - 180

- Executed a Turnkey project in 3 months involving 4 million applications
- Added our First Overseas Customer

2007 - 2009

FTEs - 30

- Started with Simple Data Entry Processes
- Signed up their 1st Insurance Customer

Sector: Rural tech, AI, ML
Headquarters: Chennai
Year of incubation: 2007
CEO: Manivannan JK
Website: www.desicrew.in





One Rural BPO can generate income equivalent to 400-acres of Farmland

– Hot, Flat & Crowded Thomas Friedman

Solving rural unemployment

Rural unemployment in India has remained high despite significant economic growth in the country in the last few decades. This is because growth has been concentrated in some geographies and sectors; in particular, the IT/BPO sector. The employment created by this sector is mainly concentrated in cities and big towns. This trend coupled with the mushrooming of higher educational institutes — especially science and engineering colleges—has led to a growing disparity between the supply of educated youth and the demand for such skills in rural areas. Consequently, many young graduates in rural areas struggle to find employment, and those who do often resort to migrating to urban centers or settling for low-quality jobs within their rural communities.

Recognizing this gap, DesiCrew decided to bridge it by introducing high-quality employment opportunities in regions where both talent and infrastructure are available. Through the establishment of digital operations centers in close proximity to educational institutions in rural areas, they began tapping into a pool of trainable and skilled graduates with digital operation centers strategically set up in rural parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Finding the right business model

The journey to establish DesiCrew took two long years, but even longer to finally find a business model that would align with their mission: To infuse income and opportunities in the rural areas. Like all successful ideas that are often shaped, this too had its own fair share of trials.

The first model they tried was “kiosk-based” which involved having a computer centre in a village which would enable education, healthcare, and host of other benefits. Despite having work come their way the model did not seem to be scalable and soon had to come to an end within the first year. Although it didn't yield the desired outcome, it was the proof of concept they needed, showing that educated youth in villages were willing to stay back for decent employment and income.

The next model they ventured into was the “franchisee” model. Here 4-5 computers were put together in a centre, operating as a franchisee, so small groups of people could work together. Despite zeroing in on a host of locations, within a mere 3-month period they realized that the decentralized model was not working. They would need to set up their own offices to ensure standardization of set processes and guarantee their employees or “crewmates” were well taken care of. A pivotal decision was made to buyout a few of the franchisees, converting them into company owned units. And there it was. They had struck gold on their third attempt.



Connecting the dots: Technology, Business and Social

Finding a working business model was just the start. The next hurdle was convincing big companies that they could get top-notch work done by rural employees. To handle this, they had to look at training their workers extensively, making sure the work they produced was of the highest quality.

At DesiCrew, students after they complete college would join as interns or apprentices. They were made to undergo an internship period during which they learnt the skills needed as per business requirements. During this period, they would go through various training programs including customer centric skill set development on a learning platform called D-Touch and also get hands-on work experience on real projects. Training ranged across technical, process and management skills that were needed to execute projects in areas that were most relevant and in demand in the digital data services space, such as AI/ML data services, transcription services, etc.

This effort to meticulously train their employees paid off. By showcasing the success of a pilot project and demonstrating outstanding outcomes, they earned the confidence of their clients. While it was a gradual process, with time, more clients who shared their dedication to making a positive impact began to embrace their service.

Back in 2007, DesiCrew's main focus was on Digitization. Today, boasting a workforce of over 1000 employees, DesiCrew has expanded its offerings to encompass Ai Data Solutions, Software Testing, Financial Automation, and Managed IT services through its Rural Delivery Centres. Over the past 16 years, DesiCrew's Business Model has garnered international recognition and awards. Their centers hold ISO certification and have recently achieved the prestigious **GREAT PLACE TO WORK® Certification**.

They currently provide service to industries across –

Banking, Financial Services & Insurance: With over 14 years of experience working in the BFSI space, Desicrew can process text in form of documents, transcripts, and handwritten texts as well as audio recordings, and return them as a structured and annotated data for credit analysis, audits, and fraud detection.

Transportation: Training autonomous vehicles requires huge volumes of extremely accurate labeled and annotated data. We identify cars parked, moving, in your lane, changing lanes, and more. Recognition and tracking of vehicles, pedestrians, traffic signs, and lane markings detection.

Healthcare: Through our annotator training curriculum, quality control, and process transparency, DesiCrew provides quality data to train ML models for medical diagnosis, anomaly detection, and patient data management without depending on domain experts for all the data labeling.

Retail: Help retailers offer personalized shopping experiences to their end customers via interactive chatbots, smart in-store bots, and structured webshops. Through our Analytics division, we can provide insights on shopper behaviour, purchase patterns and pricing competitiveness.

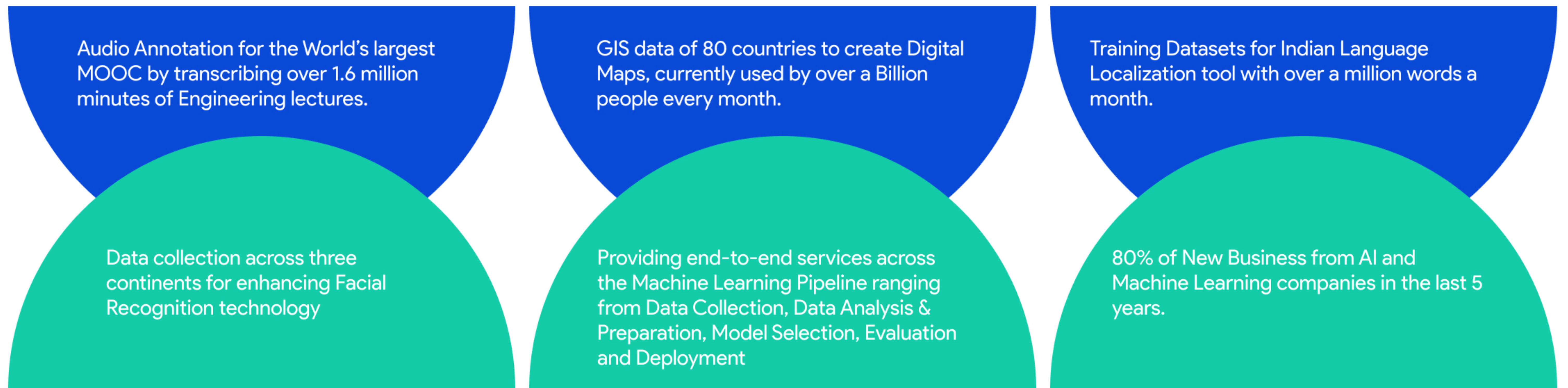
Agriculture: DesiCrew supports creation of custom agriculture training datasets that can be used in agricultural robotics, crop health and soil monitoring, field monitoring, growth progress detection, ripeness detection, unwanted plants and weed detection, and many more.



Architecture, Engineering & Construction: DesiCrew reduces risk in the AEC industry by improving safety, productivity and quality through easy to use artificial intelligence solutions.

Edtech: DesiCrew is unique in that it provides professionals transcriptions of classroom lectures to interviews to speeches to Medical exams to legal depositions.

Key highlights:



Impact across Multiple Fronts

DesiCrew's dedication to creating positive change has reverberated across various key areas, each contributing to tangible improvements in society.

Empowering Rural Youth through Knowledge Jobs

DesiCrew has taken significant strides in the employment landscape by offering knowledge-based jobs to rural youth. By channeling opportunities into areas that were previously underserved, they've not only provided employment but also ignited aspirations within these young individuals.



At DesiCrew, 12,521 person years of employment has been created since 2007. And based on an unemployment impact analysis, it is found that the unemployment rate is reduced by 17.3 basis points because of the employment created by DesiCrew in the four sub-districts where it operates.

**A person-year of employment is the number of hours that an individual has worked on a full-time basis for one year. Generally used to measure employment hours for project-based engagements.*

Amplifying Women's Participation in the Labor Force

With a determined focus on fostering gender equality, DesiCrew has sparked a remarkable increase in women's involvement in the labor force. While the IT/BPO sector in India as a whole witnesses a 34% female participation rate, DesiCrew proudly boasts a substantial 68% representation of women employees, setting a precedent for the industry.

68%

Employees at the DesiCrew centers are women in comparison to 34%³ in the overall IT/BPO sector across India.

94%

Employees have been trained in at least one training module and 98% believe what they are learning at DesiCrew is valuable in the BPO sector.

Enhancing Graduates' Employability and Industry-Relevant Skills

DesiCrew's commitment to nurturing industry-relevant skills among graduates is evident through their in-house training initiatives like DTOUCH (DesiCrew – Transforming our crew for Human Excellence). This empowers employees with the skills needed to excel in their roles and opens doors to more opportunities.

Strengthening Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Households

By providing steady income streams to individuals in socio-economically disadvantaged households, DesiCrew directly contributes to increasing their financial security and resilience. The ripple effect of stable employment is felt not just within individual families but across communities.

Actively contributing to the UN Sustainable Development goals

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Empowering Women

DesiCrew's impact on women's empowerment resonates deeply. With a significant 70% of women employees spanning various business functions, DesiCrew ensures equal pay, access to insurance, provident fund benefits, maternity support, and mainstream financial inclusion. This concerted effort translates into substantial change by boosting family income and empowering women who are stepping into knowledge-based roles for the first time, significantly enriching their lives.



In essence, DesiCrew's multifaceted efforts are resulting in substantial positive shifts across societal, economic, and gender dynamics, propelling progress at both individual and community levels.



Manivannan JK

CEO, DesiCrew

At DesiCrew, our people are at the heart of everything we do. From where we started, DesiCrew has evolved to become a reliable Human-in-the-loop (HITL) service provider for top AI teams across the world. We are working on exciting projects in the areas of Computer Vision, NLP, Software Testing and Managed AI Ops. While we continue to engage with customers working on new-age technology, the DNA of DesiCrew has not been altered. Extending economic boundaries by creating IT-based jobs in Rural Areas continues to be DesiCrew's mission. We invest a lot in training our resources to be agile to client requirements, through DTOUCH- our in house training platform. Recently, we've received the 'Great Place to Work' certification. This recognition is a reflection of our employees' dedication and the strong sense of community within our organization. Moving forward, we aim to climb the value chain in our service offerings to clients

Patricia Hayashi

Director Technical Support at Presto

I would like to take this time to Thank-you for your Company's exceptional partnership and unwavering dedication to Presto. DesiCrew's commitment to integrating and optimizing their best resources showcases their forward-looking approach and their desire to deliver outstanding solutions to their customers. It's clear that DesiCrew's collaboration with Presto has yielded remarkable results, and their dedication is truly commendable.

Testimonial from Desicrew



Roopalatha

I had joined DesiCrew as a Trainee in 2010 to work on an HRO process. Now, I am one of the Senior most members at DesiCrew having worked on Digitization, Data Collection and Transcription. I have also transitioned client processes and trained resources. I am now heading the Corporate Desk at Kaup. Working with DesiCrew has been a great learning experience for me. Beyond work, I have made great friends for life. Apart from Client-based training, I've also taken up courses on Logical Thinking and Six-Sigma via DTOUCH. I am able to maintain a healthy work-life balance being at DesiCrew.

Vishnupriya

Vishnupriya, working at DesiCrew-TN Palayam (Erode), receives a cheque from CEO Manivannam, as a part of the DesiCrew Education Fund, for completing her Post-Graduation in Computer Science. The fund is to support and encourage employees to pursue academic qualifications.



The Path Forward: Sustaining Impact on a Global Stage

DesiCrew Solutions Pvt Ltd's remarkable journey, from a visionary concept to a thriving social enterprise, serves as a profound source of inspiration. Grounded in a commitment to harnessing technology for social good, promoting women empowerment, and meaningful rural employment, DesiCrew has exemplified the transformative power of business to drive positive social change.

Today, DesiCrew has grown to a 1000-people strong entity, diversifying their service portfolio in the areas of AI-enabled IT operations, conversational AI, end-to-end ML platform solutions, and intelligent process automation. Alongside working with domestic companies, they are strengthening their global customer base in the North American, Middle East and European markets, with upcoming centers in Indonesia and Kenya.

Remarkably, this evolution has only amplified their commitment to upholding its foundational values while embracing innovation and strategic expansion. With a trove of over a dozen prestigious awards, global investments, and steadfast alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), these principles undoubtedly serve as the compass guiding them towards an even greater sphere of influence and impact on a global scale.



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