

# TRAILBLAZERS TALK

Ravi Kumar S.,  
President, Infosys,  
in conversation with  
Thomas J Donohue, President,  
& CEO of the United States  
Chamber of Commerce

Link to conversation: <http://bit.ly/2N4e0cp>

**Ravi Kumar S. (RK):** Hello everyone, my name is Ravi Kumar, and I am President at Infosys. Welcome to the next version of Trailblazers. Trailblazers, as most of you know, is about individuals who are making a significant impact, driving change, and they are making an impact at the industries they are working in as well as the communities they live in. Today, I have a very distinguished guest with me - Tom Donohue. Tom is the CEO and President of the US Chamber of Commerce. The US Chamber of Commerce represents three million businesses, and is the world's largest business federation across sectors, regions and states. Tom has been associated with the US Chamber of Commerce as a president and CEO since 1997 and he's pioneered the impact the US Chamber of Commerce has had and made it the powerhouse it is. The US Chamber of Commerce today influences policy and business reforms, it is the voice of businesses and is actually creating a significant impact on the nation's growth. Thank you, Tom, for being here and for taking time to talk to us in our New York office. We have a nice landscape behind us, the beautiful Manhattan skyline. Thank you again for being here. I was actually very inspired talking to you in Washington DC a couple of weeks ago about the impact the US Chamber of Commerce is making under your leadership. There was a little bit about the milestones in the journey in the last two decades or so and how you've kind of made it this powerhouse, the impact powerhouse I call it, for the US.

**Thomas J Donohue (TJD):** Well, thanks, Ravi. I'm very pleased to be here and what a setting! I was born in New York in the early last century and went to school here and I'm here very often. I'm really impressed with what you're doing here in the city and how you're going about fundamentally changing, on your own responsibility, the way people will be going forward, building teams and taking on challenging assignments and making them work. What we did at the chamber, I had worked at the chamber years before and then went away to run the American Trucking Association and I went back to the chamber when its President retired. They were in some difficulty, with companies – you know in your own experience - they have ups and downs and they were not doing as well as they wanted and they were thoughtful enough to ask me to come back and turn it around a little. I have some simple theories about that - first of all, individuals don't accomplish a great deal. They may lead others but the first thing you need is real talent. I brought a few people with me and shortly after we got there, we began to attract some other talent. Now, as you know talent's expensive, so, at the same time ...

**RK:** and it was in short supply as well.

**TJD:** Well, oh well, it wasn't as much in short supply 22 years ago as it is today. And so, we hired some very good people and put them in charge of what they needed to achieve and let them do it. So, what do we say? Well, first of all, we needed more members and we needed more resources. Well, you can't just go ask for those things, unless you're going to do something for the people that are going to give you the resources. So, we set up some very clear programs that people from every industry wanted - they want to be represented in the Congress, affect tax policy, affect what's going on at Capitol Hill, have people that can work on the White House and the regulatory agencies, and make a shortlist of what everybody could agree on and go about fixing it. And that's exactly what we did. Smart people, enough resources, clear agenda and we did that for about four or five years. Then we came to, not a bump in the road, but a great opportunity. Time to get stronger, spread out, provide other services. We had taken the chamber and we had flattened it all out. We had an international division, a domestic lobbying division, a division for energy, a division for the protection of intellectual property, a division for working on doing infrastructure, we had about seven or eight...

**RK:** You had country chapters as well.

**TJD:** Oh well, we'll get to them in a minute. In each one of those divisions, we put somebody in charge. If there isn't anybody in charge, nothing ever happens. And we gave them their own little boards of directors of those divisions, who were members of the business community, and we told them to go raise resources and set agendas and lead the way. I have a theory - if you had 10 people watch a young child in a pool that couldn't swim very well, chances are the child's going to drown but if you have one person watch 10 children in the swimming pool, nobody drowns. Somebody has to be in charge and that's what we have done. We've attracted the people, we continue to expand our agenda to increase revenues, to develop a reputation that we're going to get the job done. And the Congress and the White House and others respected us for what we were doing. Which means that they didn't want to fight with us when we got involved in politics- not the president but in the House and the Senate. And we brought all our members to participate in that issue. People listen to us more clearly now.

**RK:** So, Tom how do you deal with conflicts between business and governments on policy and reforms? Do you have some basic principles which you set out when you do this? I'm sure you're finding that every day in your job.

**TJD:** Well, the issue is what we do is exactly what you asked. We, first of all, represent every kind of industry in the country. So on some things, everybody is committed. Unreasonable tax reform, sensible energy policy, reduction in regulation that's not needed and keeping regulation that helps the economy function. And we operate all over the world. Today, we have 85 people in Washington working on international things, we have 117 American chambers around the world, we run 16 of the biggest bilateral and multilateral trading operations. For example, we do the India-US business council...

**RK:** I've interacted with them

**TJD:** And so what you do – get the best people, a clear agenda, simple message, adequate resources and go do it. It's, you know, a lot like your business. A lot like a lot of businesses of companies that you've been involved in and I've been involved in. You have a product, you have to package it, get the right people to sell it, get the money to develop it and promote it. That's why we came to the chamber and ran it like a world-class company.

**RK:** That's so well said. So Tom, I was very fascinated about a new partnership with the US Chamber of Commerce on the technology engagement center. Actually, I've not seen many chambers or business associations have that. It's a very unique thought. We're taking it to 10 cities, we're evangelizing technology policy. What was the impact you were looking for when you actually set this up and what are the outcomes you're looking for? We're very excited about the partnership.

**TJD:** We're very excited about the partnership. You know, we didn't have this operation 10 years ago. We didn't have it. We probably started on it five years ago because every company is becoming a technology company, every community will become a technology community. So we needed to have in the chamber itself a capacity to understand the demands and needs of the industry, the demands and needs of the people using the products the industry produces and we needed to develop a capacity to represent those industries at the Congress, in the White House and the regulatory agencies, around the world and with the press. Now, about why we are going around the country, you've already been to Indiana and you are in Orlando, I guess, this week. And they're all different and we want to go into those cities and highlight their unique characteristics. You go to Indiana, it's a great place, I have great friends there and they have done marvelous things. They've expanded the manufacturing capacity, attracted unbelievable people to come to work in the universities and the governments and the companies. They have a Midwestern sort of work ethic and they're going to get it done. And, so, we want to highlight what their great strengths are which help people develop more technology, encourage technology companies to come to Indiana, encourage them to participate in the education programs and hire people and run businesses. Then you go to Orlando, and it's not the same as Indiana. It's way down south, it doesn't get as cold in the winter, but they're the center of tourism. All the Disneyland stuff, they're the center and when you talk about tourism and Disneyland and all of that sort of thing, what you're talking about is technology. It's another kind of technology - entertainment technology, mobility technology, transportation technology, and it's the technology of movies and sound and enjoyment. It's a totally different deal. And, that's another set of stories about technology - the kind of workers we want, the kind of encouragement we want to provide the young people, to tell them 'there is a place for you, find what your passion is and pursue it.' That's why you're doing so well, being a strong advocate of trying to get people that are going to community colleges and two-year colleges to get the kind of skills they need to get good jobs - because the demand is unbelievable - and to continue their education.

**RK:** Absolutely, Tom, you're so spot on, you know. Technology in many ways takes away jobs of the past and creates much more for the future and in fact what you rightly pointed out, technology is so associated with the Silicon Valley, but if you look at the six centers Infosys established, we established in very unusual places - Indiana, Phoenix, Hartford, Rhode Island, Texas. And we think there is a ton of talent available there as long as we can actually put them through a finishing school kind of training program, and put them onto work. So, in terms of the technology engagement centers, as we call it in the ten cities, I'm sure they are going to make a huge impact.

Just teeing up on the next question which you alluded to, Infosys has worked significantly in the last two years in building almost nine and a half thousand local talent pools from these hubs and we've kind of demystified the entire notion that STEM education is needed for the future digital jobs. We've hired from liberal arts schools, design

schools, community colleges, and we're going to scale that experiment up. One of the things I've noticed from the journey in the last two years is that if governments, academia, institutions and associations and federations like yours can come together, the biggest challenge today, which is workforce needs in the digital age, can easily be bridged. Do you see a role for governments and industry federations like yours to play in this ecosystem?

**TJD:** Yes, of course, partnerships are the quickest way to success. If you're moving along without taking advantage of all the skills and resources around you, you're making a mistake. When you're talking about the 10 cities, you need technology, but you need to look at what the nature and the character of the cities are. You wouldn't want to go out and start developing farming technology for Orlando. You want to go to Orlando with all the things, we just talked about [media and entertainment]. And you and I remember when we first met, we agreed, and I jumped out of the chair almost when you told me you were hiring people from rehabilitation. We need STEM educated people, but we also need people to support all of that work. And you're taking it from where people are, what their experiences are and you're drawing out that experience. That's when we talked about and at first I said "What?" when you said you are hiring liberal arts educated people. Why not? They have studied history, government, languages, cultures, mathematics, these things are the connectivity to your basic customers. You see people think we're training all these people for technology companies, which is true, but most of those technology companies are your customers and they weren't technology companies before they became your customers.

**RK:** I'm with you, absolutely. In fact, you know, deep programming is needed on one side of the spectrum in technology but applying technology to businesses needs a much broader breadth of capabilities. Including liberal arts and design and in fact, we are hiring plenty of them and we are finding that experience of going through the process very, very exciting for us.

**TJD:** You know, where we learned a lot about all of this and Tim will tell you, we have a group and chain in the chamber that worries about protecting the intellectual property of companies and industries. People think about doing these things one industry at a time. Not on this project. Here we have people that make software, movies, music, pharmaceuticals, we have people that play football who want to protect the NFL. We have people that do every industry in this country that want their intellectual property protected. That is a technology challenge and the property they want to protect is technology in its own. So we, as a result, are able to form a strong group of industries from every part of the industrial spectrum and the creativity spectrum that have come together to protect their common interest and that is the technology they've developed, the innovation they've developed, the entertainment they've developed. They have gotten a hundred times stronger because we are doing it together, unlike if we had tried to do it one industry at a time.

**RK:** Absolutely, so, Tom I had one last question for you. You know that tech companies are creating this huge economic activity and lots of jobs, but there is still a trust deficit and with tech, the divide is actually increasing, societies are getting much more divided. How much do you think is this trust deficit and how do you think we can overcome it? Is there a role a business federation can play in this?

**TJD:** Well, the answer to the last question is, hell yes! But there are three or four things. First of all, we've always had innovations. I mean people invented the railroads, airplane, space shuttles. So we've always had technology but we were developing it in a totally different way - to change the lives, working circumstances and businesses of our society. Well now, first of all, that's scary and second of all, it's exciting and third of all, it's very complicated. So, at one point some of the technology companies started thinking of themselves as the government and thinking that technology was all about them. No, the technology was, when you really think about it, about what they were developing, producing and manufacturing that was going to serve all of the American industry and families. And we're beginning to see it everywhere. But then we got into four or five problems. We got into the privacy issue on data, we got into dealing with government, state and local governments. Maybe they didn't know anything, but they had a lot of power over companies and they got in, that explained why all the changes were going on in the industries, whether it was television or music. And the internet was pressed for all of this and for what was going on in the communities. Unknown, major change creates fear, fear creates frustration and anger and we've gone through some of that.

**RK:** Do you think empathy and inclusiveness would alleviate that divide?

**TJD:** Alleviate, it'll change it a lot. We're now looking at these things in a totally different way than before. We're bringing people, just the way you're hiring people, those are the ones that are going to work this out. I mean the guy or the gal that works, they see themselves as inventors but they don't integrate these projects, skills and machines into the school system, the local community, the businesses in a way that makes people feel comfortable, that shows that all the jobs and opportunities created are going to be for families and individuals. When you're in a hurry and you think you're smarter than everybody else, sometimes, you make a few mistakes. But the fundamental thing is, we have to say technology has earned its stripes by doing things that make it possible for us to save lives, bring great efficiency to our businesses, improve communications and relationships between people all over the world. So, what do we have to do? We have to protect the technology companies from two issues, from all the conflicts they get into as they're growing and expanding into other areas. We have to protect them from themselves and help them see how they can make a few changes and get engaged in communities in the way that it's a relationship between the technology and the producers of it and the users and the people that need it. And we're doing that today. We are going around to ten cities, and saying, look this is really positive, here are the benefits to your society, here's how you get on the boat and start rowing. This is really important and the chamber has no choice but to be a major player in this because those are going to be all of our future members.

**RK:** Yes thank you so much, Tom. That was so inspiring and every time I speak to you I actually learn a lot. Thank you again for talking to us, for the partnership and for all the inspiring work you do for the US Chamber and you've been relentlessly executing on your mission. Thank you, again.

**TJD:** Well, thank you and we look forward to you coming back again soon and you and I are going to continue this conversation about all this but using liberal arts people.

**RK:** I'm going to get a few liberal arts people to meet with you the next time you're here.

**TJD:** I'm anxious to do that.

**RK:** Thanks, thank you so much.

For more information, contact [askus@infosys.com](mailto:askus@infosys.com)



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