

## DRIVING INNOVATION BUILDING IMPACT:

A CONVERSATION WITH  
SLASSCOM CHAIRPERSON  
– MR. NISHAN MENDIS



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*Immediate Past Chairperson of  
SLASSCOM*



Our visit to Deloitte Sri Lanka had all the makings of a corporate-level masterclass in innovation and strategy. Tucked away in a sleek, modern workspace, the environment buzzed with professionalism yet carried welcoming energy. It was here that we had the privilege of sitting down with a man who has worn many hats in the industry—Technology & Transformation Leader and CIO at Deloitte, tech visionary, and now the Immediate



Past Chairperson of SLASSCOM—Mr. Nishan Mendis.

From the moment we began our chat, his grounded humility and quiet passion for driving meaningful change became evident. With a warm smile and a storyteller's flair, he shared the story of his journey—from a young student at S. Thomas' College to a having led the voice in Sri Lanka's knowledge and innovation industry. Over freshly brewed coffee, we delved into a conversation rich with insights, personal reflections, and shared hope for Sri Lanka's digital future.

Here, we explore his vision for industry, the power of collaboration, and what it truly takes to build a globally competitive tech ecosystem from our island nation.



## 1. COULD YOU SHARE A BIT ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL CAREER JOURNEY? WITH OVER 26 + YEARS OF EXPERIENCE, WHAT WERE SOME OF THE PIVOTAL MOMENTS THAT LED YOU TO THE ROLE YOU PLAYED AS CHAIRPERSON OF SLASSCOM?

I began my educational journey at S. Thomas' College, Mt Lavinia, where I built a strong academic foundation. I then pursued my BSc degree at the University of Peradeniya, followed by professional qualifications in CIMA. My career kicked off at KPMG, where I gained invaluable exposure and experience in the corporate world. From there, I transitioned to the fintech space by joining SasiaNet / RoomsNet, eventually becoming the Chief Operating Officer before I moved on.

Although I had always been part of the private sector, I felt a deep personal desire to contribute more directly to the development of our country. That opportunity presented itself when I joined PwC to lead the eSriLanka ICBP program, which was funded by the World Bank and implemented by ICTA. It was a pivotal point in my career—not just professionally, but personally as well—because it gave me the chance to align my work with a

cause I cared deeply about. Over time, I held various roles at PwC, and in 2017, I was appointed as a Partner and the Technology Consulting Leader. Then, in 2023, our team transitioned from the PwC network to join Deloitte. Today, I serve as a Partner, the Technology & Transformation leader and CIO, and a member of both the Leadership Team and the Executive Committee at Deloitte.

During the ICBP era, I had the opportunity to work closely with all the key ICT industry associations that existed at the time—before SLASSCOM had even been formed. The close bonds and collaboration among industry leaders during that program led to the creation of a unified industry body, which eventually became SLASSCOM. While I remained involved in several of its initiatives, I never imagined that I would one day have the privilege of leading this incredible organization. My involvement with SLASSCOM deepened over the years. I joined various forums, led the Capacity Forum as well as the Global Trade & Investment (GT&I) Forum, and was appointed to the General Council in 2017. I joined the Board in 2019, became the Director of Finance in 2021, subsequently served as Vice Chair 1 and 2 and just concluded my term as the Chairman of SLASSCOM. Beyond SLASSCOM, I've continued to contribute by serving on numerous committees within both industry and government, a journey that has been

both humbling and rewarding.

Above all, my advice is to approach whatever you choose to do with dedication and commitment. When you act with a selfless attitude, focusing on the betterment of society and the country, success will inevitably follow.

## 2. AS SOMEONE WHO HAS HELD VARIOUS LEADERSHIP ROLES AT SLASSCOM AND IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER, HOW HAS YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE EVOLVED OVER THE YEARS? WHAT CORE PRINCIPLES GUIDE YOU IN YOUR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS?

Early in my career, my focus was on achieving goals and meeting targets. However, as I took on leadership roles and progressed in my leadership journey, I learned to appreciate other qualities that are more important. Chief among them are appreciation, empathy, and the ability to foster teamwork.

When you achieve success, it's crucial to recognize that it is often the result of contributions from many. Genuine appreciation for others' efforts is key to building strong, motivated teams. Acknowledging both big and small contributions boosts morale and inspires people to go the extra mile. It's equally important to recognize the contributions of even the most junior team members. Something as simple as a smile or greeting your cleaning or support staff in the morning can brighten their day. You must also recognize that your position is the result of the contributions of many others. For instance, at SLASSCOM, I was fully aware that I stood on the shoulders of many visionary leaders and dedicated boards who have guided SLASSCOM with wisdom and foresight. Their legacy is the foundation which gave me wisdom, resilience and forward-thinking abilities that made my own path possible.

Empathy has also become central to my leadership style. Understanding the perspectives and challenges of others allows me to make decisions that are not only effective but also compassionate. Being able to put yourself in others' shoes helps you navigate complex situations and ensures that we're all aligned towards a common goal. Also, it's important to recognize that each of us has different strengths and also areas where we are not so good at. As a leader, identifying the unique skills of your team members and assigning tasks that match their capabilities is key to optimizing outcomes and fostering a harmonious team dynamic.

This also leads to my third point which is teamwork. I've learned that success is rarely achieved in isolation. Encouraging collaboration and creating a culture where everyone feels valued and heard has led to greater innovation and productivity. As I explained in my Chairman installation speech, I envisioned this to be similar to our victorious 1996 World Cup team. It wasn't just one or two players who made the victory possible. We had pinch hitters, mesmerizing bowlers who confounded opponents, a steadfast middle order, efficient fielders and allrounders, effective leadership, and also unwavering cheerleaders. When some players faltered, others rose to the occasion. That team revolutionized cricket with innovative approaches. And overall, it was ingenuity at its best, an embodiment of 'Island of Ingenuity'.

### **3. YOUR VISION IS TO POSITION SRI LANKA AS A GLOBAL HUB FOR TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION WAS A BOLD YET EXCITING ONE. CAN YOU WALK US THROUGH SOME OF THE MOST IMPACTFUL ACHIEVEMENTS DURING THE PAST YEAR?**

I don't need to emphasize the critical role of exports in a country's digital economy and economic recovery and



growth. I believe this industry represents a low-hanging fruit for driving that growth. While our companies have made progress in international markets, there is a pressing need to enhance global presence and increase the visibility of our industry. They need support for business expansion both in our traditional and new markets. Until the Government can allocate the necessary fiscal resources for industry branding, commissioning analyst reports etc., the industry must embrace frugal innovation to effectively elevate our brand.

Towards this end, we introduced a groundbreaking initiative: the 'SLASSCOM Industry Ambassador Program.' This program leverages the eminence and goodwill of distinguished Sri Lankans residing abroad who are passionate about giving back to their homeland. To start with, we appointed 06 SLASSCOM Industry Ambassadors strategically positioned in key global markets – Australia, USA, UK and UAE. They will represent our industry, and share our story of ingenuity at important forums,

seminars and events thereby supporting with establishing the much needed connects that would eventually garner exposure to our industry and country as a whole. To complement this initiative we reignited the "SLASSCOM Global Referral Program, another strategic step to connect Sri Lankan companies with international clients through trusted industry referrals. Designed to help our companies scale globally, this program leverages a vetted network of international advocates—people who are ready to refer, recommend, and champion Sri Lankan talent and solutions in key markets

Additionally, SLASSCOM launched the Empowering Global Growth program, offering a comprehensive, research-backed playbook for three high-potential markets: Australia, Sweden, and Kenya to start with. This playbook serves as a strategic guide, providing in-depth insights for Sri Lankan companies to position themselves in the world stage and equip our ecosystem with the intelligence needed to thrive internationally. . By leveraging these

resources, we aim to empower our companies to navigate and conquer the global market landscape with confidence and success.

Building on an MOU that was signed between SLASSCOM and IIT-M Pravartak last year, a delegation from SLASSCOM visited the facility in Madras on the invitation extended by IIT-M. This successful visit paved the way to initiate discussions on the much-needed incubation and acceleration support to selected Sri Lankan startups, offering them access to advanced resources, mentorship, and networks.

One of the key highlights of this year was when SLASSCOM further strengthened its ties with NASSCOM by attending the NASSCOM Technology and Leadership Forum in Mumbai with one of the largest delegations in our history. We engaged with NASSCOM's leadership on its FutureSkills Prime Platform, with the intent of extending this transformative talent development model to Sri Lanka. We also invited Indian tech giants to consider Sri Lanka as a promising "India+1" destination—making us a competitive Tier 2-style delivery hub. Building on this momentum, SLASSCOM has initiated a benchmarking study comparing Sri Lanka with India's Tier 2 cities to strengthen this narrative. This initiative will help us identify and bridge any gaps and also attract Indian firms to establish operations in Sri Lanka thereby making a substantial contribution to GDP growth and export earnings.

We worked closely with foreign missions and multilateral organizations to restore and strengthen the country's image and explore opportunities for global collaboration—highlighting the resilience of our industry, the ingenuity of our people, and the potential for Sri Lanka to serve as a diversified, competitive export base in the digital age. SLASSCOM contributed actively to multiple high-impact advisory and consultative platforms, various committees and taskforces and sectoral roundtables as for us, nation building is not a side effort—it was an integral part of our mission.

#### **4. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE CURRENT STATE OF THE IT INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT PROFESSIONALS IN THE SECTOR ARE FACING TODAY?**

Over the past decade, Sri Lanka's knowledge and innovation industry has shown extraordinary growth and resilience, even in the face of numerous challenges. Global analyst firm AT Kearney once described Sri Lanka as a "hidden gem," and I truly believe that description holds even more meaning today. We proudly serve some of the world's leading brands, and several multinational companies have chosen Sri Lanka as the home for their R&D and innovation centers. It's incredibly encouraging to see global giants investing in or acquiring world-class products built right here in our country. With over 80% local value addition, our industry continues to contribute meaningfully to national growth. Despite the substantial economic difficulties our nation has faced, along with broader global uncertainties, our sector has remained steadfast. Today, we have a workforce of more than 140,000 skilled professionals actively driving the industry forward. These achievements are a testament to our collective effort and commitment, and I believe we can all take pride in how far we've come.

That said, we cannot ignore the challenges that we dealt with during this year. Back in 2024, our industry was largely impacted by a wave of brain drain. This exodus of experienced professionals left a widening gap in the middle management tier, creating serious operational challenges for many of our companies. To arrest this situation, SLASSCOM Academy launched the Middle Manager Development Program—designed to fast-track promising talent into confident, capable managerial roles. This program has already empowered many professionals across our companies, helping to restore leadership depth and ensure future

resilience.

Additionally, back in 2023, we saw a significant increase in the cost of doing business, which is threatening the competitiveness of our industry. In countering this, SLASSCOM marked a key policy win during this year was the Government's decision to reduce the proposed 30% corporate income tax to 15% for the services sector and broaden the personal income tax brackets—a move SLASSCOM actively championed as part of our broader policy reform agenda. This landmark achievement strengthens Sri Lanka's global competitiveness and reaffirms the Government's commitment to recognizing the knowledge and innovation industry as a vital engine of national growth. SLASSCOM has always stepped forward as a trusted, non-partisan voice—representing the unified vision of the knowledge and innovation industry.

#### **5. WHAT EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES OR TRENDS DO YOU BELIEVE WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE IT INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA? HOW IS SLASSCOM PREPARING ITS MEMBERS TO ADAPT TO THESE CHANGES?**

If Sri Lanka is to thrive as a global digital hub, it won't be through volume—it will be through the strength and quality of our talent, especially in this AI driven era. That is exactly why our focus shifted towards building depth, agility, and globally competitive capabilities across the workforce.. Our country is recognized for its strengths in product engineering, co-creation, co-delivery, and providing R&D and product design services. As I mentioned earlier, many large multinationals have established their R&D and innovation centers here, further highlighting this expertise. This underscores the importance of Sri Lanka consistently identifying and excelling in niche areas. To maintain this edge, staying at the forefront of emerging technologies and trends is crucial. This includes aligning with global demand in fields like AI and



machine learning, cloud computing, data science and analytics, and cybersecurity. Quantum computing, though still in its early stages, also holds immense promise for the future.

. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, our industry ambassadors in the 'Industry Ambassador program', will continue to serve as our eyes and ears, providing valuable insights into emerging trends and demands that the industry needs to address.

## 6. GIVEN YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH EXPERT COMMITTEES AND COLLABORATIONS WITH ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS, HOW DO YOU SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA EVOLVING? HOW WILL THIS COLLABORATION SHAPE THE FUTURE WORKFORCE?

The collaboration between industry and academia is crucial, and I'm

pleased to note that this relationship has evolved positively over the years. Today, there is active and meaningful interaction between the two. Industry representatives are regularly invited to serve on academic consultative committees and boards, allowing the industry to contribute valuable input into university curricula.

SLASSCOM has signed MoUs with several universities, both in the state and non-state sectors, to foster collaboration. Additionally, academia is represented on some of SLASSCOM's forums, further strengthening the link between education and industry. This year saw the successful launch of the SLASSCOM Academia Immersive Program aimed to bridge the gap between education and industry by placing university lecturers within our member companies for a short period. Now in its third cycle, this program has proven to be a high-impact initiative. This hands-on experience will give them insight into how the industry operates and what it expects, enabling them to provide students with more practical, real-world knowledge. Moreover, as the first in a series of

regional student outreach programs, we partnered with the University of Peradeniya and the Central Provincial Council to host an IT-BPM Exploration Day—designed to spark early ambition and inspire future career pathways in tech.

## 7. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG PROFESSIONALS OR STUDENTS WHO ARE LOOKING TO BUILD A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN THE IT INDUSTRY? HOW CAN THEY BEST PREPARE THEMSELVES FOR THE FUTURE?

There has never been a better time to join this industry. The opportunities before you are vast, and you can become a global player while staying right here in Sri Lanka, building a recognized and fulfilling career. While learning technical skills is essential, especially in IT—continuous learning is



even more important in this fast-evolving sector. As Mahatma Gandhi wisely said, “Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” Since this is a given, I’d like to shift your focus to something equally crucial.

In 2008, the industry united with all stakeholders - private sector, government and academia, to create a unified brand for our industry: the ‘Island of Ingenuity’. But what does this mean? What values does this brand represent? I mention this because it’s important for you to understand and begin developing the core skills our brand embodies while you are still studying.

Our global customers often share with us the reasons they continue to choose Sri Lanka’s knowledge and innovation industry, and hearing their perspectives always reinforces my pride in what we offer. They consistently highlight our collaborative mindset — we naturally work well together, across teams and cultures. They also appreciate our flexibility and creativity, qualities that enable us to adapt quickly and deliver innovative solutions. Another strength

they recognize is our problem-solving capability; we don’t just execute tasks—we think critically and find ways to add value.

What also stands out for our clients is the warmth and hospitality we bring to every interaction. It’s something deeply embedded in our culture, and it resonates strongly in professional relationships. Additionally, the high emotional intelligence and individuality of our professionals make us a trusted and relatable partner in the global business landscape. These qualities set us apart, and I believe they are key to our continued success on the world stage. These qualities set us apart from our regional peers and are the core values that have made our industry a world-class gem.

One day, you will become the ambassadors of the Island of Ingenuity. Our industry will continue to thrive if you adopt the same values, mindset, and skills that your predecessors brought to the table. And always remember your roots. Sri Lanka is an island of ingenuity, and you are fortunate to be born into a country with such a proud legacy. I know some of

you may be considering opportunities abroad, seeking greener pastures. It’s easy to focus on the challenges and overlook the positives we have here. But let me tell you, every foreigner who visits Sri Lanka falls in love with our beautiful country and its people. Remember, the grass is green where you water it. Whether you choose to stay or pursue opportunities abroad, carry with you the spirit of resilience, creativity, and community that defines our nation. And always remember to give back to your homeland. Use your skills and knowledge not only for your own success but for the betterment of our country and society. By doing so, you will continue to be part of the proud legacy of Sri Lanka, no matter where life takes you. I wish you all the very best in your journey ahead.

**BY ISURI CALDERA**

