

SHAPING SRI LANKA'S DIGITAL FUTURE



INSIGHTS FROM THE FORMER INTERIM ICTA CEO - MR. MAHESH PERERA



MR. MAHESH PERERA
Former Interim ICTA CEO



Stepping into ICTA, our team was amazed at the facilities offered for blossoming tech geniuses, within the building itself. The space was so inspiration-conducive that we wished we could go back and switch our majors, just for such an opportunity to revel in the lively study area. That aside, within this space, was a gentleman we were anxious to meet, the former interim

CEO of ICTA, **Mr. Mahesh Perera**. His genial disposition, and generosity matched the electric atmosphere of a space and agency with so much to offer. Sipping some Ceylon coffee, we were off with our questions, immersing ourselves in the many pearls of knowledge that we shall proceed to record.

Here we delve into the involvement of the state and government in enhancing and improving technology and digital transformation in Sri Lanka.





Q1: To start off, could you share some of the key milestones and defining moments in your life, both personally and in your career?

Certainly. My journey began at Piliyandala Central College, where I was an athlete during my early school years. My favorite events were the 100 meters, 200 meters, and long jump. I was a school and regional champion and even competed at the national level.

By the time I was in grades 7 or 8, I had a vision of becoming an engineer and worked diligently toward that goal. However, life presented significant challenges. In grade 10, my mother was diagnosed with cancer, and I watched her suffer immensely. She passed away just six months before my Advanced Level exams, which was a devastating loss. Despite this hardship, I was determined not to repeat my exams. I gave my best effort and secured a place at the University of Colombo.

At the same time, I was presented with multiple opportunities—I was offered a position in the Sri Lanka Navy as an engineer, a scholarship to study in the

Soviet Union, and my university admission. I ultimately chose the scholarship and left for the Soviet Union in 1987. After graduating in 1994 as a Computer Engineer, I returned to Sri Lanka and began my career as a support engineer at Informatics International. Achieving my dream of becoming an engineer was just the beginning.

At Informatics International, I worked for two years, gaining valuable experience in customer satisfaction, interpersonal skills, and profit optimization. During this time, I saw an advertisement from the Sri Lanka Army seeking engineers. I applied, was selected, and joined the Sri Lanka Army Signals Corps in 1996 as a Captain.



My tenure in the Army lasted over eight years, during which I held various roles, including administrative positions. As the only IT engineer in the Army at the time, I conducted training programs, led support teams, and worked to connect operational headquarters with Army headquarters. The military environment was a stark contrast to civilian life, but it instilled in me discipline, punctuality, and a strong sense of responsibility. It shaped how I carried myself, from the way I dressed to how I interacted with others.

Despite my appreciation for the military experience, I felt that my contributions were limited by the broader organizational culture. Seeking a change, I decided to leave in 2004. Around this time, I came across another opportunity—a newly formed IT department at the Sri Lanka Parliament was looking for its first Director of IT. I applied, was selected, and took on the challenge.



At Parliament, I had to quickly adapt to an entirely different environment and culture. With over 800 employees at the time, Parliament had long-standing traditions and processes. The modernization initiative, in partnership with the UNDP, aimed to enhance accessibility, transparency, efficiency, and representation. This led to the creation of the e-Parliament strategy, which transformed the institution through technology.



After 18 years in Parliament, I reflected on my journey and felt a deep sense of accomplishment. The strategies we implemented had fulfilled and even exceeded the expectations of the Speaker and members. Around this time, I noticed that ICTA (Information and Communication Technology Agency) had been without a CEO for over a year. Encouraged by colleagues familiar with my work in ICT since 2004, both in a voluntary and governmental capacity, I decided to apply for the role. Once again, I was selected.

By this point, I had given nearly two decades to Parliament, and I felt that my mission there was complete. We had successfully implemented the modernization strategy, and I was ready for a new challenge. Taking on the leadership at ICTA was the natural next step in my journey.

Q2: Your journey is truly inspiring, especially how you've faced challenges and adapted to different situations. Now, let's talk about your leadership roles as the former President of the Computer Society of Sri Lanka (CSSL) and the Southeast Asia Regional Computer Confederation (SEARCC). How did you influence the direction of ICT in the region during your tenure?

I have been a member of CSSL since 2000. My involvement began when I met a former CSSL president, who was then the head of IT at the Ports

Authority. He invited me to join the organization, and in 2006, I became a council member.

I truly enjoyed contributing to CSSL, even though it was entirely voluntary. During my tenure at Parliament, I worked until 5 PM and then dedicated my evenings to CSSL. It was a commitment driven purely by passion—giving without expecting anything in return, which brought immense satisfaction. That sense of fulfillment motivated me to do even more.

In 2012, I was elected President of CSSL. Being a strategist by nature, I wanted to introduce a structured approach to our initiatives. My leadership strategy was built on three key pillars:

Strengthening CSSL – Enhancing its role as the apex body for ICT professionals in Sri Lanka, a position it has held since its establishment in 1976.

Empowering the Membership – Providing value to ICT professionals through networking, education, and career advancement opportunities.

Promoting Technology – Driving awareness and adoption of ICT across industries.

Our council comprised 12 members, all ICT heads from various organizations, and we collaborated with SEARCC, an Australian-based regional alliance of national computer societies. This partnership allowed us to initiate numerous local and regional projects.



During my presidency, we introduced several impactful programs, including the ICT Awards, which recognized emerging leaders, women entrepreneurs, and ICT innovators. Many of these initiatives continue to this day. We also conducted workshops, awareness programs, and hosted the SEARCC Regional Conference in Sri Lanka, which saw over 1,000 participants from across Asia.

Looking back, I take great pride in what we accomplished at CSSL and SEARCC. It was all about contributing to the ICT profession and society without any expectation of personal gain. These were passion projects, and even today, I feel immense satisfaction knowing that the work we did continues to benefit the industry. There were many late nights—sometimes working until 11 PM—but it was never about the returns. It was about making an impact, and that, in itself, was the greatest reward.

Q3: I also read that a key aspect of your policies and strategies was the convergence of ICT and human resources. Can you tell us more about that?

At the core of any leadership role is value creation. In my early career at Informatics and Parliament, I was primarily involved in operational work—first as a support engineer and later as a captain and IT head in the Army. However, when I transitioned to Parliament, my role shifted significantly. I was no longer just executing tasks; I had to lead teams and deliver strategic value that met the expectations of multiple stakeholders—including Parliament members, government organizations, and the public.

Each stakeholder had different expectations, which required a complex yet cohesive strategy. But a

strategy alone is not enough—it must be backed by an aligned and focused organization. That's where the convergence of ICT and human resources became crucial.

While technology has immense potential, it is merely a tool. Real impact comes from people—specifically, competent professionals with diverse skill sets. Running a department requires a mix of expertise:



A help desk for responding to inquiries from MPs, staff, and citizens.

Technical engineers and programmers for system development.

Web editors for managing digital content.

To manage these diverse roles effectively, I developed a competency map for my team, ensuring that everyone was aligned with our core values. At Parliament, I introduced three key principles:

Candor – Encouraging open discussions rather than secretive conversations. I pushed for a culture

where concerns were addressed transparently, which led to stronger teamwork.

Continuous Learning – Prioritizing training, internal workshops, and skill development to keep our team competitive.

Customer Satisfaction – Ensuring that every task ultimately served the end-user, whether it was a Member of Parliament, a government agency, or a citizen.

This value-based management approach was transformative. It helped us streamline operations, improve teamwork, and drive measurable success. For example, the Parliament website consistently ranked as the No. 1 government website during my tenure, largely because of the strong alignment between ICT initiatives and human capital development.

Of course, implementing such a system was not without challenges. Not everyone embraced these values immediately, and there were always a few who resisted change. However, over time, the majority aligned with this philosophy, and it led to significant improvements in performance and efficiency.

When I transitioned to ICTA, I applied the same value-driven approach. However, since the organization was already earmarked for closure, my primary focus was on ensuring a smooth transition while maintaining professional standards.

Ultimately, I believe that leadership is the missing piece in many organizations. Our country has all the resources needed to progress, but the leadership vacuum often hinders growth. If more institutions adopted value-based management, where transparency, learning, and customer-centricity drive decision-making, we would see a significant transformation.

Q4: In modern times, we have seen a significant leap in IT within the education sector. How do you view the relationship between IT and education in the future, especially in terms of digital transformation?

Digital transformation is not limited to the education sector alone. While education is a critical domain, similar advancements apply to health, land administration, and other sectors.



Technology has matured significantly, enabling greater efficiency, transparency, and citizen-centric services across various domains. However, technology alone is not enough. Emerging technologies like AI and IoT can only create meaningful impact if they contribute to sustainable development.

In the education sector, sustainable development means leveraging technology to foster better collaboration among key stakeholders: parents, teachers, and students. Unfortunately, in our country, these three groups remain largely disconnected. In many developed nations, technology has successfully bridged these gaps, making the system more effective and transparent. For us to achieve similar success, we need a holistic approach—not just technological upgrades, but governance frameworks, market involvement, and well-executed policies. It is not about isolated advancements but integrating technology seamlessly with national strategies to ensure long-term benefits.

Additionally, the role of IT in shaping work culture has been profound, with remote work becoming a norm, especially in IT-related professions. Many companies have realized that they can operate efficiently with remote teams. While this model offers flexibility and comfort, it also comes with challenges such as security risks and maintaining engagement. The shift toward remote work underscores the growing importance of digital security. Cyber threats, especially targeting government portals and sensitive data, emphasize the need for robust cybersecurity frameworks. Security should not be an afterthought—it must be built into the design of every system, ensuring confidentiality, integrity, and availability. There are no shortcuts to

security; it requires careful planning, continuous monitoring, and strict adherence to best practices from the very beginning.

Q5: When considering digital transformation at a national level, what foundational elements are necessary to make this vision a reality?

A successful digital transformation strategy must begin with strong foundational elements. One of the most critical aspects is establishing a national digital ID system. A digital ID ensures unique, secure authentication for individuals in the digital world, preventing identity fraud and enabling seamless transactions. Many developed nations have implemented this, but in our country, the current manual ID system lacks the interoperability needed for a digital economy.

Another key component is a secure data-sharing platform. Right now, government institutions operate in silos, forcing individuals to submit the same documents repeatedly for different services. With proper data exchange mechanisms—while maintaining privacy and consent—government services can become significantly more efficient.

A national digital payment system is also crucial. Citizens should be able to conduct transactions effortlessly, whether paying for government services, transferring funds, or signing digital documents. Additionally, inclusivity must be a priority. Any digital transformation must ensure accessibility for all, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical location.

Ultimately, technology should not be the primary focus—process



transformation is key. When people experience convenience, efficiency, and value in digital services, they will naturally adopt them. Over time, these changes will become societal norms, driving a cultural shift towards a fully digital ecosystem.

Q6: One last question to conclude the interview. As someone who has held numerous leadership roles, what advice would you give to the next generation of IT professionals?

My advice would be this—you must strive to be a well-rounded individual. And what does that mean? For me, it comes down to four key aspects: physical fitness, mental resilience, spiritual integrity, and societal connection.

First, you need to be physically fit. Engaging in regular exercise and maintaining a balanced diet is crucial. Without physical well-being, productivity suffers, and achieving long-term goals becomes difficult. Your body is the foundation for everything else.

Second, mental strength is essential. This includes emotional intelligence and continuous learning. Managing emotions effectively is a critical skill—if I feel anger or frustration, recognizing it in the moment allows me to control my response rather than reacting impulsively. Similarly, lifelong learning broadens our perspectives and enhances our ability to make informed decisions. The ability to think critically and adapt to new knowledge is vital for both personal and professional growth.

Third, spirituality plays a significant role. This is not about religion but rather about having a strong moral compass and a clear sense of purpose. People should be able to trust you; integrity is non-negotiable. As a leader, I constantly remind myself why I am here—not just because I was hired or because I receive a paycheck, but because I have a responsibility to contribute meaningfully. No one can force integrity upon you; it must come from within.

Finally, societal connection matters. It's not about having hundreds of contacts but rather about cultivating strong, meaningful relationships. It's also about taking responsibility for your

engagements and interactions. Leadership is not just about personal success; it's about building a network and making a positive impact on others.

These four pillars—physical, mental, spiritual, and societal—form the foundation of a well-rounded leader. Without them, leadership becomes fragile. Leaders set the culture of an organization, and without a strong internal foundation, they cannot execute strategies effectively or create lasting societal impact.

To all young professionals, I encourage you to focus on these four areas. Strive to be a well-rounded person, and leadership will naturally follow. The more balanced you are in these aspects, the better equipped you'll be to take on leadership roles and drive meaningful change.



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