

UMAR BALWA

AN INSPIRING TALE FOR EVERY ENTREPRENEUR

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A motivational success story rekindles and rejuvenates a flagging spirit. Individuals in such stories become exceptional characters and people strive to emulate their lives and careers. One such inspirational story is of Umar AK Balwa, Managing Director, **Sealmatic India Pvt Ltd**. The Company is a leading designer and manufacturer of mechanical seals with a strong presence across the globe. Its portfolio is acclaimed for robust design and high-quality mechanical seals and related products for industrial applications such as petrochemical, oil & gas, chemical, fertiliser, mining, pharmaceutical, pulp & paper, aerospace, marine etc.

The CEO Story Magazine has always believed people with such attributes can inspire many others to find their calling. In the following article we shall take you through Mr Balwa's journey in the industrial fraternity and how he found his calling in the technically competitive field of mechanical seals.

AN UNEXPECTED ADVENT

Umar initially planned to open a garment manufacturing unit in the city of Mumbai. Back in 1988, Mumbai was one of the largest export hubs to Europe and USA for ready-made garments. Understanding the potential, -after completing his graduation-Umar decided to branch out from his family business of real estate and hospitality. Initially, Umar found encouragement from his father for the garment business but after further deliberations his father decided against it. Umar made great effort to convince him about the garment business but his father's decision remained unchanged. While Umar was brooding over the decision, his elder brother Hussein Balwa, decided to enter the mechanical seal industry and laid the foundation of AK Engineering.

Named after their father, Abdul Karim Balwa, it was a small engineering enterprise. Umar's family sternly asked him to report to A K Engineering on May 19, 1989, at 9:00 am. Much to Umar's chagrin, he had no

knowledge, and neither any experience in this field. Having no recourse except to follow his father's instructions he reached the company at the assigned time; thus, commencing his journey in the business of mechanical seals. The mechanical seals business was a completely new arena to Umar and posed its own unique challenges

“It was completely different as compared to our family businesses of real estate and hospitality,” stated Umar

As such, he started from the basics. From writing letters of solicitation to customers to purchasing raw materials and even pursuing errant customers for payments, he solely managed everything. These endeavours taught him that mechanical seals were difficult to design, manufacture and sell. His work brought him to good customers like KSB, Sulzer, Ebara, and after meeting them he realized that without a strong technological backup from developed nations like Germany, UK or US, his company wouldn't stand for long.

The mechanical seals market was dominated by developed nations in those days. Information was sacred and confidential, and there was no open database containing the names of reputable international companies with whom to collaborate. But these challenges didn't discourage him. He visited a technical book store in Bombay where he found something that changed his life, a book – titled Seals And Sealing Hand Book by Elsevier Publishers.

DELVING FURTHER INTO MECHANICAL SEALS AND CHALLENGES THAT CAME ALONG

The book gave him access to the world of mechanical seals and carved his way to reach world-renowned manufacturers. He wrote incessantly to every company the book mentioned, followed by badgering phone calls to these companies. Many such letters and requests found a rude reply from the receiving end because a company in USA or Europe wasn't envisioning the need to establish a mechanical seal company in India. But Umar didn't stop his efforts and fortunately attracted Feodor Burgmann of Germany.

“My labour, patience and perseverance paid off as I managed to get an audience with the renowned German company,” says Umar.

Shortly, the German company visited his office in Mumbai, where several other applicants with a history in mechanical seals were also in contention to collaborate with Feodor Burgmann. But with innate motivation and confidence and despite the odds he gave a dynamic presentation to the German company. The competition was tough and the German company had almost signed an agreement with another company in India, but his persistence resulted in the German company changing their mind and which brought Umar to the biggest turning point of his life- A K Engineering signed the collaboration. The collaboration led the way for Umar to widen his horizon. In his words, it was eventful and invigorating during his training days in Germany.

He learnt a lot about technical matters, but above all else he understood that the keystone of German engineers' success lay in their dedication, sincerity, perseverance and discipline. After returning to India, he created a disciplined work culture based on his experiences in Germany. While many of his colleagues raised queries about this perfectionist approach he would candidly reply, “discipline my dear fellows – discipline.”

After 17 years, Umar's hard work and patience earned him a stellar presence across the globe. Just as he was foreseeing steady prospects, an unexpected business development shook Umar's world. In 2004, disturbing news came from the German company that it has been acquired by a larger conglomerate. Within the next 3 years, the consequences of this acquisition came to the doorstep of his company in India and in 2007, under a congenial agreement, Umar and his family had to sell all their shares to the German conglomerate. The incident left Umar bereft of a company he had lovingly nurtured for years.

THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Umar took a sabbatical from the mechanical seal business as he was still reeling from the loss of Feodor Burgmann. He was back to work in his family's business of real estate & hospitality and was trying to keep himself occupied, until in 2011, Hanif Chaudhary – a former colleague from A K engineering walked into

his office to voice an idea- that they should start a mechanical seals company. In a candid conversation, they talked about whether they were up to the challenge and decided that in spite of the pros and cons, they found no reason to doubt one another's abilities.

The conversation planted the seed of **Sealmatic** in both their minds. It took a year but their collaborative strength and experience led to the foundation of Sealmatic in 2012. This time, the duo took accord of their experiences- failures and hard-earned successes- in recent decades, which made them more aware of their responsibilities. Umar had three successful decades in the field of mechanical seals and this increased his own as well as the expectations of others from him.

Of course, the restart wasn't an overnight success. Umar had to return to his roots and introduce himself to customers just like a beginner.

“On the autobahn, the autostrada, the highway, the motorway- whatever name you call the road- I was there, bag in hand, and aspirations on my sleeves, with no badge or any big brand to display,” Umar spoke proudly.

Every so often he received a rude reply since Sealmatic wasn't well known. But persistence being his strong point coupled with commitment to his employees and their respective families, he worked hard to make a big success out of Sealmatic. The task of building a new customer base took several years. Umar journeyed through cities, big and small, crossed states and countries and remote parts to scout for customers and make Sealmatic an international brand.

Consequently, his endeavours made Sealmatic a stellar name amongst leading mechanical seals manufactures and the company enjoys a presence in more than 43 countries. It is the only Indian mechanical seal company having API Q1 and ATEX certification, with a long list of satisfied customers. Starting out from 200 sq. mtrs premises in 2012, today Sealmatic has grown in leaps and bounds with over 200 employees. It has been recognized with one award after another. Umar believes the collaborative efforts of all the people involved in Sealmatic have helped shape a bright future envisioned by Hanif and him, and which has now become their greatest achievement. A learned and experienced person from the mechanical seal industry once asked him.

“Why are you entering the mechanical seal business again?” Umar's humble reply was “Once A SealMan Always A SealMan.