TRAILBLAZERS TALK

Ravi Kumar S.,
President, Infosys,
in conversation with
Gina Raimondo,
Governor of Rhode Island

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Ravi Kumar S. (RK): Hello everyone my name is Ravi Kumar, President at Infosys. Welcome to the next chapter of Trailblazers. We're recording this conversation in the beautiful Infosys Design hub at Providence. I have a very distinguished guest -- the Governor of Rhode Island, Gina Raimondo. I belong to the Gina fan club myself, I'm a big fan of the governor. I think she is one of the most impressive and dynamic public policymakers I know of … and I know many of them… and I can't talk about anybody who can match the dynamism of the Governor… Governor Raimondo she has a very impressive academic background. An Undergrad from Harvard, Masters and Doctorate from Oxford, a grad from the Yale Law School. She ran an early venture fund as I call it… co-founded it… has been involved with a couple of startups in Rhode Island… was the treasurer of Rhode Island, which kind of tackled the issue of unfunded pension and then a two-time Governor for the state of Rhode Island. So thank you so much governor for doing this for us. And this is your vision… we are in the Rhode Island hub… we promised we're going to be hundred employees by August. That's what I committed to the governor. Thank you so much for being here. You know every time I read about you and every time I meet you I always go back inspired thinking of doing something more and something big for this state. You know I wanted to tee up the first question to you around how you tackled the unemployment issue. I remember the first time when you came on when you did your first term… Rhode Island was having the highest unemployment and from there you've got to below the national average now and I'm now told this is the lowest since 2001 [yeah] how do you tackle this? And I know this has been the cornerstone of your administration… jobs and preparing a workforce for the future for the state of Rhode Island

Governor Gina Raimondo (GGR): So first let me say it is such a pleasure to sit with you and be here in this gorgeous hub, the Design hub. I am an Infosys fan I'm part of the Infosys fan club and I'm thrilled that you've chosen Rhode Island and as you know it's my job to partner with you to make sure that you're happy here, successful here and able to find the talent that you need. It is true you know when I took office when I ran for office for that whole year Rhode Island had the highest unemployment rate in the country which if you've spent any time in Rhode Island that doesn't make sense you know. We're nestled between New York and Boston, we have Ivy League university, gorgeous beaches, great food, why would this be the case and I just I felt like we lacked some leadership and strategy and so I have made it my mission to just try to create high wage jobs for people because at the end of the day I think that's what matters the most. If people can have a good job, feel like they have a path to an even better job if they work hard you know some sense of opportunity and mobility. So a lot of what I've done really gets back to skills my theory and I'd love your thought on this is… today every company that's fast growing tells me that the rate limiting factor to growth is talent [**RK:** Yep] so I've invested in universal pre-K, all-day kindergarten, teaching computer science in every grade in every public school in Rhode Island, tuition free community college, job training, partnerships between what we're doing job training and companies… for me it's just all talent talent talent because if I can meet your talent demands you know why wouldn't you want to be here.

RK: Thank you, Governor. I think that you know that's so apt and at a time when in many ways repurposing human capital is the only way you could scale this entire digital transformation happening in large enterprises and you're spot on that's the only way you can actually build jobs of the future. So tell us a little bit about CSforALL… I know that you have tripled the number of kindergartens and I think you're gonna be the first state if you get to CSforALL for all schools in the nation. I also know that in 2017 you actually announced that every Rhode Islander is going to have free education at least for the two years (**GGR:** Three years) in the community colleges. It's kind of very comprehensive… starting from K12 to higher education. Tell us a little bit about it.

GGR: So I think computer skills and digital skills are essential skills. Maybe they weren't when we were in high school, (**RK:** Yeah) you know but they are now. it's just as important as anything else… and I am a mother I have two children. I want my kids to have the skills they need to get a good job and those are digital skills and computer skills among other things… you know problem solving, collaboration, basic math, statistics so when I became governor I realized we just weren't too many kids in our public schools didn't have access to computer science and I also realize we wait too long. You can't wait until high school you have to start so we start in kindergarten now and if you ever want to put a smile on your face go to a kindergarten classroom and watch the computer science class because it's a sorting game and they line the kids up and teach them how to sort themselves and they learn sorting, and logic, and coding… and to me… statistics, problem-solving, it's exactly what you want to hire.

RK: Yeah you know I don't go there because it beats my ego actually they're so smart…

GGR: I just feel you know every leader if you try to do too much you get nothing done so you have to focus and I am focusing on reviving our economy and rebuilding from the bottom up and that is investing in infrastructure, lowering business taxes, but it's making big bets in education and job training. As you say comprehensively - from the time we have four years old until the end we're even making our community college available to adult learners. Imagine you're a, you know, 50-year-old bank teller you're much too young to retire so you may have to go to our community college and get some digital skills and technology skills so you can continue your career and I know that's something you excel at in Infosys.

RK: Absolutely and Governor you know how do you stop the brain drain in the sense in some ways Rhode Island has some fascinating you know colleges and universities including the Rhode Island School of Design which is so reputed, the Brown University, the academic ecosystem is fantastic that's one of the reasons why it is we chose… but once people finish their studies there are kind of opportunities in other states they go to and I know that you wanted to create an innovation ecosystem in Rhode Island so that they can stay back and contribute back to the state you know. So just want to pick your brains on this, how do you stop the brain drain from Rhode Island because you've invested into them and now they have the opportunities in other states

GGR: Everybody who could get a good job in Rhode Island would want to live in Rhode Island really I mean… Oh! they're all nodding seeing your own employees agree with that. The best Italian food in Boston is in Providence Rhode Island. The best arts and culture in the Northeast is in Rhode Island. You could be on a gorgeous beach… in any… from any point in our state you could be on a gorgeous beach in half an hour. It's 35% less expensive to live and do business here than in Boston. So I never have to sell anyone… anyone who spends even a day or two here says I love this place… I want to live here they need to get a good job and so like in this building here where you are upstairs is a company called Virgin Pulse. It's a company I recruited here they are growing like a weed, it's a healthcare IT company, they are adding talent and everyone loves it. Upstairs beyond on that is GE Digital yeah I recruited them here all these people are moving here to work at these companies and they love it. So the thing is once you get people to Rhode Island or once you can get a recent you know a young Brown graduate a job here they will stay so that's why to me it just comes back to jobs. The more companies that are here the more vibrant the ecosystem I think that the young people everybody will want to live here and stay here.

RK: So if the story is told more often to corporations across the US you think it's going to attract more because well it's still in some sense a nice little secret (**GGR:** It is) so how do you break that, just more work and…?

GGR: More time and more marketing. I've been on a lot of pitches to companies and I make the pitch about you know it takes a half-hour to get to Boston by train, two and a half hours to New York City, all the quality of life and the talent when I tell that to company they love the pitch they say I never knew that, you know, nobody ever says why would I do business in Rhode Island. They say they like where is it? What is the value? When you tell them, they love the story so for me it's really just a lot more marketing a lot more getting the word out and then I have to get a kind of a flywheel going, you know, I've recruited 35 companies here in my three years I have another three years I recruit another 35 companies eventually there is critical mass [**RK:** yep] and it just continues to grow.

RK: And is there anything which you're doing on creating that innovation ecosystem? I know that you're establishing infrastructure so that there are more companies who can be attracted.

GGR: Yes, you know one thing I should have mentioned is we have a I think a really interesting initiative called a Wavemaker Fellowship. If you graduate from any Rhode Island University public or private you know Brown or URI with a STEM degree and you take a STEM job in Rhode Island, the state will help you pay back your student loans. We've put almost a thousand people to work in Rhode Island because of that it's your point about the [**RK:** That's pretty unique I've never heard about it from any other state I don't know whether…] I don't think it is true so one day I went to Brown University they have an excellent computer science department and I went on a Saturday morning at eight o'clock to a hackathon. Now I don't know about you Ravi but Saturday morning at eight o'clock in college I was in bed I was not at a hackathon. They had hundreds of young people there and I said how many of you are from Rhode island two hands go up. I said how many of you are gonna stay in Rhode island when you graduate Brown, three hands go up. I said how many of you have student loans everyone raised their hands. I said if I pay back your student loans for four years… you've got a STEM job in Rhode Island would you stay here? Literally there was a line out the door waiting to talk to me. People want to work here if we have the jobs, if we provide those incentives, so they spend a little more time looking in Rhode Island I think there's no way we don't win and…

RK: Is this something really unique to Rhode Island?

GGR: I think so [**RK:** because I've not heard this from any other state and is this fully operational] it's fully operational, this happened for two years we're continuing the program and it's I believe unique. I came up with the idea because I'm very...

RK: Do they need to commit to stay in Rhode Island for a couple of years?

GGR: Four years. You got to stay here for four years, well we'll pay back your loans up to yes if you stay one year we pay one year, stay two years pay two years, but I really want to focus on that science.

RK: That's a very smart move.

GGR: You know focus focus focus and it's fantastic.

RK: So now Governor switching gears you know you have competing states [**GGR:** Yeah] around the New England region all of them have great universities. How do you differentiate Rhode Island to the others? And all of them have good academic ecosystems to create the talent pools of the future and do you see that as an advantage of being a very small state? You know I personally thought… coming here… it's a very closely-knit community of academia, government and large institutions, I felt that was a huge advantage [**GGR:** Yeah] being in a small state. How do you see that?

GGR: Yeah it is a huge advantage and hopefully you've seen that you know if I need help from one of our United States senators to help me on something I pick up the phone. They are fantastic, I have access to them, we work as a team. If I need the mayor's help or a company needs the mayor's help to do a program in the city, I pick up the phone, he does what's required. Community college president, as you know you're working with our community college. I talk to her every week she's you know we're all on the team it's a small tight-knit team and we're hungry to win. You know not to take anything away from Boston and Cambridge and as you say I went to Harvard, I'm a believer its crowded, it's expensive and you know they've already made it, we are on the rise and there's a certain you have a lot of hustle and we are all on the same team to make the companies here feel like you're the most important company that I have to help and I think that makes a difference, you know, you get to get the governor return your phone call, Oh I'm on the team, I'll do what I can to help every company that's here.

RK: Awesome, and you know a little bit about the higher education institutions in this state you know you have some fantastic ones. Brown is reputed for a whole lot of disciplines. The Rhode Island School of Design I think, again, is a hidden jewel. I've seen design schools across the US, this is probably the best, it's inspired by humanity, life… nothing more purist than what they are. What's your plan around higher education institutions in Rhode Island?

GGR: First of all, we have big plans for a community college. I believe the community college should be a workforce development engine, it needs to work hand in glove with businesses to provide customize training [**RK:** Yep] and we're doing that. I think we are ahead of other community colleges. It's leadership… it's focus... we're in the early innings of seeing what that could be.

Secondly, this is an area where the governor plays a big role because a lot of what I do is convening. So bringing the University of Rhode Island together with Brown together with RISD to come together yeah and providing access to companies, I'll say this in this regard, Rhode Island is lucky because right now we have a digital revolution, we have a data revolution, and we have a design really revolution.

RK: Design is in the middle of everything is [**GGR:** Exactly design is right]. In fact, in fact, you're spot on, I think large corporations like ours are moving from higher studies to skills and the community colleges will play a much important role because we almost got to go away from saying do you have a master's or undergrad and so we're just going to say do you have the skills that I hire you.

GGR: Yeah competency, absolutely I would say that and I say this even if you weren't sitting in front of me, Infosys is a global leader in that transition. There are still many companies that are I think a little old-fashioned in the way they hire and in the way they train and they still do like check the box from HR. Do you have a four-year degree? Do you have a master's degree? And I think that's gonna slow them down… it will slow them down company you guys are ahead of the pack you're looking for can you do the job? Are you competent? We hire you and will continue to train you. It's continuous learning, easy to say hard to do yeah [**RK:** So we call it a lifelong learning in a way] and it's everyone says it but you're doing it and I am I'm doing it too with my community college you know it's all about changing the way we deliver higher education so it's competency-based, it's unbundled, it's shorter amount of time, get the job done, start your job, come back for some more training. The majority of Americans go to community college…

RK: 50% of the US actually is in community college

GGR: Right, so then it's not alternative it's where most mainstream [**RK:** It's mainstream] yeah so I'm really leaning into that model.

RK: We are excited about it as well

GGR: And by the way it's working.

RK: And in fact, governor, thanks to your own vision on this we almost want to create a national movement on it but pivoted on Rhode Island as the foundation. This year we're going to hire like five hundred from community colleges, we all know we did a hundred, it's not the least resistance path as I call it [**GGR:** Yeah] but once people adapt it and they start realizing the benefits are huge stickiness, hunger, a little bit of a challenger mentality, that gives you more than what we are expecting.

GGR: There's a very famous Harvard Business School case, Harvard Business School review and they look at how companies are hiring based on certain academic credentials - four-year degree plus master's degree. But then they look at how many people in their company actually doing that job have those credentials, and there's a huge gap. And it's kind of the old adage "You don't get fired for hiring IBM" well you know it's the safer path … to say you have the four-year degree and the master's degree, we'll try it but I don't think you'll hit your hiring goals at pace if you do that. So I appreciate you taking a little risk with us and our community college and we'll deliver for you. You know we'll deliver for you and you'll get people who have talent at a price you can afford who will stick around.

RK: Thank you Governor, thank you so much you know if I have to ask you one question about what your expectations are from Infosys in the next 12 months, what would that be?

GGR: Grow, grow, grow in Rhode Island. Stay here. Truthfully you are a model corporate citizen. You have been integrated in the community, you've restored this historic building, you are a great partner in the computer science initiative, working with our community college. I want to just do more with you. We are aligned in our vision so let's do more together.

RK: Thank you so much, Governor. I'm gonna put you on the spot for this final question and you may choose not to answer. Where do you see yourself in five years from now five maybe three years from now?

GGR: Three years I'll be right here, I'll be working with you.

RK: Four years?

GGR: Four years from now I don't know, I don't know, I'm not running for president next year I'm like I am the one Democratic governor in America not running for president next year. [**RK:**I was about to ask that yeah but I kind of worked around it] We'll see you know I'm like any CEO I got a job to do, I'm laser focused. I have three years to do it, we'll see.

RK: Thank you so much

GGR: Always a pleasure talking to you, Ravi.

RK: I'm a big fan of you know I call it the Gina fan club and I'm a big fan of the club. Thank you again for being here and we'll continue to live to your vision and the aspirations you have for the state, thank you again,

GGR: Thank you.

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