

## Umeed Kothavala: The CEO Who Acts On Stage, Builds With Lego, and Drives Experience-Centric Transformation

Meet Umeed Kothavala—serial entrepreneur, award-winning dramatist, design evangelist, and the mastermind behind Extentia, the Pune-based technology powerhouse founded in 1998 that scaled to a 1000-person global operation with customers across the US, Europe, and Oceania before being acquired by Merkle/Dentsu in 2022. But here's what makes Umeed truly fascinating: he's as likely to be found performing on stage in English or Gujrathi theater as he is architecting enterprise transformations—proof that the best CEOs never really grow up, they just get better at balancing multiple passions.

### Experience-Centric Transformation: A Philosophy, Not Just a Buzzword

As CEO and co-founder of Extentia, Umeed pioneered something genuinely revolutionary: **Experience-Centric Transformation (XCT)**—a human-centered philosophy that flips conventional thinking on its head. Rather than building technology and *hoping* people will adapt to it, XCT starts with empathy, deep user research, and collaborative problem-solving. It's the antithesis of the "if we build it, they will come" mentality. Under this vision, Extentia transformed from a scrappy startup into a globally recognized powerhouse renowned for its acclaimed Design Studio, user-centric research lab, and proven ability to deliver intuitive, high-performance digital experiences. The approach is so compelling that Dentsu Group recognized it as the missing piece to accelerate Merkle's customer transformation and technology capabilities.

### XEN LAB: Where Art Meets Science (And Innovation Gets Serious)

Umeed's most visible contribution to the design thinking revolution is **XEN LAB PNQ**, Extentia's groundbreaking experience design center in Pune—a first-of-its-kind facility where the art of design meets the science of technology. This isn't your typical corporate boardroom. XEN LAB is an inclusive innovation space that integrates hardware platforms, software tools, creative breakout rooms, and collaborative workshop areas designed to spark inspiration and out-of-the-box thinking.

Recognized as a member of the **SAP AppHaus Network**, XEN LAB hosts immersive design thinking workshops using Extentia's proprietary **5D methodology**: Discover, Define, Design, Develop, and Deploy. The center has facilitated hundreds of events, including ideation workshops, Design Fridays, and customer transformation sessions. For organizations that can't travel to Pune, Umeed championed two innovative offshoots: **XEN UNWIRED**, a virtual workshop experience that recreates the magic online, and **XEN IN A BOX**, which brings the entire XEN LAB experience—complete with certified design thinking coaches—directly to client

locations. Because sometimes the best innovations happen when you remove barriers to participation.

## X24: The Annual Hackathon That Celebrates Creativity, Not Just Code

Every year since 2015, Umeed has orchestrated **X24**, Extentia's legendary 24-hour hackathon—a cultural phenomenon that's become synonymous with creative problem-solving and human-centric innovation. X24 isn't about grinding code in isolation; it's a carefully choreographed event that brings together cross-functional teams (developers, designers, strategists, sales specialists) to tackle real-world business challenges within a single day.

What makes X24 truly special is Umeed's insistence on making it *fun*. The hackathon includes a series of warmup mini-events: Creathons (where teams might build Rube Goldberg machines or craft 3D models with toothpicks), Walkathons, Ideathons, and even a **Legothon** challenge—a celebration of creative, tangible making that perfectly embodies the Extentia philosophy that innovation isn't sterile; it's playful, collaborative, and deeply human. Season 8 (November 2024) challenged teams to build "AI as a Human Companion" solutions, while previous seasons focused on themes like "Minds Innovate, AI Elevates" and "Adaptable. Simple. Accelerated. Platform." Teams are mentored by seasoned industry professionals (Gurus), ensuring that 24 hours of intensity translates into practical, implementable solutions.

## Beyond the Boardroom: Ventures, Mentorship, and Community

Umeed's entrepreneurial appetite extends well beyond Extentia and he has been active and partnering among others, with:

- **ExSeed**: A partnership venture supporting startups, early-stage companies, and small businesses in IT and related spaces—his personal incubator for entrepreneurs who need guidance.
- **GreenTokri**: A sustainable agriculture and food delivery enterprise producing high-quality, naturally grown salads and herbs—proving that even CEOs can get their hands dirty in different ways.

He also created Extentia's **CONNECT global internship program**, which brings students from across the world (the US, Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands, the UK, Italy, Singapore, and beyond) to Pune for 3-12 month cross-cultural work exposures. And the **MENTOR program** offers practical IT industry experience to students aligned with their academic coursework. These initiatives reflect Umeed's deep commitment to education, pedagogy, and believing that the next generation of innovators should be exposed to diverse thinking early.

Additionally, Extentia's **SAKAAR program**, established in 2001, demonstrates Umeed's commitment to corporate social responsibility through teaching initiatives at local schools, street cleaning drives, fundraisers for the physically impaired, environmental awareness campaigns, and community partnerships that involve clients and partners in social causes.

## The Person Behind the Transformation

Outside the office, Umeed is refreshingly, wonderfully *multidimensional*. He's an accomplished and award-winning dramatist with several stage performances in English and local languages to his credit—someone who understands that storytelling, empathy, and human connection are the foundations of everything worth building. He holds an engineering degree from the Pune Institute of Computer Technology and a Master's in Computer Science from Purdue University, bringing both technical rigor and creative thinking to everything he does.

He travels the world with his family, stays active in art, photography, and music, and enjoys badminton and golf. He's genuinely passionate about education and the pedagogy of learning, frequently delivering guest lectures on topics ranging from mobile technology and business strategy to entrepreneurial journeys and digital transformation. In 2010, the World Zarathusti Chamber of Commerce recognized his impact by awarding him the 'Outstanding Entrepreneur Award' for his efforts in setting up community organizations and advancing social and humanitarian causes.

## What to Expect When Umeed Takes the Stage

When Umeed takes the stage today, expect someone who bridges the gap between business rigor and creative irreverence. He's a rare leader who can articulate why customer-centric design matters *and* organize a Legothon. He designs with profound empathy, speaks with infectious enthusiasm about the potential of human-centered innovation, and reminds every audience that the best technology is invisible because it anticipates human needs before people even know they have them.

He's living proof that the most impactful leaders are those who never stop learning, creating, building, and playing—whether that's architecting enterprise transformations, performing Shakespeare, or convincing an entire organization that a 24-hour hackathon with clay and toothpicks will change how they think about problem-solving.