

THE paradox of paradoxes

Recruiting and retaining top talent in India has become increasingly difficult for corporations. This has only intensified the war for talent. This issue needs to be examined from multiple dimensions, which will break several myths and bring forth different perspectives.

BY DILEEP RANJEKAR

The term 'war for talent' sounds paradoxical in a nation of 1.25 billion people where, 'unemployment' or 'lack of opportunities for youth' is among the top three challenges.

In my career, I have experienced this paradox from the very beginning. While there were hundreds of applications from local ITIs (Industrial Training Institutes) and local employment exchanges; these were people who had the qualifications merely on paper. Despite a flood of applications, we found it tough to source a good turner, a good fitter, a good shaper or a good moulder. During my four year stint at the factory, in the late 70s, for two years we had to run a continuous process plant with half the strength of boiler attendants, statutorily needed under the Indian Boilers' Act. In such a situation, the Boiler Inspector had no alternative but to permit us to do so. We struggled to find a Factory Chief Engineer for almost four years till we decided to develop some of the younger internal talent - of course with some compromise in the quality. It was also a major struggle

to find a stenographer who was good in both language and speed.

Some 20 years later, during many of my trips to the US (1995 - 2000), I was a witness to the 'IT boom' that hit across North America. We spent significant time with some of the IT giants such as Tandem, Cisco, Sun, Intel, Microsoft and dozens of other organizations to understand how they recruited, developed and motivated people. In 1997, when McKinsey presented to a few of us, their concept of 'war for talent' at their plush office in San Francisco, we were rather impressed with their analysis.

Around the same time and even a little later (post the Y2K fever), the Indian IT sector too experienced this 'war for talent' primarily due to a huge 'demand-supply deficit' that existed. The Nineties saw unprecedented growth in the number of engineering colleges that mushroomed all over the country including in semi-urban areas. Hoards of engineers graduated from these colleges and in the peak of demand also got recruited by IT and allied organizations.

The 'war for talent' implies a

fierce competition to acquire and retain the limited talent that is available in the market. It implies a situation where there is an acute gap between supply and demand of talent. Organizations looking towards recruiting this limited supply of talent in their workforce must develop strategies that enable them to acquire a majority share of the available lot, to further the interest of their business ahead of the competition. It is an explicit acceptance that people give the ultimate edge to the business and not just financial prowess or technology or the modernity of your machinery.

On the backdrop of the unemployment scenario in our country and our failure to create adequate job opportunities, we have to examine the issue of 'war for talent' from multiple dimensions. I would put forward a few of them to help in our understanding of this paradigm. **Investment by the nation:** The first dimension is investment by the nation-through scenario mapping of the future, analysing the global development, deciding areas where we want to play a significant role at the global level and enabling through

appropriate policies and programs; and the development of talent that would meet the requirements of the future. This would also involve careful crafting and planning of growth in sectors such as, large manufacturing, medium and small manufacturing, service and hospitality, agriculture, social and development sector, etc. This necessitates enormous interactions among academicians, analysts, policy makers, planners to determine the scale of talent development in each sector.

Create a high quality education system: The second dimension involves creating the kind of 'education and vocational guidance system' that would most appropriately support the above plans for the nation.

The key question is, 'What are most organizations looking for in the talent they want to recruit?' Some of the essential competencies range from - skills and capability to perform the job, to communication and

interpersonal skills, empathy, ability to work in teams, commitment, integrity, work ethic, etc.

The larger failure of our current education system is in not being able to carry out education within the committed constitutional and policy mandate. The failure is in not achieving the curricular objectives that the nation has spelt out. The failure is in not building strong and competent institutions that have the responsibility for developing high quality teachers and in having education that is primarily a rote memory-based education that does not allow the learners to be reflective, independent thinkers with necessary life skills and affective attributes aimed at, by the curricular framework.

As a result of such an educational process, we have large number of students who have the qualifications on paper but very little understanding of the areas of academic specialization. Since the educational system does not address these issues,

despite close to 16 years of education, students lack basic communication skills, patience, humility, interpersonal skills, ability to deal with ambiguity, resilience and other attributes that are vital to work in organizations and teams.

Sparse or no vocational guidance:

The third critical element, is - very little or no vocational guidance available to the youth. There are several stereotypes (also promoted by the society) on the kind of education that students should pursue for a meaningful career. Illustratively, because of the market value and job opportunities it commands, very few people want to pursue pure sciences; for most youngsters, medicine or engineering is the stream they wish to pursue. This leads to serious and severe imbalance in the kind of talent available in the market. In many developed nations, the job of a janitor or a restaurant worker or a ticket collector or engine/tram driver is as socially acceptable as any other.



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This is one of the reasons that a brighter student in India tends to pursue engineering rather than becoming a teacher. These social hierarchies of jobs must be destroyed through competent vocational guidance and careful matching of aptitudes and chosen vocations.

Insufficient understanding and analysis by organizations: The fourth dimension is organizations' inadequate understanding and analysis of key people issues, such as, why people want to work, what they want, what would help them realize their potential and what motivates them at work. Whereas compensation is given excessive importance while designing the architecture for retaining talent, very important issues such as basic alignment with the organizational vision, independence of work, importance of one's role in deciding, impacting, influencing the organizational work, opportunity to learn and enrich oneself are neither recognized nor dealt with by majority of the organizations.

Accept the reality: The fifth dimension involves accepting the fact that the kind of talent organizations want is often unavailable in the market. Organizations have to design systematic development plan for employees, which will help build a talent pool from within. This demands commitment to invest in people with a faith that such talent would eventually become pillars of strength for the organizations, would be the culture builders for future new employees and would become home grown leaders. They are also likely to have a higher sense of credibility having grown from within the organizations and having felt the pain at each level. This process also has a potential to provide a steady stream of future leaders for the organization.

Motivate & retain: The sixth dimension is having found such talent, how do organizations motivate and retain such talent? How do they help the talent realize their potential to the fullest? This is a deeper aspect of 'war for talent' that deals with the organization's basic belief system about human beings, people, society,

people's growth, motivation, etc. It is about the organization realizing what works with people and what doesn't. It deals with the organization's understanding of the word 'talent' and its ability to externalize the same within and outside the organization. It deals with the organization's success in developing a shared vision for such talent. Pure mechanical, policy oriented and 'one size fit all' kind of working would never work. The supervisors need to develop indepth understanding of some of the youngest members of the organization, since that is where normally the highest disconnect and conflict arises, leading to indifference and inertness in a large part of junior employees in the organization. The feeling of 'nobody listens to us, leave aside accepting what we say' is detrimental to having a truly "engaged" pool of talent. Because, these are precisely the people who would provide the competitive edge to the organization, they are the people who would make it happen, they would provide that outstanding interface with the customers, they would provide that 'aha!' experience to the outside world. They need highly individualized interactions. Most members of the senior management ought to be thinking about these issues. This is one job that cannot be delegated.

To view 'war for talent' purely from the perspective of 'I need the best people and therefore I don't care what I do to get them and keep them' would be a great disservice to the concept in its entirety. Especially, when one is thinking about it from a national perspective.

India needs an overall policy to create a highly competitive edge of competitive talent in the global market since today's talent is highly mobile across geographies. Mere political boundaries do not stop them from exploring lucrative career opportunities. What is needed at this point of time is for the nation and the organizations to adopt a comprehensive approach that will help to manage the wealth of young people resources that is available in the country. HC