

Why Indian Startups Have A Tough Time Hiring Fresh Talent

ANANYA BHATTACHARYA
QUARTZ.

Employee referrals are also a safe bet. For instance, Pathik Shah, CEO of DB Digital, Dainik Bhaskar group's digital products arm, asks new hires and existing team members to refer the best people they have worked with. "That improves the chances of getting the right skill set, as well as the right mindset which will fit into your culture," he said. "One great question to ask them is, 'If you were to start your own company right now, who would you want as your co-founders?'"

India has one of the world's largest working-age population, but finding the right talent is a massive struggle. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents in a Twitter survey by Vijay Anand, CEO and founder of The Startup Centre in Chennai and known as "The Startup Guy" on the microblogging site, said they believe India has a shortage of talent to build world-class startups. Much of Anand's follower list comprises of Indian startup ecosystem players from founders to venture capitalists.

Does India have a shortage of talent to build world class startups?

If you are an entrepreneur struggling to attract the right talent, answer Yes. If you are able to find talent, answer No

"I've been noticing that whenever there are two or three fast-growing startups in the ecosystem, founders start complaining about talent drain and everyone getting sucked into it," Anand told Quartz.

To be sure, India has struggled with poor tech talent for several years now as the country's ages-old rote-learning model makes people book smart but lacks analytical and practical teachings. Less than 5% of Indian engineers can write functionally and logically correct code.

Startup seduction

While talent shortage is a problem across many industries, startups face some peculiar challenges. For one, working with a young and small company is not the oft-chosen career path. "Multinational companies have a brand value and a stable system that gives them an advantage in reach," said Kunal Patil, co-founder of WorkIndia, a geo-positioning app that helps in connecting blue- and grey-collar workers with potential employers. In addition, startups can't always offer exciting salaries.

In some cases, even geography works against startups. For instance, Akash Gehani, co-founder and chief operating officer of Instamojo, as well as Adam and Patil, struggled to find tech talent for their Mumbai-based ventures as the prime talent was concentrated in IT hub Bengaluru. Patil and Gehani both shifted base to Bengaluru and have since found it easier to hire the right talent. "Every startup [should] be in a startup ecosystem like Bengaluru, Delhi-NCR, or Hyderabad," Patil said.

If entrepreneurs can't find the right talent in India's financial capital, it's obviously a near-impossible task for startups that are based in non-metro cities. "Talent with expertise in building large scale applications is the toughest to find given that only a handful of Indian companies have seen this scale," Farooq Adam, co-founder of fashion e-commerce site Fynd. "Talent with relevant experience and from the startup ecosystem comes with a mercenary attitude - shops for offers around and is always looking for greener pastures," Farooq added.

A flawed system

Recruiting resources are few and far between still. Arpita Ganesh, co-founder and CEO of online lingerie brand But-



tercups, met her co-founder and technology head Aaditi Sinha in a chance meeting. "It is extremely rare to find brilliant Ruby coders, leave alone a female one," she told Quartz. After some convincing, Sinha moved from freelancing to a full-time role.

However, building the team thereon out was a struggle. "We usually look for referrals and our go-to was Hasgeek.com. But we still have trouble finding the right talent, no matter where we look. It's a long drawn and tedious prospect to hire great tech people," said Ganesh, who sold Buttercups to CK Textstyles to operate as an Amazon-only brand last year.

Most companies are parsing through job portals like LinkedIn, Indeed, and Angellist, among other such channels, competing to get their hands on the best talent. However, the search often draws a blank - at all experience levels.

"Most fresh graduates from engineering colleges in India are not ready to build such huge software applications," said Kashyap Matani, co-founder of Yocket, a five-year-old Mumbai-based ed-tech startup for students who aspire to study abroad. "Even among experienced developers, it's challenging to find people who have an understanding of writing software, which not only works, but is also easy to maintain, efficient, and secure."

While fresh graduates lack fundamental skills, experienced talent is not up to date with the latest know-how. This is especially an issue with more niche areas like internet-of-things, artificial intelligence, and machine learning.

The churn at some of India's most prominent startups in the last month alone is a testament. Late last year, reports said ride-hailing unicorn Ola and online classified major Quikr were reducing their headcount by over 15% and 30%, respectively. Less than two weeks into 2020, American retail giant Walmart let go of over 100 top executives in the country. At its heels, hotels group OYO has laid off 2,400 people, or 20% of its workforce, to cut down costs and streamline operations.

"Some roles at Oyo will become redundant as we further drive tech-enabled synergy, enhanced efficiency and remove duplication of effort across businesses or

geographies," founder and CEO Riteish Aggarwal wrote in an internal email.

Hiring in big numbers has clearly done little to help the industry in the face of a chronic skills deficit. But companies are finding workarounds.

Looking for jobseekers

One solution is to hack on-the-job training. "Companies can help build better talent by sponsoring short courses that help develop specific skills," said Matani. "They can also encourage their workforce to contribute more to open source projects and be more active on online technology communities. This will build a very good ecosystem."

Fynd, for instance, runs an internal programme where engineers are moved periodically across the tech stack to increase exposure. "If you were to start your own company right now, who would you want as your co-founders?"

Employee referrals are also a safe bet. For instance, Pathik Shah, CEO of DB Digital, Dainik Bhaskar group's digital products arm, asks new hires and existing team members to refer the best people they have worked with. "That improves the chances of getting the right skill set, as well as the right mindset which will fit into your culture," he said. "One great question to ask them is, 'If you were to start your own company right now, who would you want as your co-founders?'"

A handful of entrepreneurs told Quartz India that global talent can bring in diversity and fresh perspective. This is also important for startups that intend to expand to other parts of the world. For example, to be a leader in a foreign market, it can be helpful to have people who come from that culture.

However, India's size and diversity make it a unique challenge. From language and demographics to purchasing power and mobile usage, every little factor is different as you move around the country. "Global talent is great on skills but their aspirations, purpose and mission orientedness, and expectations need to match to what we are solving," said Karthik Venkateswaran, CEO and co-founder, online food and grocery marketplace Jumbotail.

Plus, the investment can be expensive

but to little avail, experts warn. If past is precedent, burnout is anyway common among the cohort that can't always make peace with the harrowing work culture, red tape, and stalled innovation in India.

Education first

While approaches vary, there is one thing that every founder agreed on: the work needs to be done bottom-up. Overcrowded and understaffed educational institutions need to be reformed, moving away from being theoretical and towards being industry-aligned. Here's some advice from half a dozen such leaders:

Divyam Goel, co-founder and CEO, AttainU: "To allow for rapid, mass acceptable innovation in the space, government should change the regulations around what is considered an AICTE [All India Council for Technical Education]-accredited degree. This has to be done carefully, keeping away players who might reduce the quality further."

Rajeev Tiwari, founder and director, STEMROBO Technologies: "At [the] school or college level, students' practical, hands-on learning should serve as a criteria for success. The need is that project-based Learning become an integral part of curriculum."

Patil, WorkIndia: "These days, we are clearly seeing internship culture in few universities which are part of the curriculum which gives very good exposure to the students. Incubation centers within colleges or universities are pushing students towards entrepreneurship."

Madhukar Kumar, chief analytics officer, Shine.com: "Educational institutes and organisations can employ leading online learning platforms that equip students and professionals with in-demand skills through curated courses and high-quality content."

Hari Krishnan Nair, co-founder, Great Learning: "This is a good time for the government to step in with learning allowances for corporates, GST rate cuts and tax benefits to encourage professionals and organizations to work towards reskilling their talent and existing skill set."

Krishna Kumar, founder and CEO, Simplilearn: "The government should look into revisiting the prevailing school curriculum and practices. Today, we see a great demand for a talent pool that can pursue part-time jobs post 12th standard. To establish this, the students require guidance in the form of career counseling in addition to at least one skill that they can put to practice in their workspace. Educational institutes need to design courses that are based on industry requirements."

Shah, DB Digital: "It's also a mindset issue. People who want to learn, will find a way to learn. People who don't, will find excuses. Any mentor in the technology industry is a tweet away. All the information you want in any stream is available at the click of a button. The internet has everything and we have the cheapest internet in the world. It's on every individual - do they want to Netflix and chill or watch viral videos on Tiktok, or do they want to learn?"

Gandhi was no connoisseur but he did appreciate some voices - Dilip Roy and MS Subbulakshmi. What moved Gandhi about bhajans generally was the lyrics and content that he often discussed at length in the meetings. The language of the bhajans was also singled out for discussion; for Gandhi, what was pleasing about the medieval bhajans was the simplicity of their message and accessibility of their linguistic expression.

For instance, he praised the Marathi bhajans of Tukaram that extolled the pure and unflinching devotion that defined the true devotee. Gandhi did not find anything sectarian about the selection of bhajans that were sung, as in his view, prayer could never be considered as belonging to any one community.

1946 and 1947 were years of tribulation for Gandhi as he battled against communal violence and attempted to quell the fires of Partition in the Punjab and Bengal. It was not surprising that these years saw Gandhi's marked appreciation for music as a source of personal solace and as an affective medium of pure devotional communication with the audience. The Ramdhun invariably set the stage for his speeches, helping to convey the transition from darkness to light and from ignorance to truth, resonating with the collective will of the people to aspire to an idealised nation, the Ramrajya of his dreams.

Gandhi wished all his followers to join in the prayer, for this alone would cleanse their hearts of animosity and prejudice. While there is no doubt that these personal efforts calmed the communal fires in Bengal's Noakhali and brought some resolution, the issue of a multi-faith prayer was not that easy to accommodate.

Gandhi's prayer meetings seem to have become noisy and dissonant in 1947, when he encountered protests from many about the inclusion of the kalma, the Muslim expression of faith, in his repertoire as well as the invocation of the Ramdhun amidst a

Can People Of Different Faiths Pray Together?

A new book on Gandhi and music has an answer

LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN | SCROLL

crowd composed of different communities.

For Gandhi, coercion of any kind was intolerable. The issues facing him were escalating violence and communal hatred, majoritarian tendencies and a resurfacing of petty issues that invoked religion to create a public disturbance. By August of the same year, when the country witnessed devastating scenes of violence and discord, he was openly critical of Hindu majoritarian tendencies.

On 19 August 1947, he expressed sadness, noting how a Muslim friend of his had said that Muslims had nothing left but subjection to the Hindu majority and may have to suffer in silence the music blaring before mosques while they were offering prayers. Gandhi hoped that whether in Pakistan or Hindustan, each majority would do whatever that was proper and in all humility.

Gandhi experimented with public prayer meetings to communicate his understanding of non-violence and tenets of public participation. The issues before Gandhi were one, interpretations of tradition and religion; two, acceptable codes of public dialogue and participation; and three, the power of prayer for persuasion. Thus, holding prayers amidst protest, the appropriateness of non-violent protest and disagreement was a running theme in his prayer speeches.

On 30 October 1947, reacting to a disturbance

caused by a gentleman who said he would not allow the prayer to proceed, Gandhi expressed his reluctance to hold the meeting, especially after the person was asked to leave by the concerted decision of the majority present. He was pained by this coercion, but equally, he could not consider abandoning the reading of the Koran or the singing of the Ramdhun, which were inseparable parts of his prayer.

Cutting short the discussion, he asked those present to think over the matter and express objections clearly. If they wanted to persist in the prayer meetings, they would have to give an undertaking that they would not be provoked to violence under any circumstance. Openly appreciating the conduct of one of the protestors who maintained codes of civility, he admitted that it was a litmus test for non-violence and that basic tenets of truth and non-violence were never easy. However, his sadness at the obstacles that India faced, making it well-nigh impossible to achieve social harmony and peace, was obvious.

The songs that were sung at his prayer meetings referred to an India that was an idealised dream and not the reality that he confronted.

On 31 October 1947, he said how, in his view, disappointing 300 people who had gathered to listen to him and pray with him for the sake of two or three detractors was also a form of violence - an admis-

sion that could be construed as his own form of majoritarianism. Where the difference lay was in cultivating the habit of non-violence and forbearance that withstood the clamour of the few to stay on the path of right action with complete non-violence.

"Let them not be angry with the persons who are protesting or say anything to them either here or outside. I shall carry on the prayer and the recitation from the Koran if you are agreeable to this. Because you are in the majority, you should not think that you can ignore the people who are protesting. If you think you can ignore them, you would be following the path of violence. We must be more concerned about the people who are in the minority."

He invoked the serenity of the morning's bhajan service rendered by Dilip Roy. 'I was pleased by his melodious voice and his art of singing. The sentiment expressed is nothing uncommon but the way it was presented is what we call art.'

For Gandhi, art was about the higher life and if it taught the principles of non-violence and accommodation, it was nothing short of deep creativity. Prayer meetings were an ideal occasion to delve deeper into the significance of texts such as the Koran and to communicate the benefits of inclusive reading and immersive listening. On 2 November 1947, he said that by reading the Koran, he was even closer to Hinduism, and that if people were not willing to listen to him, they were free to leave.

"Let them not put up with it because I am Mahatma or because I have rendered service to the country and they wish to see me. That is why I am asking if you are truly keen on having the prayer."

The only rationale for attendance was belief in the principles of truth and non-violence.

Singing Gandhi's India

Excerpted with permission from *Singing Gandhi's India: Music And Sonic Nationalism*, Lakshmi Subramanian, Roli Books