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HOW INDIA
INNOVATES



1st

NATIONWIDE
SURVEY ON
YOUTH AND
INNOVATION



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DR. SANTRUPT MISRA

Director, Group Human Resources, and CEO, Carbon Black Business, Aditya Birla Group.

India's innovation journey: from 'somehow' to 'how'

In this agenda-setting curatorial piece, Dr. Misra addresses a range of issues around Indian innovation: the themes that bind it together, the role of age in the innovation process, and the importance of a balancing act between the 'cost' and 'investment' mindsets in nurturing innovation.

Is there too much emphasis on innovation today at the cost of other organisational factors? To answer that, let's rewind into history a little. There was a phase in the life of Indian businesses when the concept of 'quality' was given disproportionate attention. Then came a time when 'supply chain excellence', 'safety', 'human resource management' or 'talent management' became the buzzwords. Today innovation has become the centrepiece of corporate strategies. And rightly so.

Of course there is nothing wrong in according disproportionate attention for a while to something that you want to embed in your DNA. Then again, [it is not right] to overemphasise anything beyond a point and neglect other factors which are critical to an organisation's onward growth trajectory. Therefore a balanced approach is always important.

For example, you cannot have innovation without human resource development. You cannot not build the skill base of your employees and expect innovation to happen just by talking about it. You have to create a culture of openness and tolerance, alternate perspectives, and only then expect innovations to happen. There has to be inventive thinking in a corporation. It extends beyond just new product lines. It entails game-changing business processes, people processes, and of course strategies. Innovation is a definitive mark of an empowered people. The organisation has to foster a culture of continuous innovation. Management has to tap the wellspring of creativity, and I think this is resident in most people.

What unites Indian innovators?

As is well known, traditionally the biggest unifier of Indian innovators has been the concept of *jugaad*. But this is changing now. *Jugaad* is the 'somehow' that I can't explain, but I can explain 'how' in real innovation. This journey between 'somehow' to 'how' is the difference between *jugaad* and real innovation.

What unifies Indian innovators today? A common thread is that they embark upon this journey under enormous resource constraints. Yet another source of inspiration is the vastness of our mass market. Thanks to this mass market today, people are looking at bringing in innovations at hitherto unthinkable price points. For example, the Aakash tablet.

A third commonality, I guess, is the dependency and collaboration with friends and colleagues rather than through formal institutions and labs. Also, I believe, a lot of innovation in India is seeded in self-fulfilment—primarily as an outlet for one's creativity rather than trying to meet a 'market demand'.

Age and innovation: balancing the conversation

Since the subject of this cover story is the relationship between age and innovation, let's look at the situation on the ground. Firstly, has there been a void when it comes to age-related research, as opposed to, say, research on gender? I don't know whether it is empirically correct to say so. I think research around age is embedded in various kinds of studies, and,

therefore, perhaps not as obvious as research on gender. For example, the attitude of the youth at the workplace, their work ethics, expectations, etc., have been very well researched. This research gets camouflaged as 'What Gen Y wants', so the age factor remains silent and doesn't stand out, but the underlying theme is age. When there is research on multigenerational diversity at the workplace, age is subtly an element of that too.

So I don't think age hasn't been researched, but gender seems more researched than age because it has been around longer as a category of discrimination. While gender is a binary element—male or female—age is not. Though it can be classified into young and old, there is no specific definition of these, so it becomes a subject of multiple classifications.

Even the concept of demographic dividend, which is well circulated these days, has remained confined to parts of the world where research has never been a strong tradition. Globally popularised, high-quality research emerging from India or other Asian economies that are said to enjoy/have enjoyed this dividend is miniscule vis-à-vis the research output of the West. Therefore, you do not find much of India-specific research on this issue.

Crossing the rubicon

In a country like India, respect for age is deeply rooted in the culture. In earlier times, a young person's opinions rarely mattered.

The flow of opinion, information, and education was one-way. But the disruption of technology coupled with other factors has turned the table. Unsurprisingly, grandchildren teach their grandparents how to use a laptop. This was unthinkable 35 years ago.

Cultural bearing and social thinking has been centred on seniority. But now the narrative and composition seems to be changing. Youth is at the focus of practically everything, from media and popular culture to innovation and entrepreneurship.

One must be careful not to overstate the case on either side of the age divide. Even with the youth taking centre stage, it is not as if there is no life after the sunrise years. As far as it relates to productivity in older people, the entire second career concept was never rooted here in India. But I think that's changing now. Rapid economic growth coupled with the shortage of experienced people to lead organisations is opening up a new vista of second career options. In these second careers, people are getting a lot more opportunities for innovation than they did say 35–40 years ago, in the prime of their youth.

It is a question of opportunities and the manner in which society accords them. India is reaching a stage where the view that your innovative capacity ends with your formal employment—your retirement—will soon get reversed. Ultimately, age is in the mind. It is the agility of the mind, the spring in your feet, the wisdom, and the value add that counts. If you don't mind, age doesn't matter!



Assessing your innovativeness

One of the questions in the survey that forms part of this cover story is "How innovative is your organisation?" How does an organisation self-assess its innovativeness?

So here we go. First, evaluate whether your people feel that you are innovative. Do you encourage and reward innovation? This is the foremost and critical level of assessment, because if your employees do not have it in their veins, you can't be innovative.

Second, carry out stringent management assessment to see if you have been able to find out-of-the-box solutions to problems in any area. So evaluate and check if you are solving persistent problems with indigenous ideas, and through experimentation.

Third, an indication of innovation is people bringing about improvement and doing things differently. How many innovative ideas are your employees sharing with you?

Fourth, how many innovations have come out of collaborative work within the different arms of the organisation? If an organisation is sensitive, it can define various indicators to assess its innovativeness. Are people motivated to do the same things slightly differently for better cycle time? By doing so, how many things that you believed were not achievable did your people demonstrate as doable? Yet another aspect to evaluate relates to achievements that your employees present in their reviews. Do they contain any process, product or breakthrough innovations, or are they just numbers? Innovation in an organisation is often work-in-progress, if you have to be at the cutting edge. Innovation means not just brilliance but being conscientious too. A whole host of factors need to be examined to assess innovativeness.

Can organisations screen candidates for innovativeness?

Yes and no. If you conduct a psychometric test, you could look at the candidate's learning orientation, comfort with ambiguity, creativity, teamwork, and collaboration. Innovation is ultimately the outcome of a number of things. While interviewing your potential employee, if you assess a range of things of which four or five are contributing factors to innovation, then that's good enough.

For example, one of the greatest sources of innovation is interdisciplinary thinking, which is applying knowledge from one discipline to another. So if one is able to learn things beyond their discipline because of one's learning orientation, curiosity, etc., then that is always a plus. Innovation calls for a learning orientation.

So if you assess this aspect, you are assessing innovation potential.

Teamwork vs. individual genius

A perennial debate when it comes to building a culture of innovation in an organisation is whether innovativeness is a function of teamwork, or it is born out of individual genius. I think there is space for both, though outstanding achievements by and large happen through teamwork. Organisations need to create an atmosphere where diversity flourishes; where both individual geniuses and people who are collaborative have space.

If you can find a sweet formula to combine the collaborative character of people with individual geniuses, that is when you can have the biggest and most sustainable innovations. But you can't rely on either/or and exclude one for the other. Therefore, management needs to resolve any situation when geniuses create destruction while working in teams, and it also must bear in mind that too much teamwork stifles individual creativity. Lone genius is fine. Sometimes even the most legendary innovator has a team working behind the scenes. I doubt if Michelangelo would have painted the entire Sistine Chapel without other artists giving him a helping hand.

Is innovation an investment, a cost, or the spontaneous outcome of organisational culture?

At Aditya Birla Group, we look at innovation through all the three lenses. Again, it is important to have balance. It is an investment, but it cannot bear fruit without the right culture. But even when you have the right kind of culture and the investment mindset, unless you keep focusing on the investment to give return, it will become a cost. There has to be an opportunity focus and a results focus.

If I put up an R&D centre, pay somebody to discover a breakthrough product, and then every two months nag them about what they have produced, that will be stupid and counterproductive.

That's where I have to bring in the investment mindset and make peace with the fact that R&D will take time to bear results. But if somebody is working on a project for the past five years and there seems to be no headway even from the beginning, then I need to examine whether that project should continue any further or be aborted.

Pragmatism is important. A balanced approach to cost orientation and a long-term view of staying with an investment and understanding it as a human process is important. Organisations need to bring balance to have sustainable innovation—though there is no magic formula to obtain this balance. Each company and each sector needs to find the formula for itself.

(As told to Tanmoy Goswami.) ★

Feedback: innowin@spentamultimedia.com