Technology-based hiring is for repetitive jobs; human judgement is must for quality hiring

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Chandrasekhar Sripada's wide experience of over three decades across economies – old and new –and across companies in the private, public and multinational sectors spans such as IBM, Capgemini, Reliance Infocomm, NIIT and Bhilai Steel Plant.

Sripada, president & global head, HR, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, talks to HRKatha about leadership styles and influence of environment; technology and its impact on the workplace; and about people practices in the pharma industry.

Having over three decades of experience across industries and sectors, what difference have you observed in leadership styles across public, private and multinational organisations? Also, please share your experience managing people across industries, such as pharma, IT, telecom, and so on.

Leadership styles differ more by leader than by context. Believing that the context is important and leaders have to bring in flexibility in their styles to suit the context is a misconception. Believing that a leader will not do something if he is in the public sector or will do it if he is in the private sector is also not true. A leader is always a leader and leadership is about setting directions, building visions, influencing people, setting the pace and taking the people ahead, and all leaders across industries do that.

How does the context influence leadership behaviour?
In the public sector, if at all context impacts leadership behaviour, it is because of excessive vigilance in the environment, which curtails the risk-taking abilities of leaders significantly. At times, while leaders in the public sector may personally possess risk-taking abilities, the work environment doesn't allow them to put those abilities to use. In the private sector, leaders are encouraged to take risks and hence, one may find that they are more aggressive risk takers. However, they may not be as process-oriented as the leaders in the public sector are.

In multinationals, because they are spread across borders, work can only happen through collaboration. Leaders are more efficient at consultation and collaboration. At the same time, in some ways, a very large global multinational and a large public-sector organisation may not be very different, as the internal workings may look similar, with slow and bureaucratic cultures. It's those private companies—the not so big ones— led largely by promoters, that tend to be very nimble, fierce and competitive. And therefore, they hire leaders who display the same characteristics.

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So, in short, leadership style depends on the leader. The context certainly influences in some ways, but the leaders who believe in their style continue to demonstrate that irrespective of the context. I have seen risk-taking leaders in the public sector and some very process-oriented leaders in the private sector, and also some individual-focussed leaders in large multinationals. They have been successful as well, but they often work against the context.

Talking of people issues—people are universally the same everywhere, across countries, cultures and companies. The human instinct is more or less similar irrespective of the location or nature of company. Everywhere people use organisations to advance their careers, to learn their profession, to improve their esteem, to earn better compensation, to find recognition and if possible, to move on in life with a sense of progression.

This is true for all countries, all populations, generations and industries. Employees work for companies to advance themselves and it is better to recognise this fact and legitimise it rather than wonder why someone seeks a promotion or why a certain high-performing millennial is so restless, and so on.

Also, attrition, which is seen as one of the biggest people concerns across organisations, is not a function of an industry but the impact of economy on that particular industry. We should see industry in the context of economy. For instance, in IT, the cycles of work are much shorter, whereas in pharma the cycles of work are much larger, as it takes 5–10 years to develop a drug. Therefore, the companies' ability to entertain a long-term issue is higher in pharma than IT companies. This is why, HR, which is a long-term matter (as one cannot develop people in a quarter), has actually found a hospitable ground in pharma companies.

As far as people and their management are concerned, barring the broad contextual differences, the HR function must continue to develop greater insights into why people do what they do and advise managers to deal with people more effectively, based on the people cohort characteristics in that context. All employees, even within a single company, are not the same. A true HR leader has the ability to segment the employees, personalise HR interventions, and custom-build solutions for them. These tasks remain static across industries for all leaders.

How was your journey working through the changes in economies, with industrial environments taking a new shape due to the advent of technology and people issues gaining more importance in the last two decades?

I started my career at the Bhilai Steel Plant. At that time it had 60,000 employees in one location, and hence, a whole township existed because of the steel plant. There were quarters, schools, parks, hospitals, and cafeterias. The asset register of the company even had an elephant which was there in the park to entertain children.

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However, a lot of people issues have now become very fashionable and attractive though India's most innovative people work happened in the 1920s, when the Tatas declared fixed working hours, and they had better working conditions than ever. In various industrial eras, the time leaders spent with people —be it at BHEL, HAL or SAIL—they have all done pioneering work in people relationships and people management. It's just that it's not as fashionable today, not because it's not correct or innovative, but because the industry has lost interest.

The reason why people issues are now appearing to be big, especially in technology companies, is simply a market function. Attracting people is a big issue as there are new skills and role requirements. However, even in the past, similar issues existed. For instance, when a new dam was to be built, people with those technical skills or simple engineers were also difficult to find. Therefore, even at that time, innovations in recruitment took place to get people with the right skills.

People issues have been constantly the same across industries, but they take different flavours and shapes depending on how the economy around an industry changes.

We are at an important juncture of workplace revolution. The way we work now has changed dramatically in the last 10–15 years. Now it is anticipated that we are at the threshold of yet another bigger change due to artificial intelligence, intelligent automation and the Internet of things (IoT). How do you perceive the workplace to be in the near future or say the next five years?

Everything that has already been predicted for the future of workplaces will come true. There will be more free agents, freelancers and organisations, as we understand today, will kind of morph into a more make-shift place. The concept of going to a particular place for work will not make much sense, with increasing urban traffic. People will prefer distributed hubs of working instead of one office. People would prefer working on a project mode and work will be sold on the Internet.

The sense of loyalty towards an organisation and many other such things will change. The future of work is certainly going to be very different from what it is today, characterised by its flexibility and impermanence. This will, in turn, require rethinking about how people are managed, and how they are led, because leading people virtually across distributed workplaces is a different ball game.

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This future workplace will also impact the manufacturing sector as even that will see huge digitisation. However, societies take time to evolve, and hence, not every company or every industry will change altogether. Companies with extreme digitisation, automation, IoT and virtual working will continue to co-exist with slow file pushing setups for a good while. Hence, it is pragmatic for mature HR leaders to understand that they still need to have the skill sets to manage multiple generations of workplaces and not just think that the whole workplace is changing.

Despite so many efforts leadership hiring is one of the biggest challenges organisations face in the current times. What does it take to create a strong leadership pipeline in an organisation? How can organisations create loyalists or employer brand ambassadors internally?

Well, it is true that many of the strategically-placed leaders and CHROs spend over 60 per cent of their time thinking about building a strong leadership pipeline. This is the biggest agenda for those at the accountable helm of HR leadership in an organisation. It is not an easy task, but there are good models. For instance, Unilever, GE, and many others, have become leadership factories as they have been taking some great initiatives for the same>

Leadership pipeline development, again, has a universal checklist, including right hiring, providing talent a higher sense of career and living up to the commitments. It takes a calibrated talent identification and development process, ability to tailor development into the famous 70-20-10 method of learning, ability of the leaders to mentor other leaders and ability to lead succession giving people a chance internally. Doing so, we may not ensure loyalists but we certainly will have brand ambassadors. People are now loyal to a profession and not a company.

In times when automation and AI are taking over a number of jobs, especially in the industrial units, what do you think leaders should do to prepare the workforces of tomorrow to imbibe the new culture where man and machines come together?

It is true that AI, augmented intelligence, and so on, are helpful in hiring, but only in the context of a repetitive job. It is common to see AI-enabled bots helping in some analysis, in the cases of mass, repetitive, commodity-like hiring.

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But if one wants to hire a scientist, who has the world's next best cure for cancer, or a vice president who will take the company on a 100 per cent business growth trajectory, some human judgement will certainly be required at the end.

While technologies, such as AI and VR create a hype for a while, we must know how to separate that from the real world. In the real world, both will exist, and mature managers who know how to use technology to their advantage will certainly take help from AI-enabled tools.

The other thing that's impacting a lot is social media and it is time to accept that 'you are no more private'. With the help of the social media, today anybody knows everything about me even before they meet me. Life in a non-private world, with everything public and real time, is a change that requires leaders to be more alert and responsible.

The Med Reps are a vital part of the workforce for any pharma company, but it seems the perceived value of the job has been deteriorating over the last few years as compared to earlier times. How do you ensure strong employee engagement at Dr. Reddy's for the remote-located MRs dispersed across fields?

The MRs are now called professional sales representatives (PSRs) at Dr Reddy's, because the term 'medical representatives' was found to be an inadequate expression for what they do. Having said that, the value of the job hasn't eroded as we still get a lot of applications for the same, but it's such

that there are many other alternative jobs available today.

The pharma job of going to doctors and influencing them, making them understand the product and helping the patient in that process, providing them access to medicines still continues to attract a lot of people. Even this job is re-inventing itself as the medical representatives of the day have replaced the portfolios of the past with ipads.

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At Dr Reddy's, we continue to invest a lot in hiring good-quality professional sales representatives, and it's a countrywide activity done throughout the year. There are meticulous selection processes and well thought out tests that have been put in place. In fact, the work has so stabilised that a lot of the next-level hiring in that community happens internally. In fact, more than 70 per cent of our requirements are met internally.

As a new development, we are consciously now trying to get more women into this profession. One of the most interesting observations we had was that since the job requires a lot of travel, with doctors making you wait for hours, it's not easy and it doesn't suit women as much. Considering that, we have tailored the job to suit women's needs —under a programme called SHE (Special Hospital Executive)—where we attach them to hospitals. These jobs are bereft of the unpredictability associated with travelling across the city.

What according to you makes a human resources professional a successful people leader? What is your advice to budding HR leaders?

A true HR professional is primarily a business person. HR is not a set of tools and programmes, or a set of best practices or about lugging people relationships. It is about understanding what the business needs to do and then finding people solutions to business problems.

Secondly, the HR profession needs to believe in itself. There's been too much of self-beating in this field. People think that they are not at the table, or not as important as others, but the profession needs serious introspection to raise its standard. Any profession is only as good as how standard the process is. People in HR need to define and agree on standards similar to how marketers look at consumer insights and how accountants look at assets and liabilities. Similarly, HR people need to change their views about how people are managed or how performance feedback should be given. Having said that, the profession must adopt certain core standards and processes, which should be consistent across companies. Last but not the least, it is crucial for budding leaders to have the ability to change, adapt and learn.