

The people factor

A FEW years ago if you'd asked senior managers what their company's most valuable assets were, chances are they would have talked about the brand, goodwill, plant and machinery and so on. But ask them this question today, and 'people' will most likely figure in the answer. And for those in the information technology (IT) industry, people are probably the most valuable asset, and their value endures, irrespective of the fortunes of the industry.

As Professor Wayne Brockbank of the Michigan Business School remarked in an interview to *Praxis*: "The human side of business is critical for success." The astute, and successful, IT companies recognise this, and hence view people as an investment and not as a cost. So, there are no pink slips or withdrawn perks when there is a business slowdown, a point reiterated by Wipro chief Azim Premji recently. Instead, what these companies do is develop a sensible and sustainable HR policy as part of the overall business plan. The more perceptive IT companies also acknowledge that HR is not just about offering staff whopping salaries and a gymnasium or a cafeteria. For them money and a comfortable work environment are a given. The challenge is to provide employees with a substantial amount of responsibility, openness and transparency, and above all an opportunity for learning, innovation and creativity.

There is also the realisation that for many of those in this industry, work is not just a task to be done, but has to have meaning and offer an avenue for learning and personal growth, in addition to being a challenge. Hence, the stress in most top-rung IT companies is on providing employees with oodles of responsibility, diverse projects to work on and, of course, opportunities to learn. Cognizant Technology Solutions, for instance, offers employees the opportunity to earn post-graduate qualifications from BITS, Pilani and the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta. The company also has an in-house academy that offers certification programmes in various technical areas, and several other knowledge sharing fora. But the most important element of Cognizant's HR policy is that the company does not have any budgetary restrictions on training.

The more enlightened IT companies are also extremely focused on creating and maintaining an environment of openness and transparency. This means clear goals and transparent appraisal procedures, with opportunities to redress grievances built into the system. This commitment to openness also means that all employees are kept well informed about developments affecting the company, its financial health, its plans and so on.

An incongruity of this industry (and one touched on in this issue of *Praxis*), and also of many other sectors, is the contradictory nature of the job profile. On the one hand team work is an essential condition for the success of this business. So people are encouraged to work in teams. Yet, from childhood, most people are taught to compete and conditioned to believe that only the most competitive person succeeds. And it is to alleviate, to an extent, this see-saw conflict between cooperation and competition that many companies organise events and programmes that build and strengthen bonds among employees. So there are cultural events, picnics and parties. For instance, Cognizant hired an entire train and took all the employees of its Chennai office on a one-day picnic to an island - renamed 'Cognizant Island' for the day - in Pondicherry.

The smarter IT companies also recognise that their employees are people with lives of their own. So there is a deliberate effort on the part of the company to take out some of the sting of modern urban life. IT companies offer employees a range of services including that of concierge companies to do all those irritating and time-consuming, but important tasks such as booking tickets and paying bills. These companies also acknowledge that many people are unable to cope with the pressures of meeting insane deadlines that are a part of this industry. This results in ill health, broken relationships and so on. Therefore, the more enlightened companies have a system of checks and balances to ensure that employees do not go round the bend.

Another feature, and perhaps the most important one, that differentiates these top-performing IT companies from the also-rans



is leadership. For these organisations not only have people with vision at the helm, but also consciously strive to nurture leaders. For them, developing leaders is not just talk, but is a deliberate commitment, a passion. And it is this passion for people that translates into people policies that recognise employees as individuals with needs and aspirations that must be met, and abilities

that need to be used if value is to be created. So, a company such as Wipro or Infosys 'goes the distance' to develop leaders.

And it is these companies that focus on the "human side of business" that have the satisfaction of knowing that though their most valuable assets walk out of the door every evening, they will walk back in the next morning. ■