

Making the most of human capital

HUL is putting customised programmes in place to upskill its staff and plug gaps

VIVEAT SUSAN PINTO

Getting admitted into an Indian Institute of Management (IIM) is far from easy for most aspirants. There are tests, group discussions and interviews to clear plus the mandatory academic qualifications and work experience that students have to flaunt to get past the admission gate.

A group of sales distributors, however, working for Hindustan Unilever (HUL), the country's largest consumer goods company got lucky recently. Their pure desire to upskill themselves not only saw them gain access to the campus at IIM-Ahmedabad, but the distributors, from different parts of the country, were given lessons on management for a good four days, thanks to a unique initiative by the company. Called "Degreed", the residential programme, designed by IIM-Ahmedabad professors and HUL managers, aimed at helping the distributors get an overview of the fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) business and how they could improve their marketing and distribution skills using technology.

At the end of their stay, participants were handed out passing-out certificates, something that most are likely to cherish through their lives. While "Degreed" helps HUL's workforce acquire crucial skills to improve productivity,

HUL has other programmes in place to help their staff plug gaps and move up the career ladder.

Some of these initiatives include offering employees "immersive experiences" with other firms such as start-ups and technology companies, exposure to new-age tech such as AI, block-chain and robotics, becoming a part of critical projects within HUL, and improving productivity with flexi hours, remote working options and flatter reporting structures.

HUL is also increasing its international exposure for employees, covering not only future leaders and managers, but also interns and junior staff. There is also greater rotation of roles and functions within the company so that employees get to know all aspects of the business quickly.

As Anuradha Razdan, executive director, human resources (HR), HUL says, the company is now taking an "individual approach" to training or "precision skilling" as she calls it, focusing on what an employee anywhere in the value chain, including at the shop floor, office or marketplace can imbibe. The company, whose FY19 employee base was close to 18,000 across 28 company-owned factories and nine offices, is also driving the message of "purpose" into its training modules to spur employee morale and motivation to do good.



A residential programme at IIM-Ahmedabad is aimed at helping HUL distributors improve their marketing and distribution skills

As a Deloitte study, which has mapped the trends in human capital for 2019, says, companies are increasingly reinventing themselves around the idea of "social enterprise" and goading their people to respect and support the environment in every possible way.

At HUL, for instance, "purpose workshops" are not uncommon, where employees are encouraged to discover how they can meaningfully contribute to sustainable living, a cause espoused globally by Unilever for close to a decade now. There is a business imperative to all this. Unilever's purpose-

led brands, for instance, grew 69 per cent faster in 2018 and delivered 75 per cent of its growth across the world, global chief executive officer Alan Jope said recently.

In India, which is amongst the largest markets in terms of volume for Unilever, purpose-led marketing acquires significance even as the firm gets future-ready. HR, says Sanjiv Mehta, chairman and managing director, HUL, has a bigger role to play today to bring about a shift in culture, mindset and leadership at a time when the FMCG market in general is getting disrupted by start-ups and rivals

who are not tied down by offices or factories. Consumers themselves are shifting loyalties easily and are hardly averse to trying out new products that offer the best price, a Nielsen study said.

Razdan says, "The focus for us is on three factors — how to unlock capacity, build capability and foster culture. All our HR plans are geared towards understanding how we can get people with purpose to thrive and how brands with purpose can grow."

HUL's attempts to recast its workplace policies around a social theme, say experts, is also geared

to draw the attention of millennials, who constitute around 40-45 per cent of its workforce, and who are no longer excited by hefty pay packages alone. The Deloitte study says that companies as well as people employed within them will have to increasingly reinvent their ability to learn and pick up from what is around them based on a social message.

"In the face of new pressures to move faster and adapt to a far more diverse workforce, 80 per cent of the people surveyed (for the study) believe they need to develop leaders differently and

GET, SET GO....

- **HUL is focusing on** individual needs as it gets future-ready
- **Acquiring digital capabilities** is a crucial part of this exercise
- **Emphasis also on purpose** or doing good
- **HR initiatives include** taking up short-term courses and training programmes, rotating jobs and functions, giving international exposure to people at all levels and flexible working hours
- **Blue-collared staff are also offered training** and re-skilling programmes at regular intervals
- **Some are also encouraged to pick up jobs** at other factories of the company to improve career prospects

that they need to rethink their workforce experiences to improve productivity," the report said.

For companies such as HUL, that have been around for over eight decades in India and are going to places for managers of the future, this translates into a massive reskilling exercise, something Mehta and Razdan say are being undertaken seriously at HUL. The reskilling exercise, says Razdan, is also tied with the broader agenda of the company to be future-ready.

More on www.business-standard.com