

Be a Builder

J. Philip*

1. Looking Forward

There is an old saying that if you want to predict what would happen in the next 10 years, look back to the 10 years gone by, and see what were the major developments that had really happened. With that in mind, we could reasonably predict what is in store for us.

2. The HN Factor:

Most of us are aware of the major technological developments that took place in the past 10-15 years. Really solid! But not in any way earth-shattering. AI, metaverse, Virtual Reality Smartphones, Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, WhatsApp and Zoom meetings have made our lives easier and richer. But none of us have been swept off our feet. I have lived through eight decades now. You also have lived through four-five decades without being swept off by any of these changes. Therefore, we don't have to imagine that the next ten years will bring in any great revolution. True 'AI' will become more pervasive, metaverse will change digital marketing, business, life, retailing, house buying, product promotion and even education. But the human brain or human nature will not be replaced by any of these.

3. Some of the Recent Changes in the HR Domain

We would notice some of the major changes that had happened in the domain of HR in India in the past ten years.

- a. IR took a back seat and virtually became non-existent in the knowledge industry. Covid-19 hastened that development.
- b. We would still remember the long marches of contract and casual labour during the Covid times. We remember the massive job losses of that time. We remember the deaths and sufferings of millions of marginalised people! In that kind of darkness, empathy and care were powerful beacons of hope and security.
- c. After lots of discussions, debates and hesitations, Four Labour Codes have been passed, but not implemented yet. They are expected to get into the statute books in the next few months and that will have some meaningful impact on HR management and particularly on the IR side. The virulent IR of the past will slowly vanish. With the IR taking a back seat and blue-collar unions becoming weaker, collectivism will be replaced by individualism. Instead of collective bargaining, it will become individual bargaining. We can see that happening all around us. Take teachers at an Engineering, Medical or Management college and they bargain individually. Even nurses and technical staff in Hospitals do the same. Advertisers, copywriters, lawyers, designers, architects and every knowledge worker is now in a situation of individual bargaining. Why, even the Zomato carrier does a little bit of the same. You will have to look at the IT industry to get the magnitude and impact of individual bargaining. And Peter Drucker is proved right in what he said - that 'the world will be dominated by the knowledge worker and the blue-collar worker will take a back seat'.
- d. And we have also seen the distinct possibility of a new kind of unionism emerging – the gig worker unionism.

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4. The Galloping Aspirations

If we take the year 1947 as the benchmark and look at the progress made during these 75 years, we would be surprised – from a per capita income of Rs.250 to Rs.1,25,000. Of course that 250 meant much more in real value – almost like Rs. 30,000 of today. And the aspirations of the common man have skyrocketed. Just to illustrate: I had a Driver in Bangalore. One of his daughters was a Doctor, and another one was a Dentist. My current Office Peon - has his daughter studying at St. John's Medical College for MBBS. Another of our Drivers got his daughter admitted to the MCA Programme of a good Engineering College. Progress, aspirations, achievement spirit, and competitiveness are all spiralling up. Implications: Growth is everywhere. Everyone looks for it and the ultimate reason is that is the basic need of all humans. Look at ourselves in the metamorphosis stages from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. We were determined to grow and be independent. And we did.

Now let us bring HR into it. What is the implication of the above on the shop floor, retail store, hotels, hospitals or offices? The message writ large is this: "I want to grow". "Please facilitate it". That is the cry. If we ignore this, it will be at our peril. Is this a key part of our HR policies and programs? If not, correct it. Obviously, this also calls for massive relearning and reskilling.

I went to CMC Vellore once and spent 2-3 days there, to understand its unique culture and the fierce loyalty of the Doctors and the other staff there. CMC perhaps has the lowest turnover of Doctors and Nurses in the country. I asked some of them what kept them so committed on to CMC. Almost universally they said, the work culture and the opportunity for professional growth.

They know that they can make huge money too, if needed – a posting in Australia, UK or US that enables some of them to make the needed money and come back to serve the mother house. And almost invariably every Doctor there enjoys an excellent professional image because of the tremendous opportunity that they get for professional growth. And they stay in spite of relatively lesser salaries. That place is also a lesson in peer learning.

If an organization is seen as a growth-providing institution, people won't leave. They will stay. There will be no exodus.

5. The Family Feeling at Tata Steel

My formative years were in Jamshedpur – at XLRI. And XLRI is a neighbour to Tata Steel. Tata Steel is omnipresent in Jamshedpur. But to the employees, it is a Father Christmas, kind-hearted, generous, smiling, fatherly and compassionate that runs through the whole organization. So no one leaves and there are no IR problems. There is a stronger feeling of sense of belonging and the permeating attitude of family feeling all across! Can we replicate it? I hear similar stories about some organizations in our areas too – a happy thing to know!

An organization in South India about which I am quite proud is Malayala Manorama, the leading Malayalam Daily. There again we don't hear about any exodus. They all stay and work extraordinarily as per Woodrow Wilson's famous saying goes 'The willing cooperation of a free people. And you should see the gung-ho there - the esprit de corps. The Chief Editor there is seen as the head of that large family. And this is going on for four generations now. That also comes out of being a member of a winning organization. That phenomenon itself is a 'morale booster'!

6. A friend in need is a friend indeed

I had the privilege of working for the Oberoi Hotels' Group as its VP-HR for over 5 years. Oberois are well known for their quality, competitiveness, professionalism and glamour. However, they can also be ruthless when it comes to performance. But there was one thing I noticed and heard often. Whenever an employee is in trouble like a heart operation, kidney failure or death – the company is there to help like a Good Samaritan. The general refrain was: If you are in a serious situation, go to the Chairman for help, you will not return empty-handed. In that way, there was considerable loyalty to the top management and the company. This also helped in staff commitment to the organisation.

I was invited to talk at the IHA Conference at ILO in 1982 and 1983. My talk was basically on Oberoi's training and development practices. I recall with great

satisfaction the way people listened to me. Most of those MNC Hotels knew Oberoi Group well as a first-rate organization in people development (growth) and quality of service (through these turned-on people). Growth is a mantra at the Oberois.

7. Equity Theory

We teach this theory as a part of motivation, knowing fully well how important it is to people. Employees compare all the time with comparable others. And at any time, one sees or feels any inequity, we would probably see the employee/executive vanishing. I know several cases, where we have paid more than what the particular executive had asked for. This happened quite a number of times at the Oberois. Even at XIME Bangalore, we had done this a few times. We paid more than what the candidate had asked for. Because he did not know our compensation situation. He asked for a salary level based on what he was getting. He must have added up some 15 or 20% to his current salary, but may still not match up to the general standards of salary at our organisation. In such situations, we don't take advantage of his ignorance. Once he finds out, he will feel cheated. This applies to almost all HR decisions. Let the value of 'equity' guide us in all our activities.

8. AI & All That

AI is going to make some substantial changes in work, organization or business management and is going to be a force in industries like garments, big retails or hospitals – but may not be that iconoclastic in manufacturing, as some people predict. Even assuming that it made some inroads into shop floors, offices and retail stores, human nature will remain the same. Read Bible, Gita or Quran. You will get an idea of human nature then and now. Eve ate the forbidden fruit because of greed. Adam's son Cain, killed his own younger brother Abel, due to jealousy and greed. The game that was played by the Grand old lady Sarah on Abraham rings out. And Moses kept talking to his people about their ingratitude. Similar stories could be seen in most scriptures.

What does it tell us? The HN factor hasn't changed! Therefore, what I am coming to is this: HN will continue to be the same even with AI and Cloud Computing around! And what is the basic craving of the HN Factor: 'to belong to, to be loved, to be

appreciated, to be recognized, to be rewarded and to grow'. In other words, Herzberg is so right even in AI situations. AI is no match to humans and AI can never deal with human needs. Only humans can deal with human needs. So, what is the message: Be human – and bring in the most powerful human trait in our operations– empathy. The hum of that one string will move every heart. That is all the more needed in this uncertain post-covid world.

9. Innovativeness

I am sorry to say that I haven't heard very much about the usage of the word 'Innovation' in the HR domain. Therefore, other functions often see HR as 'caretakers' or system maintenance wallahs. As I see it, HR is the group that can contribute far more to innovation than any other function since they are the pied pipers for good or bad.

Even when it comes to training and development within the organization, it is often the other functional areas who are the beneficiaries. But we still have something with us to take care of us as professionals; That is Self-Development. But how many of us make it a point to follow this course? How many of us systematically approach this issue and invest the required time in our own development? We should make our own development as one of our major agenda items.

We know various kinds of leadership, but the leadership that comes out of 'professional mastery' is 'real'. Therefore, keep asking yourself every three months as to what has been one's distinctive contribution this quarter? Or ask Peter Drucker, that powerful question: **Am I a caretaker or a builder?**

End note: Prof.J. Philip is the chairman of XIME-Bangalore and a former Director of IIMB.