

# WAITING FOR THE SPOTLIGHT

BY SULEKHA NAIR

When talent supply lags demand, organizations tend to lose talented employees who would rather not wait for senior and top positions to open up. There are scores of instances of such employees quitting for better positions in other firms, or to become entrepreneurs.

Mumbai-based Rahul Kulkarni, head, HR, Kale Consultants Ltd, a solutions provider for the airline industry, cites the example of an employee who was the second in command at a company and held that position for more than 15 years before he decided to quit and start his own business. The organization in which the employee had worked realized only after the exit interview that the employee had reached a level where he knew there was no growth beyond the role he had been assigned.

talent shortage  
age Survey conducted by ManpowerGroup, a US-based staffing firm, recently identified talent mismatch as the major reason for unfilled positions in organizations. In this survey over the first quarter of the year, the firm researched the views of more than 38,000 employers in 41 countries. Over a third of them said they were unable to find the talent their organizations need. They said there weren't enough candidates with the right technical expertise and employability skills. "The percentage of employers complaining of the lack of right persons for specific job roles remains relatively consistent over time among some of the world's leading economies. For instance, in Japan the proportion has remained between 76% and 81% in each of the three years (2010-2012). Increased volatility was noticed particularly in India, where the proportion increased from 16%

in 2010 to 67% in 2011; and fell to 48% in 2012. Employers cite a variety of causes ranging from undesirable geographical locations to candidates looking for more pay, lack of technical competence, and experience in general," the survey says.

Though the research indicates that a growing percentage of employers are addressing the talent shortage by promoting those who show potential to grow, are they really doing enough? How can organizations ensure that critical talent waiting in the shadows (in line for the top job) remains motivated?

The core ingredient for retaining top talent is "engagement", emphasizes Delhi-based Richard Rekhy, head, advisory services, KPMG India, providers of risk, financial and business advisory services. "Until people are emotionally engaged, and their individual success and goals aligned to the success of the organization, nothing will work.

Organizations must recognize top talent, let them know and feel that they are special regularly," he says.

Some leading organizations and consultants share strategy, motivational and energetic placebos to keep these "heir apparents" happy as they work in the shade until the spotlight turns on them.

## Why people leave

The opportunity of starting afresh at the top at another firm can be a career high. "There have been cases when employees feel that they are hitting a glass ceiling and move on—usually the smaller the size of the company they work in, the more the chances of this happening," says Gaurav Seth, country head, Hays India, a recruitment firm based in Gurgaon.

Though the reasons for leaving may seem ambiguous at the time, they become clear once the employee has quit—and are often linked to unaddressed grievances and/or lack of opportunities. "We have had instances where capable employees have left because their grievances may have been unaddressed," says Mumbai-based Ramanathan Ramanan, managing director and CEO, CMC Ltd, an IT solutions provider.

With a large number of multinational firms (MNCs) having entered the arena, talented employees in some sectors find it easy to fulfil their dreams sooner. Senior slots

open up for these "in-waiting" hopefuls and they seize the chance. "We do a lot of succession work for large telecom companies and have seen key employees going for job switches in MNCs. There are also cases where employees prefer to leave organizations and work in start-ups rather than wait for top slots to open up," says Smita Affinwalla, head, consulting, DDI India Pvt. Ltd, a Mumbai-based talent management firm.

Employees who don't have the advantage of youth prefer to move rather than wait, feels Ronesh Puri, managing director, Executive Access, a headhunting firm in New Delhi. "When an employee is aged 45 and above, he/she has limited years for growth in career and therefore makes a decision to move which could be prudent."

## Getting it right

Some organizations do have a plan to recognize and motivate talented employees who can reach top-level positions. One way is to move them to regional offices and give them a lead role there. Such employees are told that their work merits a promotion to the head office in a fixed time span, provided the company targets are met. However, be careful. Not all employees are excited to hear about these jobs, says Chennai-based Hastha Krishnan, director—executive search, Randstad India. "I know of many individuals who have approached us because they do not want to shift cities. They are unwilling to uproot themselves and their families."

Boredom takes a toll. The antidote would be job rotation, say some experts. A "variety of initiatives" is the hook that has helped a large number of employees stick with the company, feels Mumbai-based Gopinath Govindan, director—HR, CLP India Pvt. Ltd, an investor company in the Indian power sector. "This is despite the long gestation period of conventional projects," he adds. The company moves employees across verticals such as gas, coal and wind projects and horizontals such as technical, commercial and business development functions. This has enabled "unconventional growth" for a large number of employees. "Opportunities for cross-cultural interaction across our business units in the overseas markets, participation in international consortium pro-

grammes at reputed institutes like IMD, Switzerland, and being part of an expedition to Antarctica are just some of the initiatives that have helped groom future leaders and retain key talent at CLP India," says Govindan.

It works, says Mumbai-based Subramanian Suryanarayanan, national head—HR, Tata AIG General Insurance Co. Ltd. The company has centres of excellence which share best practices across geographies and companies. "Additionally, our senior and middle managers also assist in setting up best practices in other geographies while mentoring other officers in international locations." Suryanarayanan says employees then feel they are adding to the growth of the company and stay motivated.

"What matters is visibility for career growth and learning," says Kulkarni, adding: "If an organization provides that, then it can retain the talent for a longer duration.

apart from this, give challenging assignments, freedom to experiment with new things; the feeling, 'My opinion counts', good compensation and benefits on a par with peers in the industry also help."

Remember, money is not the only incentive for critical talent. It is the intangibles that hold more currency. Organizations should realize this, says Prof. Uday Salunkhe, group director, Welingkar Institute of Management Development and Research (WeSchool), Mumbai. He stresses on "Communication". "Creating 'communion' through senior leadership teaming is also an effective retention tool," he says.

Some organizations suggest that while most HR practices in India are now in line with global trends, companies should engage in competency mapping to ensure that the development needs of future leaders are taken care of. "Organizations should have an ongoing engagement with these employees while assessing their capability to take on larger roles. They should involve and rotate talent within important projects to expose them to a larger role-building exercise while gaining from their experience," adds Suryanarayanan.

"Also, we have a strong succession planning process—globally run—wherein successors are identified two-three years before key positions are given. We nurture and develop them for a takeover of the new role," says Augustine V.D. vice-president, HR, RBEI (Robert Bosch Engineering and Business Solutions Ltd), Bangalore. The result, he says, is that the percentage of critical people leaving the organization is "low".

However, not all organizations can afford to upgrade critical talent to key posts. Explains Rekhy: "As the old saying goes, 'there is only so much room at the top', so there will be instances where people may choose other career paths outside of the organization. In some senses, this may even be healthy for the organization, as some of these could otherwise become obstructive in other people's leadership paths."

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Retaining talent: Training opportunities and job rotation can keep employees motivated.

