

# **Interview with Mr Rajeev Dubey, National President, National HRD Network, India**

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## **Executive Overview**

Human Resource Development (HRD) in India has been experiencing a transformation, especially over the last decade. National HRD Network (NHRDN), India, established in 1985, has been playing a pioneering institutional role behind this transformation. The NHRDN is all about tapping unexplored human potential. Its logo represents the idea that NHRDN helps complete the missing pieces in any HR practitioner's life, be it professional or personal. The jigsaw piece in the logo represents a single individual, because it is the individual who has the power to change oneself and that only he/she can complete the circle of life. It carries the features of humanist classification, perhaps aptly reflecting the origin of the HRD function which has its roots in humanism.

As the National Apex body of human resources (HR) professionals, NHRDN is committed to promoting the HRD movement in the country and enhancing the capability of HR professionals to compete globally, thereby creating value for society. Towards this end, NHRDN is committed to the development of HR through education, training, research and experience sharing. It is an autonomous, not-for-profit, professionally managed organization, playing a catalyst role in grooming leaders for tomorrow. It has 12,500 members representing multi-nationals, public and private organizations including Government, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) spread across 30 chapters in India and serves as a reference point for HR Professionals in India.

Mr Rajeev Dubey is the current president of NHRDN. He is also the president (Group HR, Corporate Services & After-Market) and a member of the Group Executive Board of Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. He is also the chairman of the CSR Council and the Corporate Governance Cell of the Group and serves on the Boards of several Group Companies. He joined Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. in January 2004 after a career spanning 29 years in the Tata Group, where he joined in 1975 as a member of the Tata Administrative Service (TAS), the central managerial cadre

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of the Tata Group. He spent 21 years with Tata Steel, and the next seven years as managing director and CEO first of Tata Metaliks and then of Rallis India. He studied Economics at St. Stephen's College, the Delhi School of Economics followed by an MBA from the Yale School of Management, USA.

In addition to NHRDN, Rajeev is the president of the Employers' Federation of India (EFI). He is the co-chair of the National Committee on Skill Development of Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) and serves on the CII National Committee of Leadership and HR and the CII Apex Council on Affirmative Action. He is also a member of the National Executive Committee of The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). He serves on the Boards of Walchand Talent First, the Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management and Technology (LBSIMT), the School of Inspired Leadership (SOIL) and Magic Bus—an NGO that works with underprivileged youth.

In a wide-ranging interview with the author, Mr Dubey talks about the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world and the need for adaptability. Further, he explains the changing role of HRD in the context of globalization in South Asia and the specific role NHRDN is playing in India. He talks about the rising value of Human Capital Management in the country and how innovation and execution would be the key to sustainable organizational performance. He further highlights the need to incorporate human values in the organizational value framework. By quoting examples of progressive HR practices in Indian organizations, he shows how India can influence regional and global best HR practices.

**As President, National HRD Network, what is your perspective on the changing business scenario at national, regional and international level?**

The business scenario will be characterized by the following 'New Normal':

- VUCA—Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.
- Countervailing power exercised by the various stakeholders: consumers, suppliers, shareholders, employees, community and government.
- Lower rates of growth for the emerging economies, especially Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS).
- The shift of power will be more evenly distributed, with a clear trend towards the developing economies.
- Demography will play an important role.

In this overall 'New Normal', regional groupings will play an important role.

The above is becoming increasingly true at the business level for everybody, and business cycles are becoming shorter and less predictable. The time period of unchallenged success for any product, service or organization will become shorter. Also, the heady growth that we saw up to 2008–2009 will not return to India for some time.

**How does this business scenario relate to other South Asian countries?**

In my opinion, VUCA will apply equally to all countries. There could be different opportunities that come up for different countries, but regardless of what specific opportunities come up, the same VUCA conditions would apply. So everybody will have to be on their toes and be prepared for rapid and unanticipated changes. They have to keep reinventing their competitive advantages, because nothing is going to remain a competitive advantage for very long.

**Do you see more growth or stagnation? In other words, has the business scenario become more favourable or competitive?**

I see muted growth for a few years ahead. The old ‘decoupling’ theory, where it was assumed that there could be some economics that would continue to be decoupled from the global economy, will not be true for anyone for any sustained period of time. The global economy is becoming more and more interconnected and I do not think anybody will be decoupled from that. So, maybe with some time lag and in varying degree, depending on the specifics of the case, we all will tend to be affected by whatever happens elsewhere in the world. There is a shift taking place in the centres of economic power, and that would still be true in the long term. But the emerging market economies would be impacted by the ups and downs in the more advanced countries.

The neighbouring countries in Asia should seek to become part of a regional block with a graded opening up of the flow of products and services, capital, information and labour. This will give a huge boost to the economic development of all the South Asia countries.

**Given that you are looking at things at an international level and as part of the decoupled economy, how do you see the Indian economy?**

My own view is very similar to the views that are being expressed by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor (Raghuram Rajan), that as long as we get some basics correct—infrastructure, current account and budget deficits and governance—we potentially have good long-term growth prospects. But this will not come automatically; we will have to pay much more attention to the fundamentals, especially infrastructure and governance.

I see the Indian economy growing but at a slower pace for the next few years. I believe that the long-term prospects for the Indian economy are good.

**If you look back at the Indian HRM 10 years back, now, and 10 years ahead, what are the defining features that you see?**

If you were to go back 10 years from today, HR was still more in a transactional rather than a strategic mode. HR is now increasingly becoming a critical business

process and there is recognition that human capital will actually be the biggest differentiator and determinant of whether or not an organization is going to have sustained business performance. I think this trend will become even stronger, and 10 years from today human capital would be even more important as a critical strategic business process and a success factor, a vital differentiator and determinant of the firm's ability to be competitive and achieve profitable growth.

**In addition to human capital as an important differentiator for competitive advantage, what other dimensions do you see as critically important?**

A very important part of this whole game will be the innovation and risk-taking ability of the organization. In both of these HR has a very important role to play in creating a culture which fosters and encourages innovation and risk-taking, because the two are very heavily interconnected.

**It is said that the national culture plays a vital role in HRM. How has the Indian culture influenced HRD in Corporate India over the last four decades?**

I think the national culture does and should play an important role in the corporate culture, because the organization is an integral part of the country in which it operates and I think Indian culture has a lot of very strong and powerful contributions to make which will go a long way in creating a competitive India. Foremost in the Indian culture, I would like to stress two things: the role of values and respect for people and the entrepreneurial spirit.

We, in Corporate India, have been largely dominated by the thinking in the West for a long time. But now I see an awakening interest in trying to learn from our own culture, our lineage and our history. And while not for a moment am I suggesting that the West and other parts of the world do not have a lot to contribute, I think the way forward is by integrating learning and practices from the rest of the world with our own culture. It is the combination and the integration of the two that can produce something which is very powerful and vibrant. However, I think the bigger emphasis should be on our own native genius and our own culture while drawing upon good practices from the West and elsewhere.

**What do you think is the primary role of national professional bodies such as NHRDN in developing HR systems in India?**

At the risk of sounding slightly fuzzy, I would say that the overall goal should be to create an India which is globally competitive but at the same time fair and inclusive. So given this as the overarching goal, NHRDN's basic value proposition has to be to create the kind of HR capabilities that would promote competitiveness, and the culture that would promote fairness and inclusiveness. This has

to be done by creating vibrant platforms for networking, enhancing capabilities for both white and blue collar, and thought leadership. If possible, to look beyond our own self-interests and try and see if we can use our capability and our networks to contribute in some way to the society in which we operate.

**How else can we become more inclusive?**

I certainly think that our main focus would have to be the people who are working in organizations, but to the extent that we can, we should also reach out to people who are not working in the organized sector, and to society at large. It is important to remember our fundamental purpose, that is, to be strong and then use that strength to move beyond ourselves and our narrow boundaries. However, we need to guard against the danger of spreading ourselves too thin and end up doing nothing.

**What are the key HR strategies that you think will overcome the current economic challenges?**

I will go back to what I had said earlier, which is the need for innovation. At the end of the day, we need organizations that create value through innovation and innovation requires a lot of empowerment and risk-taking. It is about unleashing the potential of people and other factors that are present in any ecosystem. We need to create a culture which underpins sustained business outperformance by unleashing the human potential. In that culture, empowerment and leveraging learning from failure has to play a very important role. The culture we create should also show extreme care for all the stakeholders, which means not only employees but also customers, the overall supply chain, shareholders and society. We need to do this without sacrificing the core values of the organization. So, in a sense, HR has a triple bottom-line to address: sustained business outperformance, extreme care for stakeholders and nurturing and nourishing the core values of the organization.

**Now expanding beyond India what are the similarities and differences that you see in the HR management in the South Asian region?**

This is a slightly difficult question for me to answer as my exposure to other South Asian countries is limited. But if you look at these countries, they have very different levels of productivity. There are many economies in South Asia with low levels of productivity. Clearly we are not harnessing the potential either of people or of other factors of production. And therefore, there is a great need to improve both efficiency and effectiveness. There are some countries with much higher levels of productivity, of innovation, of rigour in execution. We need to accept that there are large differences, and simply by understanding this fact and going deep into the process of benchmarking within South Asia itself, one can learn a lot.

On the reverse side, some of the economies that are doing very well in terms of productivity and innovation need to pay greater attention to human values and respect for human beings. So, there is learning both ways.

In addition to differences in the rigour of execution and the approach to the role of values and respect for individuals, there are differences in the level of entrepreneurship, innovation and risk-taking. The similarities all lie in the importance given to personal relationships.

### **What are your views with regard to individual career management?**

Lifetime employment is a phenomenon which is being phased out in almost all the economies. The Japanese used to be the epitome of lifetime employment, but even there, lifetime association with one organization is on its way out. So, from the point of view of the individual, he/she has to be forever reinventing oneself, and be prepared not to stay on in one organization for very long periods of time. I think that is already happening. I also see a trend where more people are going to be self-employed as opposed to working for organizations.

### **This century is often referred to the Asian century. If true, what implications do you see for the International HRM?**

Well, I think for one, there will be a lot of practices that will flow from Asia to the West. The dominant HRM paradigm will no longer be the exclusive domain of the West. I think it is almost inevitable, although the pace at which the shift takes place may vary over different periods of time; but, over the long run, the shift will take place. However, we must note that power will be distributed across many more countries, including those in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

### **What are the implications of the Asian century on International HRM?**

The implications for international HRM are that the Asian countries need to very quickly come up to speed with respect to productivity, innovation, strategic long-term thinking and rigour in execution. These are things that would have to be picked up by the HR community in the Asian economy. What will happen is that a lot of practices that have to do with entrepreneurship and people would tend to flow in the opposite direction, which means they will flow from the Asian economies into the Western countries.

HR practices will need to focus on unleashing the potential of human beings and organizations, where innovation is unleashed through risk-taking and freedom from strict definition of boundaries, with the autonomy to take decisions at local levels; a recognition that *native* intelligence and practices may produce better results compared to imposing one uniform system across economies and those systems being imported only from the West. So there will be much more of fusion and integration.

**What do you think are the greatest strengths of Indian firms going global and the biggest challenge they face to internationalize their operations?**

The biggest potential advantage of Indian corporations is innovation and the biggest challenges are rigour in execution and having a strategic approach. A lot of times we tend to get highly short-term focused and transaction oriented. Finding the right balance between a short-term transaction that could be beneficial versus a longer-term strategic approach, is something that we would have to learn, along with rigour and discipline in execution. I do not think we are as process-driven as the Western firms are. But there is need for a balance. Too much process could potentially kill innovation. So we have to find the right balance, but I believe many of the Indian companies are on the *wrong* end of the spectrum, when it comes to rigour of process and execution.

**Would you like to offer any further suggestions to strengthen HR in South Asia going forward?**

There has to be a lot more of business-connect for HR people. There has been almost a separation of business and HR and I think HR people need to have a much better understanding of business and a much more seamless relationship where they interact far more closely with business and where they are treated as important contributors to the business rather than as somebody who is distinct from or standing outside the core business.

Finally, it is really important for HR to be the guardian of values. One has to be extremely mindful that in the quest for efficiency and productivity, we should not sacrifice values and human beings should not be treated as mere factors of production. So, it is very important to have the human touch and not to get lost in the wonderland of tools, techniques and jargon. In addition, HR practitioners would need to embrace the power of IT through innovation and data analytics but without dehumanizing.

