"Most People in India consider Workplace as their Second Home"

Shampi Venkatesh is the Chief People Officer at NIIT Ltd, a global leader in Skills and Talent Development. Associated with NIIT for the last 27 years, she served in various roles and took the company from a #23 ranking at Great Place to Work in 2011 to a #4 ranking in 2013. In an interview with Aamir H Kaki, she shares her valuable views on the importance of people for an organisation, how Indian workforce is different from their counterparts in other countries, NIIT's talent acquisition and retention strategies, diversity policies and more. Excerpts:

Q What's different about NIIT when it comes to human resources?

For NIIT as an organisation, NIITians always comes first. We have "NIIT has PEOPLE" as the first core value, followed by "NIIT is Quality & Value" and "NIIT is Mission." The word 'employee' is taboo in the organisation. We do not call seniors and reporting managers as 'sir' or 'madam'. This, in fact, has been the trend since NIIT's inception almost about three decades ago.

We practice a culture of coaching and on the job mentoring. For most long-serving NIITians, we are like a B-school. We firmly believe that NIIT's growth is the derivative of the growth of each NIITian.

At NIIT, we practice positive regard and care for each other. Most teams at NIIT are very closely bonded as a result of the friendly and conducive work environment that exists. We consider our leader as our role models.

Q Can you explain what "Bringing computers and people together, successfully" in NIIT is all about? What is its aim?

Since NIIT started in 1981, we have played a significant role in bridging the digital divide in India and many other countries worldwide. Innovative campaigns like World Computer Literacy Day on December 2, initiatives like Hole-in-the-

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Wall, and flagship 3-year dual certification programmes like GNIIT have played a critical role in providing IT Talent to the Indian industry. Over the last decade, we have expanded our portfolio to include Banking, Finance and Insurance programmes and working with NSDC to Skill India.

Q NIIT has a global presence. In your opinion, how different is Indian workforce from their counterparts in other countries?

India's workforce is younger compared to other countries - 75-80 percent of our people are Gen Y. We hire a lot of fresh talent from colleges for the pivotal and mass roles. There is a greater focus on training and skilling people in India. The roles are less specialised in nature and due to scale, there are more growth opportunities for people.

Onshore has more specialised and long tenure workforce which is customer facing, and most are individual contributor roles.

Most people in India consider workplace as their second home. The 'human touch' is also more prevalent in India. Employees in overseas countries especially US, UK, Canada, and Australia have a very keen eye on timeliness, process compliance and overall discipline at the workplace.

Q What are the most important talent acquisition, development and retention strategies which NIIT practices?

We have a robust selection process in place which involves psychometric profiling of individuals for the roles that they are being assessed for. More than 80 percent of the sourcing is done internally and thus there is a strong check on the quality of profiles being sent to the business. We place greater importance on attitude and experience as compared to education and skills, since the latter is something that we can always coach and mentor on. There is an active involvement from the hiring managers and every prospective

NIITian goes through at least three rounds of interviews, assessing different competencies. Besides attitude, we look for tenacity to work hard, hunger to over-achieve, inquisitiveness to ask questions and learn, and last but not the least, passion and positivity.

We drive role-based training and certification for all pivotal roles in the organisation. Our management development programmes are customised to every business unit and are drawn up after extensive training needs identification exercise. We believe in on-the-job mentoring and enable our managers to coach their teams. Domain training is typically spearheaded by the business unit and every business unit has a Learning Leader who works very closely with the Talent Development team. For identified critical trainings, we measure business impact by a unique method called the Return of Expectations. Being a technology enabled company, many of our training programmes are executed using synchronous learning technology platforms to NIITians worldwide.

Over and above the planned instructor-led training, we have a suite of eLearning content that forms part of the eAcademy which every NIITian can access 24x7 anytime anywhere.

We also have specific programmes like Trailblazers and CEO's Leadership Circle that has a host of developmental interventions organised to build the future leadership of the organisation. For the Top 50 leaders of the organisation, the founder directors, CEO and the business group heads spend considerable time in planning out individualised developmental interventions and succession plans.

In addition, we actively encourage Talent Mobility across multiple lines of business and believe that the maximum learning

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and growth is attained when NIITians are placed in new roles, in challenging situations under different business conditions.

Focus on Retention starts right from the time the offer letter to a prospective candidate is given. Every NIITian goes through a comprehensive two-day NIIT Induction called JUMPSTART that has the senior leadership addressing new joinees. This is followed by a Role Based Induction and in some cases 2-3 weeks of training known as BOOTCAMP. Keep in Touch session is conducted by Talent Acquisition to iron out any issues/concerns which the new hires are facing. New hires have an opportunity to provide feedback and improve the quality of induction through a first impression poll.

iCONNECT is a programme through which HR and senior leadership stay connected with NIITians through the year, across various structured and informal forums. Alignment to the overall vision of the company and business objectives of the year are critical for motivation and retention and this we do very well through regular town-hall sessions and innovative sharing by our corporate communications team. Every NIITian can view the goal-sheet of his reporting manager up to the next two levels online on iNIITian.

Mobility Facilitation Centre addresses the career aspiration and growth needs of the NIITians.

HATS OFF is a unique rewards and recognition programme to make appreciation a way of life at NIIT.

We actively encourage work-life balance through many innovative schemes and policies that includes Little NIITian Care Leave, Sabbatical and Take-a-Break.

Last but not the least, we believe in having fun@work so there are many stress-buster programmes that we roll out all through the year.

Q *Diversity continues to be a hot topic. Does NIIT have programmes or policies for gender diversity? If yes, what is the approach and methodology?*

NIIT has always practiced diversity so this is not a matter of concern for us. Therefore, it has never merited extra special attention. Thirty six percent of NIITians are women and they have a fairly large representation even in middle management and senior management. Therefore, we have women-friendly policies and continue to be sensitive to the needs of female NIITians. Be it work from home, special maternity leave, little NIITian care leave or a special care4women helpdesk, women NIITians have no reasons to complain.

Q *According to you, what is the mantra for a successful career: education, experience, ability to learn or ability to persevere?*

According to me, for a successful career, a candidate has the ability to learn, ability to persevere, experience and education; in that order.

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Q *In addition to the above question, what do you think is critical for success?*

Over and above all, willingness to work hard, take risks, 100 percent accountability and positive regard for fellow workers are critical for success.

At NIIT, we have defined seven winning traits of every NIITian through a crowd sourcing exercise – Ethics, Commitment to Excellence, Goal-Orientation, Ownership & Accountability, Competitiveness, Initiative and Continuously Creating Value.

Q *Finally, what are your biggest professional achievements, and what priorities have you set for the future?*

From an IT Trainer in one of the oldest NIIT Centers in Mumbai to being a Chief People Officer of the largest talent development corporation, a position reached by pure hard work and merit, is one of my biggest professional achievements. This has been made possible not only because I had role changes every 2-3 years and moved out of my comfort zone but also thanks to the trust that my founder directors and management placed on me through my 27 years at NIIT.

As Head of HR, taking NIIT from a #23 ranking at Great Place to Work in 2011 to a #4 ranking in 2013 is my biggest professional achievement.

While the various awards and recognition that I have received at NIIT keep me motivated and appreciated, there is nothing more special than the goodwill and affection that I enjoy with all NIITians.

Priorities for the future entail building a culture at the NIIT workplace that focuses on highest levels of performance, greater individual ownership, on the job coaching & mentoring and discretionary effort from every NIITian that will take NIIT to the next frontier and beyond.