



Illustration: SIOHAM

Addressing the unique talent needs of start-ups



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India's booming start-up industry is the centrepiece of many social conversations today. Entrepreneurship has emerged as the buzzword and focal point of most discussions related to the technology sector. Market research, studies by global analyst firms and the views of industry-watchers are all pointing towards a rapidly expanding start-up landscape. The horizon is ever-widening with over five new, innovative companies getting born almost every day!

While these are indeed exciting times for people with fire in their bellies and a passion to do something different, entrepreneurship is not all fun and games. On the contrary, it is a time of intense hard work, of significant struggle, swimming against the tide, and basically hanging in there. Every start-up has a story to tell, a challenge or two to talk about.

Of the several difficulties that start-ups face, perhaps the trickiest one can be finding the right talent—both at the time of start as well as subsequent expansion. As companies with shallow pockets—funding is the other looming problem—most start-ups have a hard time hiring the right people they need to get going. The technology sector, being knowledge-intensive, needs people with the right skill-sets, and unearthing those people at affordable salary points can be hard.

While theoretically there is an ocean of talent available, it seems to dry up very rapidly when the actual search begins. The best minds are usually grabbed up by bigger companies that have the means to pay them high salaries—and are perceived to be less risky. Coveted jobs clearly mean vying

for a placement in Google, Microsoft or any other prestigious name in the tech and non-tech worlds. Start-ups, however, are unable to match their hefty pay packets and juicy perks. It takes an adventurous person to bet on a start-up.

The poor start-up—with its few years in the market and low glamour quotient—is rarely ever the first choice for career seekers. Only recently has this trend changed significantly. The success achieved by start-ups is now placing them on the radars of students and professionals. Interestingly, many industry veterans, looking for excitement and a change of scene, are also turning to entrepreneurship.

The challenge, of course, doesn't end with hiring. It extends to building a team. While most large players know the ropes—they know just what kind of training to impart to new employees and how to integrate them into the company culture and ethos—start-ups have virtually no such existing systems in place. In fact, they are yet to establish their DNA and are still in the hit-and-miss phase of their organisation building. Creating a team that is

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robust, like-minded and aligned is, therefore, difficult.

With no history to go by and little experience of how to get people to work together and deliver the goods, start-ups often struggle when it comes to nurturing teams that have the edge and can become a competitive advantage.

It may sound absurd to say this, but even leadership can be a challenge. Thousands of start-ups today are about that one crucial, explosive idea. Someone has an idea, and begins to work to commercialise it and bring it to market. One only has to look around to understand this. Often these ideas are not necessarily linked to the formal education qualifications of the entrepreneur. There are enough and more tech graduates who are launching products in domains they know very little about. A B.Tech in chemical engineering from IIT Kanpur could be introducing a banking product without knowing a thing about finance, or how to integrate the offering with a credit card system. There are MBAs, with virtually no background in science, who have launched websites that analyse the genetic characteristics of individuals.

Start-ups generally do not have the luxury of implementing division of labour. That comes much later. The founding team has to be versatile—and often willing to solve problems from first principles. They have to have the tenacity to go deep into an area that requires attention, and switch with ease to something else when done.

Each team member may be required to put on more than one hat. Today every business is a digital business and, therefore, it is not surprising that this versatility is expected of the technology team also—especially those involved in software development. In many digital businesses, the product comes alive only through software. This requires a whole new breed of programmers—especially in contrast to the large armies that have been assembled by the largest of IT services companies over the past two decades.

It is with this realisation that, at NIIT, we have identified an important requirement for programmers joining start-ups. They have to be good at both—identifying problems as well as doing whatever it takes to solve them. They are not likely to get well-defined requirements from customers and business analysts. From conceptualisation to deployment and operations, they are involved in all aspects of the technology solution. A start-up really cannot afford to have any other kind of programmer—only a full-stack programmer will do.

We have launched a special training initiative called StackRoute that mitigates the workforce challenges being faced by the start-ups in the area of software development. StackRoute, I must add, is committed to building ace programmers with the required knowledge and experience to be fully productive in a start-up or product engineering environment.

Such initiatives can be the right answer to address the unique talent needs of existing businesses undergoing a digital transformation as well as those of the growing start-up sector.

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