

Special Features

Exceeding the brief

By S Meera | 15 May 2011

An intrapreneur is an ideal employee - doing not just what his role demands, but providing and implementing ideas that take an organisation to the next level

Jayant Godbole, executive vice-president - Americas, convinced Pramod Chaudhari, founder-chairman, Praj Industries (a Pune-based bioprocess and engineering company), to expand the business to South America in the year 2000. Godbole was a senior manager at that time. It was a risky proposition as the country was at the height of militancy.

But, Godbole was convinced that it was a virgin market waiting to be explored. Chaudhuri, a great believer in enterprise in his employees, approved this plan once he was convinced of the potential and Godbole has been in Latin America for the past two decades. He re-located to Colombia unmindful of the risk and has developed markets and the business of Praj in this region. Today, Praj has over 50 percent market share in Latin America (excluding Brazil).

C. Abhay, executive vice-president, Praj Industries, has been associated with the company since its inception in 1984. He handles business development and has introduced many new lines of businesses to the company including the brewery plants business in 1993, which form nearly 10-15 per cent of the current turnover. His other credits include introducing the heat exchanger line, which diversified the company into the process equipment line, an additional offering from Praj for the distillery industry. For a short while, he headed a joint venture of Praj for a new technology in cane processing. As a result, he saw rapid growth from being a manager of a product line to heading a strategic business unit, today.

These two are examples of an intrapreneurs - employees who exceed the brief in several areas and play a crucial role in improving a company's performance.

Defining intrapreneur

Intrapreneur is a combination of the terms "intra" or internal and "entrepreneurship" and means an entrepreneur within an organisation. Anand Pillai, senior vice-president and Global Head of Talent Transformation, Intrapreneurship Development & EFCS Transformation Initiatives of Noida-based information technology company, HCL Technologies, says an intrapreneur goes beyond organisational parameters, leaves no stone unturned to complete a task on hand.

The concept is not new and companies like Tata and Marico have promoted intrapreneurial traits and practices amongst employees, points out Chaudhari. "With competition surging to new heights it has become vital for organisations to develop new strategies to maintain a leadership position and remain competitive," he adds. He believes that the concept of intrapreneurship is suitable not only for corporate houses and businesses, but also for non-profit and public sector undertakings.

Creating a platform

At HCL, intrapreneurship has been encouraged and the method to recognise an intrapreneur is structured systematically. Pillai explains that the company has three portals - value portal, U&I portal and Igen portal - where employees can post ideas to specific customer related problems (value portal), respond to a CEO's post on any specific business related problem at U&I or post a fresh idea at Igen that improves the organisational process. In all three cases, a team evaluates the ideas for feasibility and business opportunities. Only when the team gives the go ahead, is the employee allowed to experiment. Till the solution is tested, the employee continues to straddle two roles, and heads a team of his choice, even drawn from different divisions. Once the proof of concept is established, it is hived off into a separate unit - depending on the need - and the employee sees a change in his role. Thus, an engineer can become a unit head, and his team could be drawn from across the organisation.

Concept in brief

Intrapreneurship is a new term coined in the Indian business world. It simply means an employee is given the freedom to play an "entrepreneurial" role in solving problems, establishing newer business units or implementing an idea that can make a difference to the company. At companies like HCL and Praj Industries, intrapreneurship is approached in a structured fashion - sophisticated tools are used to analyse ideas, senior management plays a hands-on role in developing intrapreneurs and contributions are recognised company-wide.

At Praj too, that is the case, says Chaudhari. "There is a blend of intrapreneurial approach and professional, institutionalised approach that allows the company to offer the freedom required for intrapreneurship to flourish," he says. According to him, Praj is an innovation driven company and employees are given the opportunity to showcase their talents and take risks to accomplish certain given goals. The intrapreneurs are given an award, companywide recognition and a bonus commensurate with their achievement.

Uday Godbole, director at Pune-based Abicor Binzel Production (India) Pvt. Ltd., a subsidiary of a German manufacturing company, confirms that this concept has always existed in progressive business houses. "But, it may not have carried the tag of the recently coined term intrapreneurship." At Abicor, the intrapreneurial ability of every unit head is regularly assessed by the management in Germany and each unit head is encouraged to identify persons who display intrapreneurial abilities. Every employee's performance is assessed annually and rewards are based upon the individual's contribution - irrespective of the rank.

Encouraging the intrapreneur

At HCL, an employee can aspire to take on a role in addition to his current profile. Once the proof of concept has been established, he could even switch roles completely.

Pillai himself, a few years back, has been responsible for two innovative concepts being introduced within the company. One of them, a tool for 360 degree feedback mechanism, is a collaborative developmental tool that helps an employee know how others perceive him or her. Today, his concept is patented and improves employee assessment processes and helps them recognise their strengths and weaknesses.

Employee Passion Indicative Count™ (EPIC), his other initiative, was introduced in HCL in 2009 as a self-assessment tool, facilitating each employee to identify his/her passion drivers so that they can utilize them to enhance their individual productivity and results. It helps individuals identify his or her passion and interests at the workplace. The employee will get to know the top 5 and bottom 5 passion indicators.

At Praj, employees are given the freedom to bring forth good business ideas with an assurance that, if viable, the ideas will be implemented and incorporated in the operations of the business. As a result, the company has also instituted the Maha-Intrapreneur Awards in 2009, and has continued to nominate and award companies that encourage intrapreneurship.

Abicor is one of the recipients of the Maha-Intrapreneur award for its role in encouraging intrapreneurship and the award recognised the role of Uday Godbole in solving a major problem at the company. In 2004, the company was struggling to establish correct productivity levels and despite proof of how it could be improved, the union was proving to be a roadblock. Realising the impossibility of convincing the union, Uday Godbole brought in a neutral party - Pune Divisional Productivity Council (PDPC) - to independently study and give recommendations on the same. There was little that the union could dispute after this and production levels improved by a sizable percentage.

The future

There are several challenges when an employee plays an intra-preneurial role in a company. For starters, handling two portfolios can be tough, and with the safety net of a larger organisation and a regular pay, the passion that drives an entrepreneur to stake it all may be missing. Great ideas may fizzle out because of lack of continuity.

However, novel ideas provide growth opportunities for the organisation and newer initiatives are beneficial to both if an intrapreneurial venture succeeds. In some cases, it could even mean retaining top talent in a challenging environment.

With increasing awareness that it is the people that matter and talent retention getting unprecedented attention, intrapreneurship in its current avatar, is likely to put forth a new line of champions.