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India's talent crunch

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Our industries are hobbled by a workforce that is falling short in quality and quantity

The irony is inescapable. India today has millions of job opportunities strewn all over but there is a serious shortage of talent. Employers are tearing their hair, as the educated young are actually unemployable. Many do not have even basic skills. The education system they went through was obsolete and not engineered to deal with the new economy.

Employers have scant respect for degrees and high percentages, as they no longer need youngsters who are good at learning by rote. They want talent that can innovatively think and creatively deliver. Former president APJ Abdul Kalam recently said that only 25 per cent of graduating students were employable as the rest were poor on technical knowledge, English proficiency, and the critical thinking that the IT and IT-enabled services industry wanted for the emerging Knowledge Process Outsourcing sector.

Sam Pitroda, chairman of the National Knowledge Commission says that of the 90,000 MBAs that come out every year, only around 10,000 are worth employing. Kiran Karnik, former NASSCOM president, puts the blame at the door of India's education system, saying that only 25 per cent of the country's engineering graduates deserve jobs. No wonder companies today have to invest heavily in training fresh graduates, helping them to unlearn and pick up skills. As there are dramatic changes in politics and business as well as international scenarios, there is a need to keep updating the syllabus almost every year. Manohar Chellani, Secretary General, Education Promotion Society for India, New Delhi, points out that there is tremendous scope for improving the quality of education in India, and delay in doing it will cost us heavily.

The National Knowledge Commission has said that India will have to bring in education reforms if it has to emerge as the workforce of the world. India today needs at least 1,500 universities, but has only 370. There are more than 550 million young people in need of education but do not have educational institutes to go to. India also needs around 1,500 IITs, 1,500 management institutes, and 1,500 medical schools. A million good schools are also required. All that the present education minister, Arjun Singh, has done in his tenure is to fool around with reservations and suggest that Rahul Gandhi be made prime minister.

Thought the IT industry needs 3.5 lakh engineers a year, only 1.5 lakh are available. This could lead to a shortage of over five lakh engineers in the next few years. A recent Nasscom-Crisil report says that the IT industry is expected to create about 11 million jobs by 2010. In another two years, the IT sector would need half a million professionals. Presently, it employs over 350,000 but is short of around 90,000 workers. In another year, the shortfall is expected to cross 200,000. In 2007, the job market was vibrant. 2008 promises to be better as India goes on to vitalise its various sectors, which require over 1,000 CEOs across industries.

Of the total job market of around 496 million people, 30 million are in the organised sector. Of these 30 million, nearly 24 million are blue-collar workers who are semi-skilled, such as mechanics, fitters, electricians, plumbers and other technical hands, who usually come out of industrial training institutes (ITIs). These institutes take students who have completed their tenth standard and put them through various vocational courses, in carpentry, welding, motor-winding and so on. There are 1,896 of these institutes, but most of them are in a poor shape with outdated equipment or machinery that does not work anymore. The curriculum also badly needs upgradation.

Even doctors are scarce, says a recent Planning Commission report. India needs six lakh doctors, 10 lakh nurses and two lakh dental surgeons. Health ministry estimates that India needs 21 lakh nurses if there has to be one nurse for a population of 500. But only 11 lakh are available.

Promising to grow by the day is Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), which has the potential to employ around 23 lakh in another two years. It has rapidly grown to become a \$9.5 billion industry. But again, the BPO sector has been seriously affected by the lack of trained personnel. Attrition is the order of the day as salaries sky rocket.

But in this exciting scenario, one thing is certain. If you want to be a part of the party, you have to be talented. All development is futile if India is not liberated from poverty and illiteracy. Only good education can be a catalyst for that. The education ministry badly needs some imagination.

The writer is a documentary filmmaker.

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