

# "I am an apprentice programme on steroids"

Manish Sabharwal navigates the global economy and bureaucratic hassles with equal ease. The result is India's largest private staffing company, which was started by him just five years ago

BY SHIWA NARAYAN

Thankfully, humans, unlike mathematical formulae, are complicated. The whole is not equal to the sum of the individual parts. But if one were to describe the various parts of Manish Sabharwal in five phrases or less, one would list the following: serial entrepreneur, devoted father and spouse, voracious reader, lively debater and passionate equestrian. The last is particularly obvious as we sit at the Polo Lounge at Agram Horse Riding Centre, located in the middle of a sprawling army campus in Bangalore.

Sabharwal has just finished an hour's ride and wants a fresh lime soda (he is a teetotaler). Planes fly overhead; we are near the airport. Unusually for Bangalore, the horizon is far away—beyond the army golf course, the polo ground, the military farm and high-rises in the distance.

Born in Kashmir and schooled at Mayo, Ajmer, Sabharwal started his first business while doing an MBA at Wharton School, Pennsylvania. He got his professors to evaluate his business plan and a venture capitalist to fund it. India Life, an HR business process outsourcing (BPO) firm, was born just as he graduated. He then moved back to India to deliver the baby.

Five years later, he sold his company to Hewitt Associates and moved to Singapore to be part of the bigger group. "But I didn't like working for a big company," he says. "I guess king of a small kingdom is still a king?" So, he moved to Bangalore in 2004 to start TeamLease, a temporary staffing company that now has 62,000 employees in 475 cities across India.

Temping made sense to Sabharwal for many reasons: There was no organized player doing it. The MNCs were loath to enter the field because it required untangling India's regulatory regime. But Sabharwal had experience in HR from the stint in his previous firm, India Life, and could, therefore, use the same skills and resources in his new venture. "Most importantly, temping represented the entrepreneurial triad we had identified for our next venture: fun, profitable and good for India," he says.

Since the field is relatively new in India, I assumed Sabharwal would have gotten the short end of the stick, that companies would try to bargain down his prices so that they could test-drive his employees. "Quite the opposite," says Sabharwal. Most companies pay a premium for temporary workers, given



Team player: Sabharwal is more training centre than job shop

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the "labour law cholesterol". They, after all, get to check out if an employee is suitable without getting caught in labour unions and the pressures of making someone permanent. "My public-policy spiel is that I am an apprentice programme on steroids," he says. "I say, don't view me as a job shop. View me as a training centre."

Many of their employees are first-time job seekers. They also represent women who want to work flexible hours. They have a team of 500 recruiters who use various methods to track down employees. Every candidate who comes in to their offices for an interview has to write down four other prospects and their cellphone numbers. In spite of this, TeamLease has 5,000 to 8,000 open positions that need to be filled. "In India today, unemployability is a bigger problem than unemployment," says Sabharwal.

A passionate Indophile, he engages with the system on many levels. He writes columns for business publications, mentors budding entrepreneurs and serves on the steering committee on employment for the Planning Commission's next five-year plan.

"TeamLease and this committee have given me a healthy respect for the million negotiations of democracy," he says. "The genius of India is to tune out the extreme positions, while leaving wiggle room for the satyagraha argu-

ment—I'm doing good, therefore leave me alone."

Sabharwal has little use for the passive equal-opportunity approach that the communists espouse, something that gets him into arguments every time he visits Delhi. A couple of weeks ago, a Left parliamentarian told him in a TV debate that no job is better than a temporary job. While he rolls his eyes at such sentiments, he acknowledges that his opportunity lies in India's inefficient markets. Firms like TeamLease blend Indian know-how and Western education. They are able to navigate the global economy and the quagmire of Indian bureaucracy with similar, if not equal, ease, something that an MNC would find difficult.

Best of all, they operate from a rupee-cost base. In other words, they offer the best of both worlds. "As Woody Allen said, the advantage of being bisexual is you double your chances of finding a date!" Sabharwal says. "What is happening in India is not once in a decade or once in a millennium, but once in the lifetime of a country."

Such unbridled and sometimes irrational optimism is the hallmark of entrepreneurs, of course. But weren't there any stumbling blocks, any lows? After all, if starting your own firm is easy, everyone would quit their jobs, right? And TeamLease wouldn't have any staff to staff. Instead, it is India's

largest private employer after a mere four years of existence. "We have hired somebody every 12 minutes for the last four years, weekends and nights included," he says.

Not surprisingly, the lows have to do with regulation, and the inability to get regulatory reform in spite of his weekly and monthly pilgrimages to Delhi. The other challenge is how to handle such explosive growth. "I guess you always need a few lessons in handling scale," he says.

There are many kinds of companies. Some zig and zag through the initial stages before finding their identity and place in the world. Others incubate for a while before growing gradually and painfully with much infusion from VCs and friends alike. And some, like Athena who sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus, hit the ground running. TeamLease veers towards the Athena model and, perhaps as a result, Sabharwal has to handle her teenage traumas right away.

Entrepreneurship seems to run in his family. His wife, Kavita Gupta Sabharwal, has founded Neev, a preschool and community centre with several branches across Bangalore. They have two children, Dhruv, who is five, and Noor, who is two. Both incidentally are taking riding lessons.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME:	Manish Sabharwal
BORN:	1969
EDUCATION:	Completed his MBA from Wharton School of Business, Philadelphia, in 1996
JOB PROFILE:	First job in Nagarjuna Pennar Group in Hyderabad. Started India Life, a HR BPO unit right after business school. Sold company to Hewitt Associates in 2001. Moved to Singapore as Head of Hewitt Outsourcing (Asia) for two years. Didn't enjoy working for a big company. Moved back to Bangalore. Started TeamLease in 2004.