

## *Let's get Low Context*

the **4** things that really ail Indian work culture  
& what to do about it

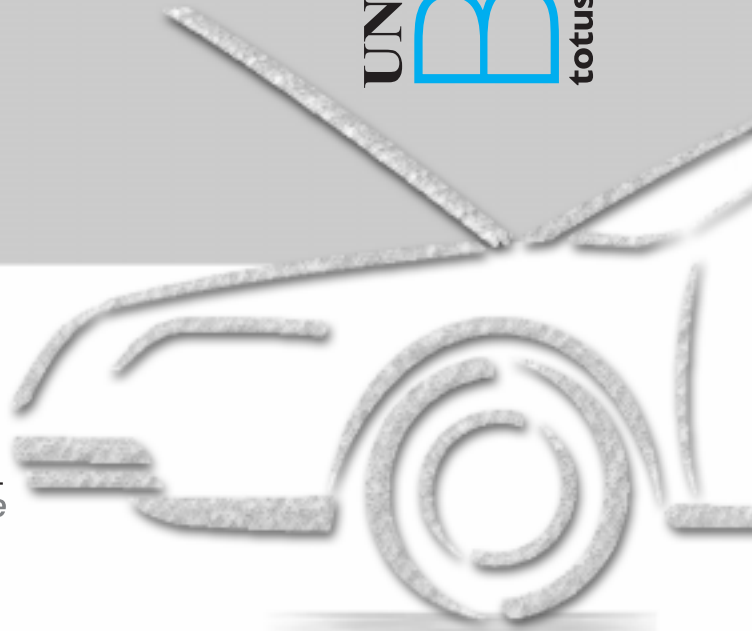
JANUARY  
2002

UNDER THE

**BONNET**

VOLUME  
ONE  
ISSUE  
TWO

**totus consulting services (p) limited**



Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake

*Verse 35, Gitanjali.*

*Rabindranath Tagore*

# Backdrop

Ask any number of global executives working in India about their experience of managing and/or working with Indian professionals. Or ask any Indian CEO the same question. They all have almost the same things to say:

While they will tell you that Indians are intellectually strong, numerically savvy, flexible & innovative, warm & friendly, quick to learn,

they will also tell you that Indians lack:

1. Pride and passion
2. Quality of execution, attention to detail and the ability to do repetitive tasks well and with consistency
3. Depth, technical expertise and specialization
4. Ownership, dependability, professional integrity and good work ethos.

What does this mean and why is it so? Do we have a problem with the Indian “attitude”, “work ethic” or “culture” or are we just ineffective, as we most often believe we are?

We have seen these questions asked many a time, but they have never been answered conclusively.

We don't see these as mere cultural or social issues that we can brush aside. We see these as the **real** Human Resource Development issues that should concern us and occupy our minds.

While the issues are seemingly deep-seated, fundamental and therefore quite complex, we have tried to create a simple model to capture them.

The model has three elements - beliefs, actions and consequences.

1. Beliefs: We see four fundamental beliefs at the root of the situation.
2. Acting out these beliefs: Educational institutions, organisations, students, parents and employees have all been playing their own roles in perpetrating these beliefs.
3. Consequences: All of these have led to the four serious consequences that all of us are witness to and have been described above.

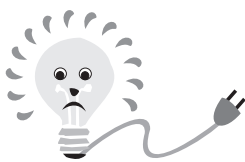
The model is explained overleaf.

# the 4 things that really ail Indian work culture

## Beliefs



**Education and educational qualifications are key and those with education know what to do**



**Educational Institutions impart job skills and therefore employees come ready to "plug & play"**



**Managers are key to the organisation**



**Ends justify means**

## How we act out these beliefs

1. Jobs are over-engineered in terms of qualifications desired – the higher the better.
2. Organisations compete on campus and drive up entry-pay and also create greed and expectations.
3. Students get coached for aptitude.
4. Organisations do not invest in job design, clarification of roles and responsibilities since "educated people know what to do".
5. Education has been converted into a profitable business opportunity.

1. Organisations do not have systems for imparting job skills on an on-going basis through technical training and coaching other than during induction.
2. Educational institutions train students for securing jobs rather than developing their "learning ability".
3. Organisations are doing away with training periods.
4. Organisations invest disproportionately on "soft skills" with the hope of improving effectiveness.

1. Managerial jobs are paid more and enjoy greater status than technical and specialist jobs.
2. Technical employees take up managerial roles despite lack of real interest, for reasons of pay and status.
3. The manager's role is loaded with unreasonable expectations of having to compensate for all the competence gaps of his team.

1. Educational institutions (Schools and Colleges) do not see a role in developing "good work ethos".
2. Organisations do not reward professional integrity.
3. Role models projected by the media do not reinforce value inculcation.
4. Families push children to internalize the value of achievement and measure it by financial success.

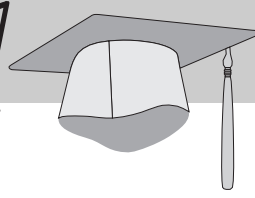
## Consequences

Lack of professional pride & passion

Lack of depth, quality of execution & attention to details

Lack of respect for and nurturing of technical and specialised expertise

Lack of professional integrity



**Education and educational qualifications are key and those with education know what to do**

While India can certainly boast of having an old and well-established system of education at the School and University levels, a rather simplistic assumption seems to exist about the role of education in building careers. Organisations seem to believe that people with good educational qualifications can perform their jobs well. The emphasis on and expectations out of educational qualifications are so high that disappointments follow for all – Organisations and employees.

## Actions

**Let us understand how this gets perpetrated.**

*1. Jobs are over-engineered in terms of qualifications desired – the higher the better.*

Organisations so often over-engineer jobs, hiring post-graduates when you actually need graduates, hiring graduates when you actually need less, hiring Engineers when you need Diploma holders and so on. Led either by availability or just poor judgment, this leads to disappointment and frustration. We have seen so many examples of Indian and Multinational companies doing this. MBAs can be seen doing clerical work or work that a graduate would do in any other part of the world.

This also drives students to run behind educational qualifications for the sake of the stamp and seal, irrespective of whether it really adds value to them or not. So much so, quite often we see people with big qualifications on paper, seeking smaller jobs quite apologetically.

*2. Organisations compete on campus and drive up entry-pay and also create greed and expectations.*

Organisations, large and small, boast of a campus-hiring program. Hiring from campus is seen as cost-effective and important for building talent. Do all Organisations need a campus program? Do Organisations need to continue the program all the time? The answer is NO. A campus program and a day-one ranking is fast becoming a matter of prestige and status. The excessive dependence on so called premier educational institutions is only ending up driving entry level pay to unrealistic levels and creating greed in the minds of all youngsters at large. Most Organisations do not have a clear role carved out for the new entrants.

### 3. *Students get coached for aptitude.*

Given what educational qualifications can fetch, students choose to pursue not what they have an aptitude for but what will fetch them a good job and pay. They seek to get coached for aptitude and quite successfully too in the short run. Real aptitude is hard to find.

### 4. *Organisations do not invest in job design, clarification of roles & responsibilities since "educated people know what to do".*

There is a serious flaw in Organisations today. Most HR Managers and Operating Managers believe that since the entrants are educated, they will figure out what they need to do. There is no serious thought to job design, no effort in understanding and defining the outcomes expected, no effort in designing the context to facilitate performance and so on. Organisations believe "things will fall in place".

### 5. *Education has been converted into a profitable business opportunity*

"The sordid spirit of success has allowed educational institutions to be annexed to the busy market where vidya is bought and sold according to the standards of worldly profit" said Rabindranath Tagore way back in 1935!

All this hype and demand has finally made education one of the most lucrative businesses of the decade. Educational institutions are now becoming media savvy and vying with one another to appear on the "best list" and sell their seats.

## Consequences

The consequences of all these actions are very evident.

Students choose professions for which they have no real aptitude. They take up jobs which they hate deep within. They seek to "innovate", "improve" and "change" when they are actually expected to first "conform". Their need to prove themselves and make a difference actually becomes such a great hindrance to quality, customer service and just plain efficiency. Peter F. Drucker had once said, "Sooner or later, all the thinking and planning has to degenerate to work". Our education unfortunately over-prepares us for the "thinking and planning" and under-prepares us for actual "work".

We therefore seldom carry the passion in what we do. While in the early days our artists, musicians, sculptors and artisans demonstrated the love and passion for their work, in the name of education we seem to have lost it all.

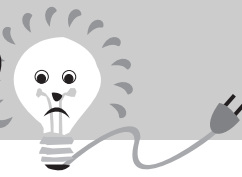
Education has also inhibited us from recognizing the dignity of work. It has created a false sense of what we do and do not consider dignity in our work. We are half hearted and we keep changing jobs, forever seeking the "dream job" that our education led us to believe did exist.

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வினைக்குரிமை நாடிய பின்றை அவனை  
அதற்குரியன் ஆகச் செயல்.

*As each man's special aptitude is known,  
Bid each man make that special work his own.*

-Thirukkural



## **Educational Institutions impart job skills & therefore employees come ready to “plug & play”**

Organisations, employers and Human Resource Managers have over the years held the seemingly lazy and maybe simplistic belief that educational institutions impart all the necessary job skills to students to come “shrink wrapped” and ready for “plug & play”.

Educational inputs in the form of basic theories, concepts and fundamentals have been thoroughly confused and mistaken for “job skills”. (Job skills are simply knowing how to do your job to standards and are not the same as understanding the theoretical constructs of your profession.) Except for a few trade and vocational courses (like Catering Technology diplomas, electrical and mechanical diplomas, and more recently the courses to prepare people for medical transcription or work as call centre agents) very few educational programs equip people with the core skills and capabilities that are essential for work performance, (not for a moment are we saying that at least the theoretical inputs are current!) Over years even students have started to believe that they are ready to perform from day one and do not need any training. The spiraling entry-level pay on campuses is not helping matters. “Having paid so much, why should I again invest in training? Why can’t he / she perform from day one?” is the question.

## **Actions**

### **Let us understand how this gets perpetrated.**

1. *Organisations do not have systems for imparting job skills on an on-going basis through technical training and coaching other than during induction.*

An induction program is quite often seen as the only obligation that HR has toward the employee’s settling down process. Most Organisations do not invest in designing learning systems that are necessary to develop the key job skills that are required to improve quality of its products and services and work efficiency.

Organisations compensate for the lack of job skills through excessive supervision. Supervisors are expected to check, review, correct, redo and even give work instructions.

Job skill training is hard to put in place since very few performance standards exist in the first place to guide employees in their work and tell them the level of competence expected. In the absence of standards even the supervisor finds it hard to coach and train the employee. Since so much is left to the supervisor, there is lack of standardisation among different employees performing the same job within the Organisation.

2. *Educational institutions train students for securing jobs rather than developing their “learning ability”.*

While educational institutions give theoretical inputs and quite often encourage learning by “rote”, very few develop the students’ ability to learn. Learning which is a function of thinking, inquisitiveness, motivation, adaptability and a value of openness is seldom encouraged. The excessive emphasis on “placement” diverts focus towards “job seeking” rather than on developing the much-needed ability to learn.

### 3. *Organisations are doing away with training periods.*

The fact that entry pay is high and Organisational pressures are increasing cannot take away the need to invest in the employee's need to receive training in job skills.

Unfortunately both Organisations and employees are in a hurry. A training period is almost an insult today. No wonder many have begun doing away with it.

### 4. *Organisations invest disproportionately on "soft skills" with the hope of improving effectiveness.*

Organisations invest disproportionate amounts of money on developing "soft skills". Why? With the fond belief that it is these soft skills that will help improve performance. There is another important reason: Human Resources Managers seldom have an in-depth understanding of the businesses they work for or its technical intricacies. Nor do their CEOs believe it is their role to do so. As a result, the only areas where they believe they can or are competent to contribute in is in the area of "soft skills".

While we are not denying the importance of soft skills, we need to look at it in its current relevant context.

Processes, discipline and standards reduce conflicts and issues at the work place. If expectations are clarified, it reduces the need for skills in interpersonal relationships, conflict management, seeking and giving information, influencing, and so on.

**In one of our consulting engagements, in the course of our initial assessment, we discovered that the error rates in the work turned out by the technical employees (due to lack of job skills) was so high that it was leading to expensive re-works, delays and customer dissatisfaction. The Training Manager on the other hand was busy conducting programs on personal effectiveness, communication and presentation skills.**

Job skills training on the other hand ensures that people understand how something needs to be done, the consequences of not doing it and the "one way in which it needs to be done". This is absolutely essential and is the foundation of a productive Organisation. Employees' confidence emanates out of his knowing his job well. This cannot be compensated by any amount of attitudinal training on "self worth"!

Job skills can unfortunately be taught only by the supervisor or job expert and not by outsiders.

Most HR Managers have failed to recognize this.

In fact, it is for this reason that Training budgets get slashed and Training Managers are constantly called upon to justify their training effectiveness. It's just too soft to stand for itself!

## Consequences

The consequences of these actions are clear – work quality is poor, does not conform to standards and excellence in execution is missing. It is for these reasons that India is not able to produce world-class products or compete globally on the strength of quality and not just price.

In the absence of a well-honed system of developing job skills, we will never be able to compete globally. While we can import technology and know-how what we need to develop is job-skills which will bring about execution excellence.

We need to urgently rediscover our craftsman roots today, for let us not forget that the craftsmen succeeded because they had a very effective method of transmitting job skills from one generation to another.





## Managers are key to the organisation

India has a preoccupation with Managerial roles. Managers are glorified, rewarded and sought after. The excessive dependence on supervision that we spoke about earlier has created a false sense of dependence on Managers. They are supposed to compensate for all the gaps of the team members and "somehow" produce results.

No wonder, good technical and specialist employees are quickly made Managers and becoming a Manager is positioned as the ultimate goal. Administrative dominance has thus been over-sold, at the cost of technical dominance. As a result we have not been able to create adequate number of experts in domain areas relevant to each Organisation. Managerial breadth has been seen as more important than technical depth.

## Actions

**Let us understand how this gets perpetrated.**

1. *Managerial jobs are paid more and enjoy greater status than technical and specialist jobs.*

Traditional approaches to job evaluation has ended up recognizing accountability dimensions to the detriment of knowledge and competence dimensions. Our nation must have lost many a good salesman and many a good engineer because we wanted to make them Managers. And we wanted to make them Managers since that was the only way to put more money in their hands. Organisations have been so oblivious and ignorant of the important role that seasoned job experts can play in coaching, training and guiding junior employees and new entrants. By making them Managers we have killed the respect of technical and specialist jobs in good measure.

2. *Technical and specialist employees take up managerial roles despite lack of real interest, for reasons of pay and status.*

How often have you heard decision makers offer growth opportunities only to employees willing to play a Managerial role. Specialists therefore end up giving up their passion for their fields and move into generalist roles for reasons of pay and status. The "Manager" tag is perhaps the most sought after tag in our country. Once again, real interest and aptitude is compromised.

3. *The manager's role is loaded with unreasonable expectations of having to compensate for all the competence gaps of his team.*

The lack of job skills training that we spoke about earlier leads to huge and unreasonable demands being placed on the Manager's role. The Manager is somehow expected to compensate for all the competence gaps in his team, without any support systems. This is the sure recipe for disaster.

## Consequences

The consequences of all these actions are that technical depth and specialization is missing in our country. It shows in our inability to design and create anything from first principles. The experts or specialists are always from outside. Maybe of Indian origin, but still trained from outside!

The lack of experts is also a great dampener for young professionals who join Organisations with the hope of learning or being challenged.



## Ends justify means

The Father of India's missile technology A.P.J. Kalam recently said " I have set out on a different mission after I encountered knowledge-hungry and agitated minds of the young, generally high school students, who are full of questions which need to be answered."

Narrating his personal experiences in his interaction with students, Mr. Kalam cited the following four instances:

"How can you dream to develop a corrupt country?" – a student in Rajkot asked him

"Who is a living role model?" – asked a student in Tripura

"When can I sing a song on India?" – a student from Pune asked him

"Why don't scientists come to teach us?" – a girl from Jharkhand asked him

"These questions clearly indicate the aspirations of the Indian people, especially the young, who have been told that India would be a developed nation by 2020. Science and technology would become irrelevant for national development, if these issues are not addressed on time" said Dr. A. P. J. Kalam.

Ends justifying means is a serious social malaise.

The biggest problem facing our youth is the lack of real role models. With the dwindling influence of the family, the increasing international influences, which are so materialistic in nature, and the growing use of "financial results" as the key parameter to evaluate success, every one is focusing on ends, no matter the means.

## Actions

Let us understand how this gets perpetrated.

1. *Educational institutions (Schools and Colleges) do not see a role in developing "good work ethos".*

Other than the tokenism of "moral studies" educational institutions are doing little about inculcating good work ethos. It is such a paradox – these institutions are focusing so much on preparing students for jobs but never seem to realise that career making is a lot more than the first job and has a lot to do with value inculcation. No one seems to tell students about good work ethos. Moulded that way for 21 years or so, it becomes an uphill task for any organisation to do anything about it, never mind the investment on "soft skills".

2. *Organisations do not reward professional integrity*

Do Organisations reward professional integrity? Do they say upfront what they expect by way of professional standards? Mostly, NO.

Pay for performance systems have reduced everything to business results. Worse still Organisations have two standards – one for themselves and another for employees. Unfortunately, professional integrity cannot be managed by quarter and needs investment over years.

Worse still, the financial pressures that Organisations bring themselves under are so huge that there is no time for looking at means and standards.

### 3. *Role models projected by the media do not reinforce value inculcation.*

Who are the role models projected by media? Obviously those who make the millions, and make it quickly. The role models are seldom those who have created new knowledge, those who have stood up for something they value and those who have achieved excellence or demonstrated passion.

### 4. *Families push children to internalize the value of achievement and measure it by financial success.*

While parental pressure is diminishing, what little exists is in the form of pressure to perform and achieve. Love is conditional. The easiest measure of success is obviously money.

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அறத்தினூங்கு ஆக்கமும் இல்லை அதனை  
மறத்தலின் ஊங்கில்லை கேடு.

*No greater gain than virtue aught can cause;  
No greater loss than life oblivious of her laws.*

*Thirukkural*

## Consequences

Lack of professional integrity ultimately impacts the society at large.

Resumés are now a work of art rather than a compilation of facts.

People leave Organisations with the same impunity with which they are asked to leave – no notice, no announcement and no communication.

Just as Organisations work to please the stock market analysts, employees work to make their bonuses – padding budgets, playing safe and fudging financial information.

Just as Organisations tend to work more for the investors than for the customers, employees also end up working more for building their personal careers than the Organisations they work for.

While Organisations are increasingly wary of paying except for results, employees are also increasingly wary of throwing their lot for their Organisations by demonstrating ownership and accountability except for huge rewards.

# Understanding the Cultural Context

So, how did these four beliefs originate?

From our Cultural Context.

The concept of "Context" was coined by Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist and author of *The Silent Language* and *The Hidden Dimension* in his pioneering work on intercultural communication.

Hall looks at Context as being either "high" or "low". He looked at "high context" cultures as those where meanings are derived and communication made, not just by the "utterances" but also by the "deeper meaning" which cannot be derived from the "utterances" alone. In a high context culture, it is important to have a contextual knowledge of that culture to understand the true meaning. On the other hand, in a Low context culture, no contextual knowledge is needed.

Hall also saw differences arising in the way time and space are managed as a result of contexting. Let us look at a few key and relevant differences:

## High Context

### Time

- o Everything has its own time
- o Time not easily scheduled
- o Needs of people interfere with keeping to time
- o What's important is that the activity gets done
- o Things rooted in the past, slow to change and stable
- o Time belongs to others and to nature

### Space

- o People stand close, share same space

### Interaction & Association

- o One talks around and embellishes the point
- o How things get done depends on one's relationship with people and attention to group process

## Low Context

### Time

- o Things are scheduled to be done at a particular time
- o One thing should be done at a time
- o What's important is that the activity should be done efficiently
- o One can make quick changes and see immediate results
- o Time can be spent, saved. One's time is one's own.

### Space

- o People are further apart, space compartmentalized and privately owned, privacy important

### Interaction & Association

- o One speaks things out exactly
- o Things get done by following procedures and attention to a goal

America would be a typical Low Context culture. What would India be? Mostly High Context, we may say.

# Understanding the Cultural Context

Our ability as Indians to handle abstractions, do many things simultaneously and focus on relationships and not regard time and structure are therefore a reflection of our cultural context. Similarly our inability to follow processes, do repetitive tasks well, pay attention to details are also related to our cultural context.

Our extraordinary tradition of architecture, textiles and our scriptures are all resulting more from our high context orientation than our low context orientation. The fact that we have no museums, little documentation or that we write very few books is ample evidence of our high context.

It must be remembered that high context cultures have some low context elements and low context cultures have some high context elements.

This explains the fact that the Japanese, despite being “high context”, have mastered many “low context” capabilities like manufacturing excellence, JIT and so on.

The globalisation of world economies is putting pressures on countries like India to acquire at least some key “Low Context” capabilities. Else, India will always have a problem with succeeding in the mass production game and Indians will always have a problem with process-driven tasks.

However, when Indians work overseas and in a Low Context culture like the United States for a long time, they get “Low Contexted” and behave differently. This explains the dichotomy.

While India may seem to have acquired a respectable stature in the global software space, it must be remembered that the primary concerns continue to be one of productivity and efficiency. Except for a handful of Organisations which have mastered the “Low Context” skills of quality and reliability, most Indian Companies have suffered set backs and trail behind countries like Israel and Ireland, much smaller in size but better in these skills.

# What is the way forward?

The tasks ahead are simple but difficult to implement. We see four sets of actions from four constituents.

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## Educational Institutions

Educational Institutions must focus on Value Inculcation, especially values relating to “good work ethos and corporate citizenship”. Educational Institutions need to focus on helping the students prepare for what they will do for at least 40 years of their lives – work! The earlier they learn the right way, the better. Undoing the damage will be a long and arduous task.

Educational Institutions must also underplay the “placement game”. Their job is to make students employable. Not get them jobs. Only the student can help himself get a job and make a career.

## Organisations

Organisations must urgently focus on building job skills. They must impart job skills including standards and the capabilities to do a job consistently well in a standardized manner, any time, anywhere.

Organisations must also stop looking at training as tokenism to demonstrate commitment to HR and measure it simply by the number of training man days spent.

HR Managers must urgently take a serious look at Job Design – the way a job is structured, the specifications that are laid out, the educational qualification benchmarks that have been set, the way the job is being priced, the way the job is placed within the organisation and so on.

These are serious issues and need urgent attention.

To do this HR Managers must go well beyond the “Resourcing Game”.

## Students & Professionals

Students and professionals too have a role to play.

Preoccupation with pay has cost them dearly. Pay as a measure of competence or success has proved to be disastrous in the last few months.

Students and professionals must learn to understand their true worth – and that is not a function of how much their last employer ended up paying. It is a function of the true value addition that they can make to any organisation they work for. If they were paid more than what they actually deserve, they need to look at it as a short-term opportunistic window. Let it not lead them into believing that they have arrived. On the other hand, if they are paid less than what they deserve, they can look at it as their window of pay increase opportunity that has not yet been exploited – for good reason.

Professionals and students must ask themselves this honest question. They certainly know the answer. Whether they want to let themselves into the secret is their choice.

## Society at Large

The media, families, friends, our politicians, the telephone linesman, the postman, the auto drivers, the policemen, the doctors, the shopkeepers, the plumbers, the priests, domestic maids, road users, our neighbours and ourselves constitute the everyday society. Each one deeply impacts the other’s lives, attitudes, beliefs and actions. Let us be honest, considerate and respectful in all that we do and say.

Let's get Low Context!

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We would like to gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Edward Hall for presenting what we believe is by far, the most simple and yet powerful way of looking at culture. The title of this article is inspired by his work.

## Feedback on the first issue of Under the Bonnet – “Combatting Layoffs”

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“Great effort! - The topic is current and the contents thought-provoking.”

*Captain Raghuram, Head HR - RPG Cellular*

“Very timely, very thoughtful and good ideas and suggestions.”

*P S Srinivasan, Skills & Learning Executive - AP Human Resources, IBM*

“Thank you for “Under the Bonnet”. I find that your organization stands for values and innovation.”

*Prof. R. Natarajan, Chairman -AICTE*

“The choice of subject is topical and comes at a time when most organizations ... The multiple view are coming to terms with reality, the multiple conceptual framework, the multiple points, the issues of concern, have all been presented in a very simple and lucid style.”

*Shrinivasa Sasri, GM HR - Covansys*

## About totus consulting

totus consulting was founded by Ganesh Chella on June 11, 2000 with the objective of providing strategic and operational HR solutions to 'human capital intensive' startups and small & medium sized organisations, which need these inputs but cannot afford to engage full-time top quality HR talent. Through end-to-end and short-term engagements, totus builds the necessary HR systems and processes and develops internal HR capacity.

The model met with instant acceptance due to its uniqueness, sharp focus on implementation and the appropriateness of its offerings to its target segment.

totus has worked on diverse engagements covering a wide spectrum of Human Resources and Service Quality Initiatives. Our clients include

Altium Technologies	Qwiky's Coffee Pubs
CETEX Petrochemicals	Real Image Media Technologies
Club Mahindra	RPG Cellular Services
DHL Worldwide Express	RPG Retail
Dragoco India Limited	Sakthi Finance
Elite Group of Companies	Stahl India Limited
Fourth Dimension Technologies	Tanishq – Titan Industries
HLL	Taylor Rubber Industries
Kumaran Systems	Thinksoft Global Services
Prasad Productions Limited	Viveks Limited

totus is committed to *thought leadership* and adding to the *knowledge about people* through research and publications, especially focused on understanding issues that really impact human resources in the Indian cultural context.

For more details – visit us at: [www.totusconsulting.com](http://www.totusconsulting.com)  
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