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Aircel: What The Future Holds

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Here's a detailed account of how brand Aircel evolved over years and the various initiatives it took to retain the talent pool in the present competitive landscape.

Sandeep Gandhi, Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), Aircel Limited

People are the biggest asset of any organization. While it may sound clichéd, intense competition and rapid globalization have made it impossible for any organization to ignore its importance.

Not only are competitive remuneration and timely reviews critical for the growth of employees of any organization, today's HR (human resource) heads also need to manage their talents effectively, to ensure that their in-house creativity can bring tangible results.

Having good HR policies and practices is far more important in a sector like telecom which is rapidly evolving and requires quality people to drive the company's growth.

In an exclusive interaction with *Light Reading India*, Sandeep Gandhi, Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), Aircel Ltd. , discusses the key HR challenges faced by the company, the role of HR in a changing business environment, and the inhouse initiatives taken by the company to engage the staff.

Here are the excerpts of the interview:

Light Reading India: What are biggest HR issues faced by Aircel?

Sandeep Gandhi: The telecom industry faces daunting challenges in hiring and retaining credible and stable talent.

Retention of key talent brings stiff challenge for the talent engagement professionals as newer entrants [organizations] in the arena have somewhat led to people changing jobs frequently. Though at Aircel, we have been instrumental in retaining talent by innovative critical retention plans which are backed by a transparent performance measurement system and an embedded culture that transpires a desire in the employees to excel and experiment.

Light Reading India: How do you think is HR evolving in the today's dynamic and global economy?

Sandeep Gandhi: Today, human resource management has evolved as a critical differentiator in an increasingly competitive market. It is an essential part in the strategic positioning of an organization and is now inseparable from key organizational goals. The traditional approach of HR cannot survive in today's dynamic and global economy hence the role of HR has moved beyond attract, train and retain. Contemporary organizations demand an enhanced participation from the HR department. The success or failure of any organization depends largely on how aggressively the HR function can maintain and improve the human capital base and the knowledge thereof.

An alignment of HR strategies to the organization's priorities or business strategies contributes significantly to an organization's health, productivity and capacity to innovate; it is systematically linked to the strategic needs of the organization and aims to improve the effective and productive contributions of individuals that consequently maximize business results.

Light Reading India: What role is HR playing as a business partner? How has this changed over years?

Sandeep Gandhi: HR business partners are strategic advisors to the management of an organization and thus act as a catalyst for continued business performance. HR partners with business leaders in solving the organization's business challenges and deliver business outcomes. The prime focus of HR business partners is to understand the business and deliver according to the needs by ensuring that HR strategies and plans are translated into concrete actions and tangible results. Effective talent management, that is attracting, developing, engaging and retaining talent, has a direct impact on business performance.

Light Reading India: How do you keep the staff engaged when so many opportunities exist in the market?

Sandeep Gandhi: Aircel deciphers employee engagement as an element of employees connecting with the organization with their head and heart. Programs like job rotation, cross-functional teams, ideation groups and various other learning and individual professional development opportunities serve as support for intellectual engagements of employees and help them connect with the organization. Employee benefits, work-life balance, open-door policy, etc, are some more motivators for the employees at Aircel. The organizational culture adds to the overall optimistic attitude within employees.

Light Reading India: What qualities you look for while hiring?

Sandeep Gandhi: At Aircel, talent acquisition is an area of heightened focus. We need to ensure that new incumbents have not only the requisite skills and competencies but also the will to learn and adapt to the Aircel culture. We expect people to thrive on ownership and team-work in an environment where people are not micromanaged.

This upstream challenge of finding right talent is mitigated by our elaborate process of talent acquisition where we adopt various methodologies to select and shortlist candidates on an ongoing basis.

Light Reading India: Which initiatives are you really proud of and believe that they differentiate Aircel from the other telecom companies?

Sandeep Gandhi: Our learning initiatives set us apart from the other telecom companies. The Aircel Academy's vision and mission manifest itself in the company's logo, the learning-wishing tree, wherein learning is meant to be both an inward and outward journey. Just like a tree must have deep roots to enable it to touch the sky, so must learning enable an *Aircelite* to dig deep within to improve skills and branch outwards to utilize the skills in attaining higher benchmarks towards self and organizational development.

The Aircel Academy comprises the following:

- Professional Support Services College
- Sales, Distribution College & Marketing
- Technology College
- Service Management College & Retail
- Leadership College

The Academy acts as a hub and the colleges in conjugation with the circles act as the spokes towards the learning process. The Aircel Academy presents a state-of-the-art learning facility spanning over 22,000-plus square feet of area. The Academy's infrastructure has six training rooms apart from the other circle offices which are equipped with a projector, a screen, audio/video amplifiers and mixers, and a central console to control all these.

Light Reading India: What are the initiatives taken by Aircel for leadership development?

Sandeep Gandhi: We have partnered with the best-in-class for leadership development. Internationally, we have partnered with Harvard, Duke Corporate Education, Richard Ivey School of Business, and Stanford; and nationally with IIM Ahmedabad and XLRI among others. Leadership programs are intertwined with the employees' career program. We have different programs at different levels, starting with the Emerging Leader program for management trainees going up till Executive Coaching which is for the senior leadership team.

Aircel's entry at the national level recently was accompanied by a blitzkrieg of advertisements in all the [promotional] mediums. It was one of the first pan-India telecom operator to focus on the youth segment. The company rightly believed that youth will be the driver of data usage. Earlier on, Aircel signed on the captain of the Indian cricket team MS Dhoni as its brand ambassador. Besides, the company used other cricketers as well in its campaigns, thanks to the good connect between cricket and youth.

Today, Aircel engages with other celebrities like Mary Kom, the women's boxing champion; Dhanush, the popular Telugu film star; and Sameera Reddy, the Bollywood actor.

Aircel is also known for taking up the cause of the reduction in the number of tigers with its 'Save the Tiger' Campaign. Though any direct benefit of this campaign is difficult to point out, it goes without saying that the campaign played an important role in increasing the brand recall.

Light Reading India spoke to the company's brand head, Pritpal Singh Lakkha, to trace the brand journey of the company:

Light Reading India: While you had MS Dhoni as your brand ambassador earlier, why haven't you got anyone now?

Pritpal Singh Lakkha: Our association with MS Dhoni has been ongoing. There was a requirement to create a strong foothold in the markets amidst the incumbents and his brand image was the best fit for what we as a brand wanted to communicate. Today we have started associating with various celebrities from different genres like sports and films to reach out to our target audience which is primarily youth. We are working with Suriya, the renowned South Indian star for our new proposition 'Limitless.' We are also engaging with celebrities like Mary Kom, Dhanush, Sameera Reddy for the 'Celebrity Chat' series organized by Aircel. Recently, we collaborated with the upcoming 'Student of the Year' movie to launch a 'Buddy of the Year' contest wherein Aircel subscribers could win a chance to meet the stars of the movie.

Light Reading India: How difficult is to address various other segments like enterprises under one brand umbrella?

Pritpal Singh Lakkha: It is not difficult. There are various services that cater to the needs of different segments. We are clearly focused on who we reach out to and how the brand speaks in that relevant and engaging tone and manner.

Light Reading India: What are the challenges of addressing youth in your brand campaigns? Do you think it might alienate you from the rural or value-for-money consumer as they might not be able to relate to the new image of the brand?

Pritpal Singh Lakkha: Today, youth comprises 51 percent of the Indian population and a large percentage of them are using the mobile which then becomes a very powerful medium to interact, engage, entertain and connect. Moreover, youth between 20 to 26 years of age constitute over 80 percent of the mobile Internet users and initiatives taken to address the youth patterns are the need of the hour. Therefore, Aircel is continuously building brand affinity among the youth. Also, when we speak of youth, we mean [both] urban and rural.

We have a strong brand equity and significant presence in rural areas, and have thus acquired a leadership position in Tamil Nadu, Assam, and the north-eastern region by offering affordable mobile services. We have always maintained local connect with our products and offerings.

Light Reading India: How is the brand likely to evolve in the coming two-to-three years?

Pritpal Singh Lakkha: The telecom market is witnessing a paradigm shift from traditional voice-based or messaging-based services to value-added services over data. Aircel has worked to completely revamp its VAS offerings and offer customized, affordable and innovative data services to its subscribers and has positioned itself as a 'data' company. As part of our prolonged data strategy, Aircel became the first operator to price its 3G services at 2G prices. Considering today's youth's requirement of staying connected with their loved ones all the time, we have devised the new 'Limitless' proposition. In years to come, Aircel will continue its focus as a 'new-age' brand, targeting youth by empowering them to stay connected with their friends anytime, anywhere.

— Team India, *Light Reading India*