Shrikanth G
shrikanthg@cybermedia.co.in

—**SATISH JEYARAMAN**
Vice President,
Human Resources, Cognizant

In India, too much emphasis has been given to engineering streams, today's business problems need more than just engineers says Satish Jeyaraman, Vice President, Human Resources, Cognizant. In an exclusive interview with Dataquest, he shares his insights on the ICT skills required for this day and age. Excerpts:

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TODAY, COMPANIES EXPECT NICHE SKILLS AND PROFICIENCY IN DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FROM STUDENTS

If you look at the ICT skills landscape, what according to you are the 2 challenges the industry is facing now?

The first big challenge is this: In this age of near constant technology adoption and disruption, we do not have enough technology talent globally.

The speed of disruption is compounding the problem. In the last five decades, every big technology disruption — mainframe, client server or the Internet — was followed by a long period of stability. This gave companies and the academia enough time to adjust to the changes. But now, we are seeing an unprecedented confluence of multiple disruptive technologies such as automation, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things, augmented reality and virtual reality, big data and analytics, cloud, and Blockchain. There is going to be no in-between lull and times of stability. This makes education and skilling, both within companies and in the academia, even more challenging.

Secondly, in India, too much emphasis has been given to engineering streams; today's business problems need more than just engineers. We are also grappling with a real dearth of humanities talent – commerce, languages, arts and sciences, data scientists, behaviour analysts, psychologists and so on.

The Digital Disruption coupled with automation has completely changed the nature of tech skills required for today's ICT jobs – as an organisation how are you coping with sourcing the right skills?

Today, companies expect niche skills and proficiency in digital technologies from students. They should be able to go beyond just acquiring theoretical knowledge and have the know-how on practical application of the theory. A keen understanding of new technologies would be important. Companies would also want candidates who are job-ready and who do not need much training time before they are deployed in projects. Mass recruitment will be replaced by niche-skill recruitment.

In B-schools too, different models are emerging. Consulting earlier was about a problem statement and architecting a solution for that. In the digital era, consulting is about an opportunity that no one has thought of before. That is the sort of consultant companies would be looking for.

We believe in both hiring for the need and continued reskilling to bridge the gap. Upskilling our existing workforce with digital skills is crucial in today's dynamic business environment. At Cognizant, we have focused on 'skilling at scale' and have upskilled over 1 lakh of our employees last year while investing millions of dollars in helping them deepen their domain and business knowledge and acquire digital knowledge. To accelerate this skilling movement, our centre of learning, Cognizant Academy has designed multiple learning interventions and programs to accommodate diverse learning styles and cultures of our multi-generational global population. We

offer our employees learning content in various formats – hands-on labs, gamification, mixed reality, video-based learning and micro-learning delivered in small nuggets, and always-on access through mobile platforms.

What are your top 2 priorities for your HR organisation the ongoing year and what makes your company an employer of choice of ICT job aspirants?

Cognizant offers a work culture that stimulates sharing, aligns individual aspirations with that of the organization, rewards performance and is committed to individual development and all these have contributed significantly to our being an Employer of choice. Our associates exemplify Cognizant's culture of excellence, performance, and client focus—a fact that is reflected in our strong customer satisfaction ratings.

Despite our size, Cognizant behaves like a startup – entrepreneurial, nimble, collaborative, and agile. Our model is built to ensure that our associates are empowered to take charge of a part of the business, act like mini-CEOs with a customer focus, and think about innovating to achieve that goal.

We have always had a culture of empowerment, of giving people the kind of guidelines of how we want them to behave, what we want to achieve, but letting them do what they have to do and they understood.

This combination of a strong foundational cultural value system and empowerment is very unique to Cognizant. It is this combination that has helped nurture and incubate entrepreneurial ventures that our employees have ideated.

Some of our most successful service lines, platforms and product suites are a result of this empowerment at work.

On the HR Priorities for the current year

Our HR mandate focuses on two objectives: skilling and creating a wholesome employee experience. As mentioned earlier, we have focused on 'skilling at scale' and have upskilled over 1 lakh of our employees last year while investing millions of dollars in helping them deepen their domain and business knowledge and acquire digital knowledge.

The second important HR objective is to ensure that as an organization, we create the very best employee experience for the organization. We are soon going to complete 25 years of operations and we have a unique multi-generational of employees working with us. This brings the role of Human Resources into sharp focus as we try to adapt the shifts in workplace dynamics and maximize the benefits of this generational convergence. With a rise in the number of millennials stepping into manager and leadership roles in organizations, engaging them meaningfully for growth and success has taken on strategic importance and immediacy. We are evaluating every aspect of the employee life cycle and updating or creating systems and processes to enhance the employee experience. This includes the entire spectrum of policy frameworks, work-life benefits, fitness and health touchpoints, networking and communication channels, leadership connects, diversity and inclusion programmes and other allied HR systems.