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Skill India

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In its first 2 years, #SkillIndia has empowered nearly 1.17 crore youth like Suprna with employable skills all across India. @RajivPratapRudy <https://t.co/aOmjr6lkGT>

● **INTERVIEW: SANJAY BAHL**, CEO & MANAGING DIRECTOR, CENTUM LEARNING

'Right to skill is what the country needs'

Centum Learning, India's first skilling MNC, is present across 15 countries—India and 14 African nations. It has domain expertise across 21 industry verticals and has over 1,400 training and development specialists. The MNC focuses on four key areas of the skilling ecosystem: Enterprise Training Solutions, Livelihood Skilling, Skills for Schools and Colleges, and CSR Partnerships. Sanjay Bahl, who recently joined Centum as CEO and MD, says there cannot be a more opportune time than now to consider how closely a nation's growth agenda is aligned with the skills level. In an interaction with FE's Vikram Chaudhary, he says the biggest challenge is that each month 10 lakh youth will join the labour force for the next 20 years, and even though many of them will have degrees, they will be unemployable. "We have to meet that challenge". Excerpts:

As one of government's biggest partners in the skilling space, how do you see the initiatives taken by the government?

By 2050, India's working population could be in excess of 100 crore. Our education system is characterised by a high 'dropout rate', with 56.8% students leaving school before reaching class X. Considering this, the government initiated skill-based training programmes at the school level. With the introduction of the National Skills Qualification Framework from class IX onwards, the demand for vocational education programmes began to soar. Then came a lull. There cannot be a more opportune time than now to consider how closely a nation's growth agenda is aligned with the skills level of its manpower. Especially, with initiatives like Skill India, Make-in-India, Digital India, financial inclusion and more.

At Centum Learning, we are not just into skilling the workforce, but also actively working with the ecosystem—states, Centre, agencies like NSDC, industry and the society at large—so that collectively we are able to achieve the end goal of a skilled India.

Despite Skill India and NSDC, lack of qualified workforce is plaguing industries across sectors, even affecting production...

Yes, today only 25% graduates are considered 'employable' and a major challenge is lack of 'employability skills'. Our education system has to prepare students for the new working world—it is important to develop soft skills, from the initial years. Jobs and hiring need to shift from being 'qualification-based' to 'skill-based'.

As far as manufacturing is concerned, it cannot become a growth driver if the lack of skilled workers remains a constraint. A 2014 survey revealed that 78% employers are concerned with the growing skills gap, while 57% said they have open positions for which they cannot find qualified candidates. The government has to pursue a two-pronged approach of creating jobs in the sector and encouraging multi-stakeholder partnerships to impart employment-worthy skills.

So, do the corporates need to step into skill development in a big way?

The provision of fiscal incentives to the private sector for setting up vocational and skill development institutions will motivate organisations. Adoption of measures for the development of higher education infrastructure through a PPP model and launching Higher Education Credit Guarantee Authority is another significant move. All these factors will lead to better workforce.

AR, VR, AI, etc, are emerging as areas where skills are needed. Do you have plans for such new-age challenges?

Staying updated and skilled has never turned out to be insignificant. The challenge lies on the part of companies who have to up-skill their employees. A recent study reports that up to 40% of the estimated 40 lakh IT workforce in India need re-skilling over the next five years to keep pace with automation. In fact, growing job insecurity among professionals on account of layoffs and a shrinking job market has put the spotlight on skills upgrade and learning of new skills this year.

I must add the mobile app boom is a blessing in disguise, helping the cause of skill development. It won't be long before tech penetration empowers the populace.



So technology isn't a threat to jobs as yet...

The demand for multi-disciplinary digital skills is mounting, along with the need for rapid re-skilling and up-skilling of IT workforce. If the pace of skill development can match with the pace of tech evolution and alignment of training with industry opportunities, the worst-case scenarios can be averted and the same technology can be used to augment skills.

Which is a bigger challenge: skills gap or jobless growth?

From the larger point of view, both skills

gap and jobless growth are dangerous. Each month, 10 lakh youth will join the labour force for the next 20 years, and many of them will have degrees but will be unemployable. At the same time, India Inc seeks more productivity. While this will require higher levels of skills, it will not result in new job opportunities. Hence, there is a trade-off between technology and the workforce that was previously performing the task, resulting in skills gap, leading to jobless growth.

Today, skill development is being carried out by 22 ministries through about 70 schemes. The favourable growth story and

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the demographic dividend, along with the stability provided by a democracy, makes India a sweet spot for global growth. These assets can only be redeemed if the requisite skills and the right kinds of jobs are available.

Do we need to better capture demand-side data and map it to skill training providers? Whose job is it anyway?

Earlier, lack of coordination between ministries, the Centre and state governments, public and private sector, and the academia made any skill development related scheme a failure, even before it began. However, current efforts by the government(s), NSDC, trade bodies and the academia have been relatively successful due to better collaboration. Case in point being the Skill Gap reports published by NSDC, in partnership with FICCI, CII, KPMG and EY. These reports correctly capture demand-side data. Additionally, partners such as Centum Learning have made NSDC's ambitious target to skill 50 crore people achievable. We have become NSDC's largest partner, contributing a major chunk of its achievement in the last financial year.

Should learning skills be a fundamental right?

Vocational training, skill development and quality education need to be made available to youth, especially in remote and rural areas. Such a holistic approach will lead to ruralisation and stem urbanisation, easing the pressure on crumbling infrastructure. The

game-changer would be a better industry-academia-government link that creates work-ready human capital. The proposed 'right to skill' (legislation) will task state governments with the responsibility of imparting vocational training through special universities that will be overseen by a regulatory body at the Centre. In fact, Chhattisgarh already offers the 'right to skill', as in countries such as Germany and Switzerland.

How do you view the corporate training market? It is growing fast...

Training programmes have evolved from being a mere tool for an employee's skill upgrade to a medium for developing strategic initiatives for streamlining business goals. We have noticed a higher trend for training requirements at the non-managerial level. The skill gap studies for every sector and the evolving ecosystem for skills training are a testimony to the exponential growth India is likely to witness. Corporates appreciate the need for such training and are willing to invest. At Centum, we target Fortune 500 companies across multiple sectors. Over the years, we have impacted productivity of over 2 lakh professionals across automotive majors alone. Delhi and Mumbai rule the roost in the corporate training market.

Placements have emerged as a serious challenge for Skill India. How do you ensure placements?

We have entered into agreements with companies and industrial units. We have a huge network connection with HR teams globally because of our international presence and these companies become prospective employers. Besides providing leadership and management skills to youth, we also facilitate jobs and encourage self-entrepreneurship. We work on a backward integration approach where we first identify the jobs in a specific market. Then we scout for government schemes in that area and then set up centres locally for youth. Training can vary from one to six months and is offered under segments like multimedia, accounting, BPO/DEO and IT.