

Infosys trains its new recruits like fighter pilots

Designs programme that teaches recruits to solve problems on the fly

BLOOMBERG

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When Infosys set out to remake its internal training programme, instructors visited flight schools to see how professional pilots are taught to deal with fast-changing situations. That led the country's outsourcing giant to model classes on flight simulators that teach recruits to work faster, think for themselves and anticipate corporate customers needs. They're put through multiple scenarios, and no two training days are alike.

"It gets trainees excited and removes the fear of the unknown," says Arpan Patro, who helped design the classes and motivates his students with the aviation aphorism: "Take-offs are optional, landing is mandatory".

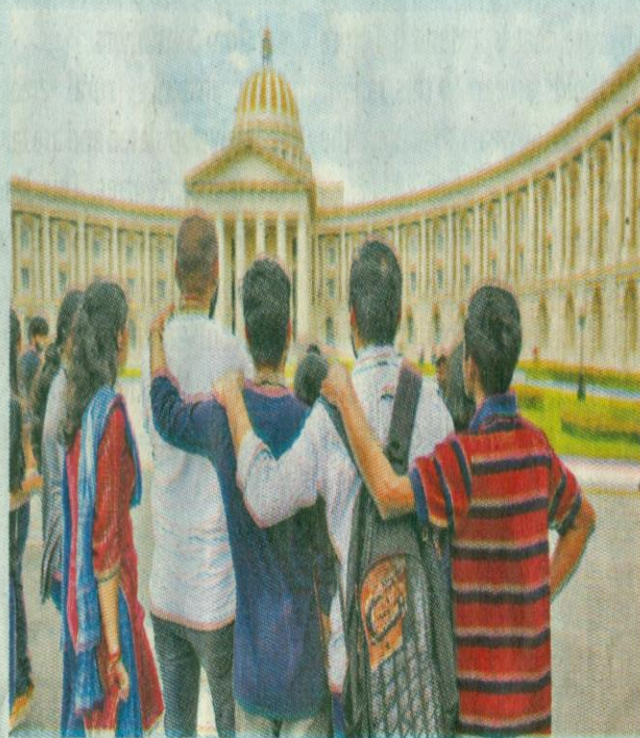
New thinking

The simulator-style drills piloted this summer reflect new thinking at Infosys as the company tries to move beyond the commoditised work of building and managing corporate computer systems. Much of those processes are now automated, and com-

panies such as Goldman Sachs Group and Philips N.V. are hiring Infosys and other tech out-sourcers for discrete, short-term projects that help them stay current in a world of accelerating change. Chief information officers want projects to go live in weeks, rather than months, and expect engineers to solve problems on the fly.

Infosys, which recently ousted its chief executive after an internal power struggle and is now searching for his replacement, can't afford to take customers for granted. While the company has not lost any major contracts yet, competition is stiffening as rivals big and small snag digital services contracts. The upheaval in its ranks and the challenges facing the industry have contributed to an underperforming share price.

Infosys stock has fallen 7.4 per cent this year, lagging behind a 20 per cent rise in the benchmark S&P Sensex. "Asia's second-largest IT services company needs to change and fast. As technologies and the outsourcing market change rapidly, skill sets become very critical," says Raja Lahiri, a Mumbai-based partner at the India unit of advisory firm Grant Thornton. "The training has to go from coding and programming to design, creativity and customer experience areas where



Trainees at the Infosys Global Education Center in Mysuru BLOOMBERG

there's more money on the table. There's a clear lag in skills."

300-acre campus

The Infosys campus sits on 337 verdant acres in Mysuru. The facility has 160 classrooms, employs 380 instructors and can train as many as 15,000 people at a time. Just past 8 a.m. on a recent weekday, herds of chattering twenty-somethings trooped into one of many food courts and selected from dozens of subsidised breakfast choices, from rice and lentil dosa crepes to leavened bread parathas. Breakfast over, they entered all-day classes, where their choices were reduced to two: cope or leave.

This is a big change. Previously, Indian outsourcers like Infosys fed thousands of notoriously cal-

low engineering grads into unchallenging software universities that spit out people adept at generic coding but ill-equipped to devise their own solutions, much less champion them to customers.

"Back then, after three weeks of training you were ready to be deployed on a client project," says training chief Satheesha Nanjappa, who spoke of his own incultation in 1993. Nanjappa went on to set up the Mysore centre a decade-and-half ago with just one classroom and a single instructor teaching 50 raw recruits.

19-week programme

Now, trainees are put through a 19-week residential programme with nine weeks of software industry basics that include study-

ing three programming languages (instead of one previously) and learning to work in teams, followed by an additional nine weeks of intensive specialised training. Besides teaching engineering grads about such emerging technologies as cloud infrastructure, digital commerce and big data analytics, instructors also emphasise 'soft skills'. These include team etiquette (working cohesively, assigning tasks based on aptitude, pulling together individual pieces of a larger project), how to articulate a point to a room full of customers (preparing beforehand, speaking slowly) and dressing dos and don'ts (no frayed jeans or short skirts).

Customers expect Infosys engineers to be able to mix and match technologies in the hunt for solutions. In the past, students might be taught to create a simple search bar for a client; now they're expected to apply search to multiple industry scenarios, from retail to digital payments. "Today applications are not monolithic, and engineers need to have a wide variety of skills," Nanjappa says. The client expectation is that those on a project know everything.

The self-contained Mysore campus has 10,000 residential rooms equipped with everything a trainee might need coffee

maker, lamp, clothes hangers, laundry baskets and more. There's a bowling alley, a massive library, sports facilities, a supermarket and a four-screen multiplex modelled after Walt Disney's Epcot Center. Campus curfew is 10 p.m., and drinking is forbidden. Those suspected of imbibing are subject to breathalyser tests and risk being shown the door.

Like an increasing number of Infosys recruits, Rohit Sharma, 23, hails not from a big city like Bengaluru or Delhi but a small town in Bihar. The recent computer science grad had long wanted to become an Infosys software engineer and ignored friends warnings that automation was killing coding jobs. Eight weeks into his training, Sharma is mastering the Python programming language, faring well in the assessments, and says the training has changed him in subtle ways.

Before joining Infosys, he hadn't realised the importance of communication. Now the reticent engineer is learning to meet people and initiate conversations with ease.

"I'm learning to code," Sharma says. "I'm also learning to come out of the shell that many people like me from small towns are caught in, and learning to cope in a global industry."