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`Skilling' latest biz mantra as top CEOs quit jobs to provide training

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Rajiv Sharma; Santanu Paul

"SKILLING", or providing skills to improve employability, is the latest business opportunity that CEOs with an entrepreneurial streak are trying to tap. Many CEOs, largely from the services sector, have quit their super-income jobs to train a burgeoning number of Indians so that they get decent employment.

From Bharti Airtel's former CEO Rajiv Sharma to Star News former president Ravina Raj Kohli, "skilling" is turning out to be the latest draw for corporate hotshots.

"In the six years as head of India operations of US-headquartered Virtusa Corporation in Hyderabad, I had the back-breaking task of ramping up the people strength here from 400 to 4,000. For every 100 people interviewed, we could pick only five," says Santanu Paul, who has founded TalentSpirit that offers a 90-day module to graduates and places them with banks and IT companies.

India's job market is unique -demand keeps growing, supply too remains high, but capability of those looking out for employment is poor. It is this gap that India Inc CEOs are trying to bridge. And this is definitely not about charity. The corporate honchos realise it makes sense, commercially and even socially, only if the business can be scaled up. Government-backed initiatives like the National Skill Development Corporation, which funds companies with scalable project ideas, are also doing their bit to nudge corporate managers to take the plunge and train the millions required to power a 9 per cent economy over the next couple of decades.

Some are putting in significant equity too, which reflects their confidence in the business proposition. Ravina Raj Kohli, for instance, has infused Rs 6.14 crore as equity along with serial entrepreneur Lathika Pai, into JobSkills, that hopes to train 1.74 million people in different trades over the next 10 years.

"When I was working on a global project across 14 countries, I could see a huge gap between education and employment. Access to jobs is a universal problem," Kohli says. But for it to make commercial sense, it needs to be a for-profit venture, sustainable and scalable. "JobSkills plans to focus on tier II and tier III cities and is tying up with colleges and institutions for training their students and making them employable." For most companies in the IT and financial sector, training programmes consume both time and money. They provide in-house training to new entrants for about six months and this eats away 2-3 per cent of the net profit.

"The industry is slowly accepting the model of taking people skilled from good skilling institutions," says Paul. His company trained some 1,500 students last year and grossed Rs 6.5 crore in revenues. Axis Bank, he claims, has now agreed to give

a loan of up to 90 per cent to students who are charged Rs 40,000 for the company's 90-day training module.

Sharma, who was previously with Bharti Airtel, is looking at the bottom of the pyramid, so to say. He is training maids to become "home managers"; the training is free of cost for the maids, but is paid for by companies through their funds earmarked for corporate social responsibility activities.

"We employ these maids, pay them about Rs 6,500 a month; they have their provident fund accounts, carry ESIC benefits, get 21 days leave, etc," he says. Empower Pragati estimates that the National Capital Region offers the potential to scale up to about 1.1-1.2 million people.

There are many others — Revathi Kasturi, former CEO of Wipro Solutions & Systems Integration, now runs Laqsh Job Skills Academy, and Srinivas Rao Cheedella, former Director of Shared Services for Business Process Solutions at Dell, now manages Laurus Edutech, and hopes to train a million people over the next 10 years. "We provide vocational and life skills training to people in a variety of trades — from air condition mechanics to welders and fitters. We are rapidly expanding, so all profits are being ploughed back into the business," says Cheedella.