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Indian Human Resource Management and Talent Mindset

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Prasenjit Bhattacharya, CEO
Great Place to Work® Institute, India

Indian Human Resource Management and Talent Mindset

Abstract

To provide an understanding of talent mindset in Indian human resource management, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) interviewed human resource executives from three top Indian organizations in different business sectors—business process outsourcing, financial services, and research and consulting. This article offers a view of talent mindset in the corporate Indian space, with related trends, challenges and opportunities.

Talent Mindset

Talent mindset is the deep-seated belief that talent differentiates organizational culture and breeds competitive advantage, with benefits for both the individual and the organization—now and in the future. Talent mindset is embedded in the entire organization—led by the CEO, modeled by management and supported by a range of initiatives developed by HR and implemented by HR and line managers.

Introduction

Many Indian corporations are now an integral part of the global community. As important contributors to the world economy, Indian corporations require human capital to grow and expand. To gain a better understanding of the factors related to Indian human resource management (HRM) and talent mindset, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) interviewed Indian HR executives in key Indian business sectors. Spotlighted in this article are three organizations (see box), with their respective philosophies about talent mindset, reflecting their vision and strategic business goals. Through the views of these Indian HR leaders—with their fingers on the pulse of the marketplace—trends, challenges and opportunities about talent in the Indian HR context are revealed. In addition, information about Indian cultural, national and socio-economic aspects provides insights about the dynamic environment in which Indian HR and organizational leaders attract, develop and retain talent.

Business processing outsourcing (BPO): EXL Service

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Place to Work® Institute, India
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As stated in *The Changing Faces of People Management in India*, as a result of India’s liberalized economic environment, “the new paradigm has brought a shift towards more corporate management and new opportunities for technology upgrading, human resource mobilization from previously untapped sources, expansion, diversification, business turnaround and internationalization.”¹ Thus, in this ever-changing marketplace, the new global imperative requires the right talent.

Written at the macro level, this article explores the philosophical perspectives of talent mindset in the Indian human resource management context, considers factors that influence talent mindset in India, and highlights key drivers and other contributing aspects. Written primarily for a non-Indian HR and management audience, this article not only provides insights into talent mindset in corporate India but also offers valuable information for HR professionals and business leaders in India, management students learning about India, multinational corporations established in India and those seeking to expand into India.

With tremendous growth opportunities in India, competition for talent is keen.

Business Case

With tremendous growth opportunities in India, competition for talent is keen. According to Indian management

researchers and authors Pawan S. Budhwar and Jyotsna Bhatnager, “given the unique socio-cultural, political, legal and economic milieu of India, the challenges regarding the efficient management of HR in the Indian context can be both complex and demanding. This is more valid during the present transitional times when traditional

In times of transition, change is gradual. The 2009 SHRM study *Global Diversity and Inclusion: Perceptions, Practices and Attitudes* notes that Asian countries tend to prefer to let diversity occur naturally. This perspective is mirrored in the Global Diversity Readiness Index, where India is ranked 41 out of 47 countries.⁵ This ranking suggests

Though change is taking place in Indian HRM, the family-dominated Indian business conglomerates and large public sector organizations are still very influential in the Indian economy. At the same time, Indian global enterprises, particularly in the information technology (IT) industry, are gaining ground with their innovative work cultures. Still, traditional characteristics of Indian management remain—authority, hierarchy, familial networks, community boundaries and acceptance of ambiguity. According to scholars of business culture, it appears that there is a blending of values in Indian organizations, as they develop their own unique form of management, with a mix of tradition and the best of global and/or Western management practices. Ultimately, managerial challenges with global links will create opportunities to develop world-class Indian organizations through learning and innovation. Successful movement forward will greatly depend on the competencies and changing mindsets of a new generation of Indian managers.⁸ The challenge of finding talent goes hand in hand with rapid growth and the demand for quality, knowledge and experience in a global world. Thus, the business case to understand talent mindset within Indian HRM is clear and stands out as a significant driver of organizational success.

Ultimately, to be successful in business in India, it is important to realize **the many unique aspects of talent mindset** in the Indian HRM context.

ways of managing HR (which were based on one’s personal relations, social connections and standing in the society) are still prevalent along with a move towards formalization and rationalization of HR systems. At the moment, a rapid modernization of the HR functions is evolving.”²

The 2008 study by The Boston Consulting Group and the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations, *Creating People Advantage: How to Address HR Challenges Worldwide Through 2015*, points out that although there is not a labor shortage in India, talent is in short supply and in great demand. Thus, HR leaders in Indian organizations are highly pressured to attract and keep talent.³ Further, in the global arena, the number of Indian high-performance companies is growing. This trend is clearly seen in the *Forbes Global 2000*, which identifies large publicly traded companies with exceptional growth rates from nearly 70 countries, where each company stands out from its industry peers, scored by its rankings for sales, profits, assets and market value. In the *2009 Global 2000* report, 47 companies are from India, up from 27 companies in 2004.⁴

opportunities for Indian organizations to seek and include talent from different groups, such as women, who are underutilized in corporate India. As noted in SHRM’s article “*Perspectives on Women in Management in India*,” changes in Indian culture and society are gradually supporting and, in some cases, promoting women in Indian corporations.⁶

The Global Competitiveness Report 2009-2010 ranks India at 49 out of 134 countries, an improvement from its ranking of 50 in the 2008-2009 index. The rankings are calculated from both publicly available data and the Executive Opinion Survey, a comprehensive annual survey conducted by the World Economic Forum together with its network of partner institutes (leading research institutes and business organizations) in the countries covered by the report. According to this report, the most problematic factor for doing business in India is the country’s inadequate infrastructure. At the same time, India ranks high for business sophistication and innovation, higher education and training, and goods market efficiency.⁷ This report reflects the challenges of rapid growth in India that require time, money and talent.

Background and Context

India is a country in transition. Historical, socio-economic and cultural factors strongly influence Indian HRM and talent mindset. Keeping in mind the dynamic changes taking place in India, and their subsequent influence and reflection in Indian HRM, the following factors provide essential background and context about key aspects of the Indian landscape: 1) language, 2) geography and 3) generational differences.

Linguistic Differences and the Role of English

The Indian constitution recognizes more than 30 languages, with Hindi being the official language in most North Indian states. There is an overarching national culture, but most states have their own unique subcultures with respect to language and ethnicity. Because such a large diversity of languages (more than 2,000 dialects) exists within these subcultures, English or Hindi are used as link languages for business and informal

India is a country in transition. Historical, socio-economic and cultural factors strongly influence Indian HRM and talent mindset.

communication with and among people across the 30-plus states in India. Most urban Indians are trilingual since a three-language formula (English, Hindi and the state language) is deeply embedded into the educational system. The influence of the local language may be reflected in the spoken English of Indians. That is, most Indians have a British influence in their choice of words. Some examples are petrol pump for gas station, accelerator for gas pedal, ice-box for cooler, expired for dead, etc. However, the accent is not British, and there is no universal Indian accent. The accent depends on the influence of the local language/mother tongue. Most Indians think in their respective local language and translate those thoughts into spoken English. Sometimes, it is a direct translation from the mother tongue. For example, “I need to give an interview” means attend an interview, whereas “I need to take an interview” means to interview someone. These examples demonstrate direct translations from the local language

(both alphabets and phrases). People who have a Western influence (mostly those who live in Tier 1 cities) are able to minimize the word translations to a greater extent than those people from the Tier 2 and 3 cities.

Geographical Differences

Most Tier 1 cities—such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and New Delhi—use English for business communication. The majority of global organizations are located in Tier 1 cities, where the corporate culture tends to be high on task and egalitarian dimensions. In the last few years, the incubator culture is also on the rise in places like Bangalore, known as the “Silicon Valley” of India, where employees possess an individualistic and achievement-based orientation similar to the West. In such an environment, Western motivational theories and performance measurement techniques are easier to apply. Tier 2 and 3 cities (also known as satellite towns), such as Pune, Mysore and Vizag, are more likely to use the local language informally, and sometimes formally, for business communication. Some local organizations in these cities may have a family-type corporate culture, where the manager is seen as a patriarch. In this environment, collectivist, inner-directed and diffuse

Generational Differences

After India gained independence in 1947, the government resorted to protectionism in order to nurture the country’s fledgling industries. The job opportunities were limited, and working for the government was considered very prestigious by people of what are now known as the Traditionalist and Baby Boom generations. There was a high degree of loyalty, and therefore, people used to work and retire from the same job. The critical HR issues of today—such as performance management, employee motivation and retention, career and succession planning—were never considered. This situation drastically changed after the government liberalized the economy in 1991 and allowed foreign competition. Domestic organizations were forced to raise the bar by improving their products and services to compete with global organizations.

Today, many people in the Baby Boom generation are close to retirement, and Indian companies are now largely filled with Gen X and Gen Y workers. Unlike Western nations, retirement of the Baby Boomers may not create a shortage of workers in India since census reports have estimated that by 2020, 50% of the population will be below 25 years of age. However, organizations are more

“Talent that has an investor mindset—‘my business/ownership’—and that is here for the long haul will help create value and trust.”

Ophealia de Roze, Head Human Capital Management
Future Capital Holdings, Limited

mindsets are more prevalent. However, this scenario is changing rapidly as a shortage of labor forces global organizations to expand into Tier 2 and 3 cities. Successful onboarding and assimilation are essential stepping stones for companies to help employees develop a global mindset.

likely to face a greater and more serious problem of employability rather than availability, since there continues to be a huge gap between the quality of talent produced by the educational institutions and the type of skills required by global organizations. The modernization of education is a very important factor

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in maintaining a competitive and sustainable workforce in the future. As such, India's government, industry and industry bodies are already working toward this objective.

Philosophy on Talent Mindset

Talent is a key driver of economic prosperity. As emphasized in *Management in India: Trends and Transition*, Indian organizations increasingly focus on talent management for a competitive advantage.⁹ In view of the increasing number of Indian corporations in the global marketplace, a brief discussion about the concept of "mindset" is helpful to set the stage. As noted in *Mindsets: The Role of Culture and Perception in International Relations*, to better understand the concept of mindset—such as within one's own culture or when working with others from another culture, as in a global or virtual team, a global forum and a global operations division—a key question to ask is, "what is the cultural lens in the background?" For example, if a business depends on a workforce to be proficient at problem solving, it is helpful to be cognizant of how work is viewed. That is, in the organization's culture, is the idea of work considered as basically good or is it something to be endured? Do employees bring a sense of personal responsibility to their company? In the workplace, does the company culture encourage people to think and reason in certain ways, such as in support of the company vision and mission? Is the leadership style hierarchical or collaborative? Are innovation and risk-taking encouraged?¹⁰ These types of questions are useful to understand and analyze mindsets in the workplace.

Awareness of key factors in the Indian HRM environment is essential to establish and/or improve work relationships. The result will be a stronger foundation to strategically develop new product lines and thus

expand market share. For example, in an Indian organization, group dynamics—the team—tends to be more important than focus on the individual contributor. Additionally, titles are important, management models and theories are of great interest, and citing recognized authorities brings credibility. In a global work environment, awareness of different mindsets can make the difference of success or failure. While an in-depth discussion of the cultural lens is not part of this article, it is important to realize that Indian culture has a substantive influence on talent mindset in corporate India. To provide current examples of talent mindset in the Indian HR context, SHRM asked leaders from successful Indian organizations about their talent mindset philosophy.

At **Future Capital Holdings (FCH)**, the company's competitive advantage is its people. Established in 2006, FCH is an Indian publicly listed company with about 300 employees. Ophealia de Roze, Head Human Capital Management, describes the company's philosophy: "We believe that if we have to live out our vision at the ground level, then attracting, retaining and nurturing talent is an art, which must be honed in order for us to bring out the entrepreneurial and creative spirit of employees in our organization." Ms. de Roze further explains that "talent is the organization's most valuable asset, hence employees need to be nurtured and groomed by management. They also need to be intellectually engaged with challenging assignments in an environment that promotes dialogue, debate experimentation and collaborative decision-making."

Great Place to Work[®] Institute, India was established in 2007 within the private sector. The multinational corporation, Great Place to Work[®] Institute, is located in 40 countries. The company's India CEO, Prasenjit Bhattacharya, explains that the

organization’s philosophy differs from most companies, because “we are perhaps the only global institute that looks at organizations and workplaces purely from an employee’s point of view. Traditional talent management frameworks in India still consider talent management and leadership development from an organization’s viewpoint, with little appreciation of the need to look at it from the employee’s experience.” Mr. Bhattacharya adds, “We have been listening to employees and evaluating employers since 1980 to understand what makes a great workplace.” As noted on the company’s web site, “our employee-centered model has been recognized for more than 20 years as a clear, comprehensive representation of the importance of trust in creating great workplace relationships [...] Building trust in relationships between employees and management helps your workplace to operate more effectively, serving as a source of enduring advantage for your organization.”

EXL Service, a multinational corporation, is a leading provider of offshore business process outsourcing solutions. Established in 1999, EXL in India has approximately 10,000 employees. With the corporate headquarters located in New York, USA, EXL has offices in the United States, the United Kingdom, India and the Philippines. In India, there are five major service centers, located in Noida, Uttar Pradesh and Pune. Nayana Prabhu, Vice President – Learning and Development at EXL in India, says, “We believe that the ‘war for talent’ is here to stay and experience it on a day-to-day basis. We are also deeply committed to people development.” Ms. Prabhu points out that 50% of the organization’s leadership is grown from within the company. “Our philosophy is to leverage the strengths of our employees by providing on-the-job challenges, a work atmosphere that engages employees, and training

that makes an impact to the person’s professional and personal development. Our philosophy about talent mindset will help us build a robust talent pool and therefore enable our vision and mission.” She points out that “people development is a strategic priority, so our CEO and the Executive Committee—with the help of our Global HR Head—facilitate the talent mindset.” Ms. Prabhu emphasizes that to be successful, each corporation must have a very strong induction process into the culture of the company.

“High-quality talent is expensive and in demand.”

Nayana Prabhu, Vice President
Learning and Development, EXL Service

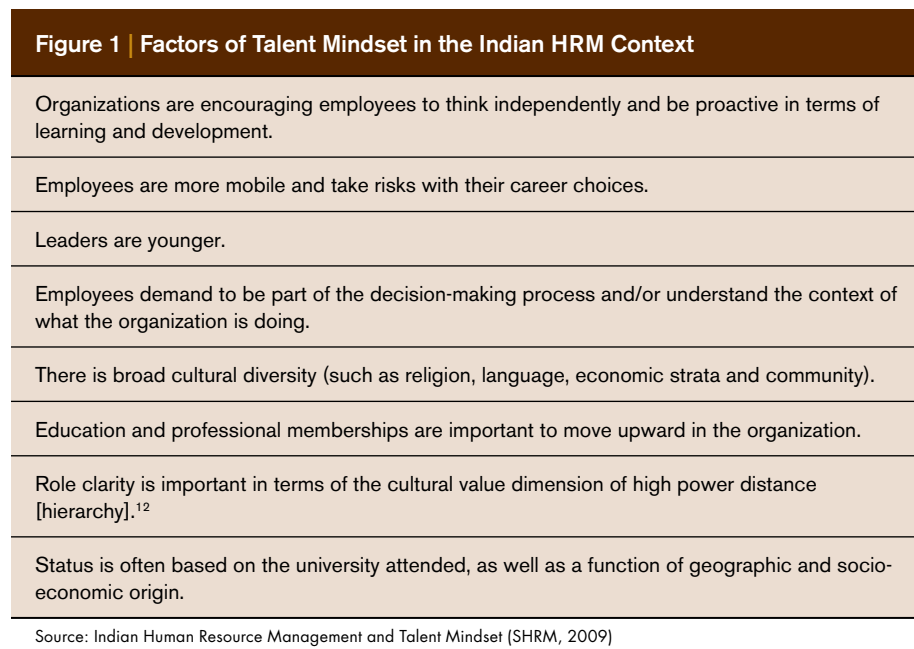
Indian HRM Context: Unique Factors

As pointed out by Indian management scholar and author Pawan S. Budhwar, the strong influence of the socio-cultural context in India does not always allow the applicability of Western management and organization theories. He emphasizes that “to a great extent, this is a core issue for Western firms

operating in the Indian context and sends a clear message to researchers in the field. The intention of both HR practitioners and researchers should be to continuously develop, test and re-test constructs suitable for conducting research and develop relevant practice in the Indian context.”¹¹

With the challenge of mixing Western management practices with Eastern management traditions, understanding the Indian HRM context and its corresponding influence on talent mindset is a necessity for both Indian and Western organizations. Figure 1 presents factors that influence talent mindset in Indian HRM—with tradition and trends combined, aptly described and explained by Ms. de Roze, Ms. Prabhu and Mr. Bhattacharya.

Ms. de Roze, of **Future Capital Holdings Limited**, points out that dissonance occurs as organizations change from a pyramid-like structure to a circular structure, which results in a shift in reporting, too. But it’s less of a concern with the current generation. Yet, as Ms. Prabhu, of **EXL Service**, states, “India has a large number of



people in the employment market, with the market open for opportunities. The two main influencers are the demand and supply of quality talent and the cost of investment for ‘growing’ talent versus ‘buying’ talent. Consequently, it is up to the strength of the HR teams in organizations to influence and lead interventions around talent.”

did not change jobs.” Today, more people are attaining education more quickly and at a higher level. Now, the workforce is much more mobile, and people reach managerial ranks earlier because they are well-educated and ready to make professional moves. “They have more experience and exposure, and thus can handle complex

you ask an Indian where he or she comes from, the response may include what region of India, community and religion. Diversity also includes economic strata and education (e.g., where did you get your MBA—at a premier Indian university or a local school?). The identified university translates into the brand (Ivy League, for example). One can be more easily positioned for different senior levels, depending on which institute/ business school you attended.”

Demographics and education have a strong impact on the talent mindset in Indian human resource management, as do changes in views among the younger generations.

A number of key factors influence talent mindset in Indian HRM. Demographics and education have a strong impact, along with changes in views among the younger generations. Ms. de Roze points out that today’s youth have high aspirations and are brand-conscious. Talent at all levels is relatively young, highly driven and very focused. She explains that young Indian workers today want to work in organizations that have a brand name and are well-respected. Many seek companies with international talent and opportunities to train or work on overseas assignments. They want more independence in assignments, freedom in choice and fast-track careers. Compensation, professional development and growth are very important.

Ms. Prabhu notes that it is important to have the right fit for the job—and this means that education is very important. “Now, there are many more doctors and engineers,” she says. “Those with an MBA have more demand. Today, one must have at least a four-year degree, but still, organizations often must train and then retrain employees.” She explains that “in the last two to five years, Indian leaders are younger (high-level managers are often in their 40s), and this is by necessity. This trend differs from 10 years ago, when people

administration,” Ms. Prabhu continues. “This transition makes sense because people are really ready to learn.”

Ms. de Roze offers additional insights regarding talent mindset in today’s Indian HRM context. “The downturn has had an impact on the mindset of talent that, for a significant stretch, only saw the economy and job opportunities move in an upward direction. Today, one sees individuals who are more concerned about skill development, leadership potential, work/life balance and corporate culture. Adequate compensation, a good work environment and intellectual stimulation have clearly become a necessity, but real success requires a complete overhaul in the mental makeup of management—and thus the DNA of an organization—to center around nurturing talent and creating internal leaders.”

The diversity of culture in India is unique and clearly influences talent mindset. Ms. Prabhu emphasizes that cultural issues are important for Westerners to understand in order to work better together with their Indian colleagues. For example, in India, power distance and hierarchy are important. One must defer to a senior person. There is also strong regional diversity. She explains, “When

Another critical factor is availability of talent. Mr. Bhattacharya, of **Great Place to Work® Institute**, India, points to the enormous mismatch between demand for talent and availability of prepared talent. This demand-supply gap is at the root of the short-term approach to talent in many Indian companies. “In many organizations, there are relatively high levels of politics and perceived favoritism around talent management. Non-application of the mind in applying theories, such as forced ranking of talent, creates internal inequities in how people are treated

The diversity of culture in India is unique and clearly influences talent mindset.

and leads to suboptimal utilization of all available talent.” Further, he notes, “Assumptions made based on the past are likely to not be correct in a growth context. The biggest bottleneck to talent management is assumptions from days when jobs were in short supply and there were many eligible candidates.” In a typical leadership development project, examples of such assumptions are that 1) there are more eligible candidates (internally or externally) than available leadership positions, 2) turnover of employees identified as ‘key talent’ will not increase, and 3) employees who are

Figure 2 | Attraction, Retention and Engagement Drivers for Workers in India

Top Attraction Drivers	Top Retention Drivers	Top Engagement Drivers
Career advancement opportunities	Manager inspires enthusiasm for work	Input into decision-making in my department
Challenging work	Satisfaction with the organization's business decisions	Senior management's actions consistent with our values
Learning and development opportunities	Positive impact of technology on work/life balance	Organization's reputation for social responsibility
Competitive base pay	Competitive performance management	Seek opportunities to develop new knowledge/skills
Reputation of the organization as a good employer	Can impact quality of work/product/service	Have excellent career advancement opportunities

Source: Adapted from Towers Perrin. (2008). *2007-2008 Towers Perrin global workforce study*. Retrieved August 26, 2009, from www.towersperrin.com.

Figure 3 | Key Drivers of Talent Mindset for Indian HRM

Business expansion/growth
Support for key business strategies
Flexibility for innovation
High-performance driven culture
Challenging assignments
Drive to be globally competitive
Internal talent deployment
Expansion of the leadership pipeline
Workforce planning
Work with international talent
Capacity to multitask across functions and businesses

Source: Indian Human Resource Management and Talent Mindset (SHRM, 2009)

not identified as “key talent” will accept that the assessment process is fair.

As highlighted by the three HR Indian executives, to truly understand talent mindset in the Indian HRM context, it is critical to be aware of the factors that influence talent mindset in today's transitional setting in corporate India.

Key Drivers of Talent Mindset in Indian HRM

In recent years, the connections among human capital, employee engagement, talent retention and productivity have gained more attention. The level of engagement is important for productivity and, ultimately, organizational success, as it reflects the willingness of the workforce to help companies succeed. *The 2007-2008 Towers Perrin Global Workforce Study*, identifies drivers of attraction, retention and engagement through the eyes of employees at midsize and large organizations worldwide. Out of nearly 90,000 respondents, 21% of employees were engaged in their work and 38% were partly to fully disengaged. The gap between engagement and disengagement is the discretionary effort that companies need from their workforce to enhance performance.¹³

The data for India indicate strong engagement of talent: 36% are engaged and 46% enrolled (actively interested) in their work, while only 15% are disenchanted (unhappy/dissatisfied) and 3% are disengaged. The engagement measures for India are significantly higher than those of most countries in the study (see Figure 2 for specific attraction, retention and engagement drivers in India).

To truly understand talent mindset in the Indian HRM context, it is critical to be aware of the factors that influence talent mindset in today's transitional setting in corporate India.

In contrast, the U.S. engagement statistics were 29% engaged, 43% enrolled, 22% disenchanted and 6% disengaged.¹⁴ India's workforce appears to be quite positively engaged, which is important for retention of talent. Figure 3 presents key drivers behind talent mindset in Indian HRM.

Recommendations: Doing Business in India

To move forward successfully in today's business world, change is necessary in India. As pointed out by Prasenjit Bhattacharya, CEO of **Great Place to Work® Institute, India**, traditional mindsets need to change to keep up with trends. He points out that “the biggest challenge, in my opinion, is in reconciling the mindset of older managers (from an era where shortage of jobs meant balance of power firmly in favor of managers) with expectations of the current generation.”

To conduct business in India, it is essential to understand the cultural context of India and its diversity. Ms. de Roze points out that relationships are as critical as professionalism, and personal loyalty is very important. Further, broadly speaking, Indians are emotional but may not show it—a cultural aspect that many Westerners fail to realize or appreciate. In her role, Ms. Prabhu emphasizes that companies that seek to do business in India need

Figure 4 | Recommendations on Talent Mindset to Do Business in India

Understand the cultural context of India and its broad aspects of diversity.

Understand that relationships are as critical as professionalism.

Be aware that personal loyalty is viewed as very important.

Understand the expectations of the young generation.

Provide learning and development opportunities.

Educate your Indian counterpart about how to understand you.

Focus on creating 'an organizational context'—not a 'geographic context.'

Source: Indian Human Resource Management and Talent Mindset (SHRM, 2009)

to understand the Indian culture with the help of a cultural model (e.g., Geert Hofstede). “This knowledge may help organizations build better partnerships [...] and also educate your Indian counterpart about how to understand you.” She recommends that Westerners seek to understand the concepts of gender, hierarchy and power

To conduct business in India, it is essential to **understand the cultural context** of India and its diversity.

distance in India (for further reading, see the *SHRM Research Quarterly*, “Selected Cross-Cultural Factors in Human Resource Management”¹⁵). Ultimately, to be successful in business in India, it is important to realize the many unique aspects of talent mindset in the Indian HRM context.

In Closing

India is in a period of transition and high growth. As highlighted by the experience of three successful Indian corporations, talent mindset is key to organizational success. Going forward,

Indian human resource management will continue to evolve, and talent will continue to be an essential aspect of growth and sustainability. Whether the goal is competitive advantage, global expansion or development of a leadership pipeline, having the right talent mindset to support the company vision, mission and business goals is a determining factor for the future.

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