

In the name of India...

No ethical breach is defensible, says industry veteran Subroto Bagchi

I write this with an enormous amount of pain. Last year, MindTree Consulting, an organization I co-founded, added 1000 new people to its work force. Of these, 70% were people with previous work experience. The bad news: close to 80 of these new entrants, almost 12% of the new lateral recruits, were asked to leave within sixty days of coming on board—on grounds of faking employment details. They failed the verification of their past employment. Just imagine the pain caused to the system, and the loss of face in front of international customers, not to talk about the financial losses incurred! It happened because people do not understand the gravity or ugliness of forging personal information. How can we place our Intellectual Property and our customers' Intellectual Property in the hands of such people? It occurs to me that there is a growing social scourge out there that needs to be addressed as much as there is a failure in the educational system that is producing engineers who think nothing of taking recourse to such measures. I do not buy the theory that it is so because we are an unemployment ridden country. Anyone who has done his or her engineering course with reasonable diligence can get a good job. Numbers are testimony to this fact. The software industry created a million jobs in the last thirty years and in the next 5 years alone, we need a million more people. That is more than the educational system can produce. So, if armed with reasonable competence, employment is just not a problem, and people do not have to attempt cheating the system



in the name of unemployment.

It is not about faking employment information alone. A fresh engineer recruited from a reputed college went on sick leave. In reality he was to prepare for his entrance test for a Master's program. In our organization, any person is entitled to unlimited sick leave because we care for employee health. In this case, the young man furnished a false medical certificate. Son of school teachers, when I asked him to explain his conduct, he

said, "I did not realize it was a wrong thing to do". This young man is in the top 1% of the planet in terms of education; he also has one of the best paid jobs. How can such a person not know that forging a medical certificate is a wrong thing to do? Have we come down to such levels that we have to run ethics classes on what is right and what is wrong? If the system is producing skilled people without foundational understanding of right

and wrong, we certainly have a disaster on our hands.

India's 300 million strong middle class that produces the maximum number of white-collar work force in this country and holds the key to the future of India, has decided to abandon its personal value system. Every day, they see politics denuded of all values, they see big businessmen evade taxes and treat organizational wealth as their own, they see religious leaders fail, and they see their icons in the world of sports and cinema nurture and benefit from connections to the underworld. Everyday, these are people who have to bribe their way for a ration card, a driving license, a house tax assessment and a train ticket. So, they have reached a state where they perceive nothing patently wrong in securing a false medical certificate or submitting an expenditure report with forged documents. Yet, are any of these acts defensible? Are they backed by dire needs or poor justifications? People who submit a fake Leave Travel Assistance voucher to save 30% income tax would not die of hunger if they chose not to. They do not take recourse to such measures because otherwise, their children would starve. That is why I maintain, abandoned values merely have justifications, they are never backed up by "needs". A lot of people play victims to justify their actions. I do not buy into that mould of thinking. If someone has been robbed once or has been abused as a child, it does not justify becoming a robber or an abuser. As human beings, we

are gifted with reasoning capability so that we do not abandon our responsibility to think on our own. If having sometimes been at the receiving end justifies embracing the path of the wrong, it would destroy the entire system. What, then, about 300 million Indians below the poverty line, who are always at the wrong end of the stick? What if they decided to subscribe to the view that the end justifies the means?

We have worked really hard, unimaginably hard, to create the IT industry that we see out of India of today. It has given India new found

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respectability in the comity of nations. We are no longer seen as a nation of sadhus, serpents and beggars. When I used to travel overseas in the early 80s, the assumption at an immigration counter was, if Indian, the person was a taxi driver and a potential illegal immigrant. Today, even if an Indian is a taxi driver and a potential illegal immigrant, the assumption is that the person is a software engineer. For the first time in the modern history of Indian civilization, we are seen as capable, intelligent people who can set a global standard. However, capability and intelligence are not enough to become world-class. If in addition, we build the reputation of being dishonest people, we cannot become to the world of software, what the Japanese have become to the world of automobiles. Honesty, at a personal and at an organizational level, is a pre-requisite for gaining the world's respect. Honesty is just not optional.

At the end of the day, we are here to run a business. We will do all there is in our powers to protect the respectability we have built for ourselves in a

globally competitive marketplace. We cannot, beyond a point, engage in a debate on ethics. In any case, on ethics, there should be no debate. We, being an "argumentative nation" love to endlessly debate every issue till it has been beaten to death. As people who have to run their businesses, we cannot take on the reformist agenda to cleanse the entire system. But, one thing we are clear about: if people would like to work for us, they would have to make up their mind on what they stand for.

When an entire industry stands up to protest the scourge in unison, as

you are seeing happen in this special edition *Dataquest*, it is a strong statement being made. I hope that parents and teachers get this message as much as the potential employees do. The intended outcome is really in the best interest of the individual because it assures him of a simple thing: this industry will not ask the employee to do something against his or her conscience, it will apply the same standards to all people—including those at the helms of the organizations themselves, and it will stand up to scrutiny each time it is required to do so.

So, the next time you apply for a job in the IT industry or advise someone who intends to do so, be notified that irrespective of the social system and its standards of governance, a different set of inviolable rules apply here. We do not intend to change that. We do not want India to fail in the eyes of the world.

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