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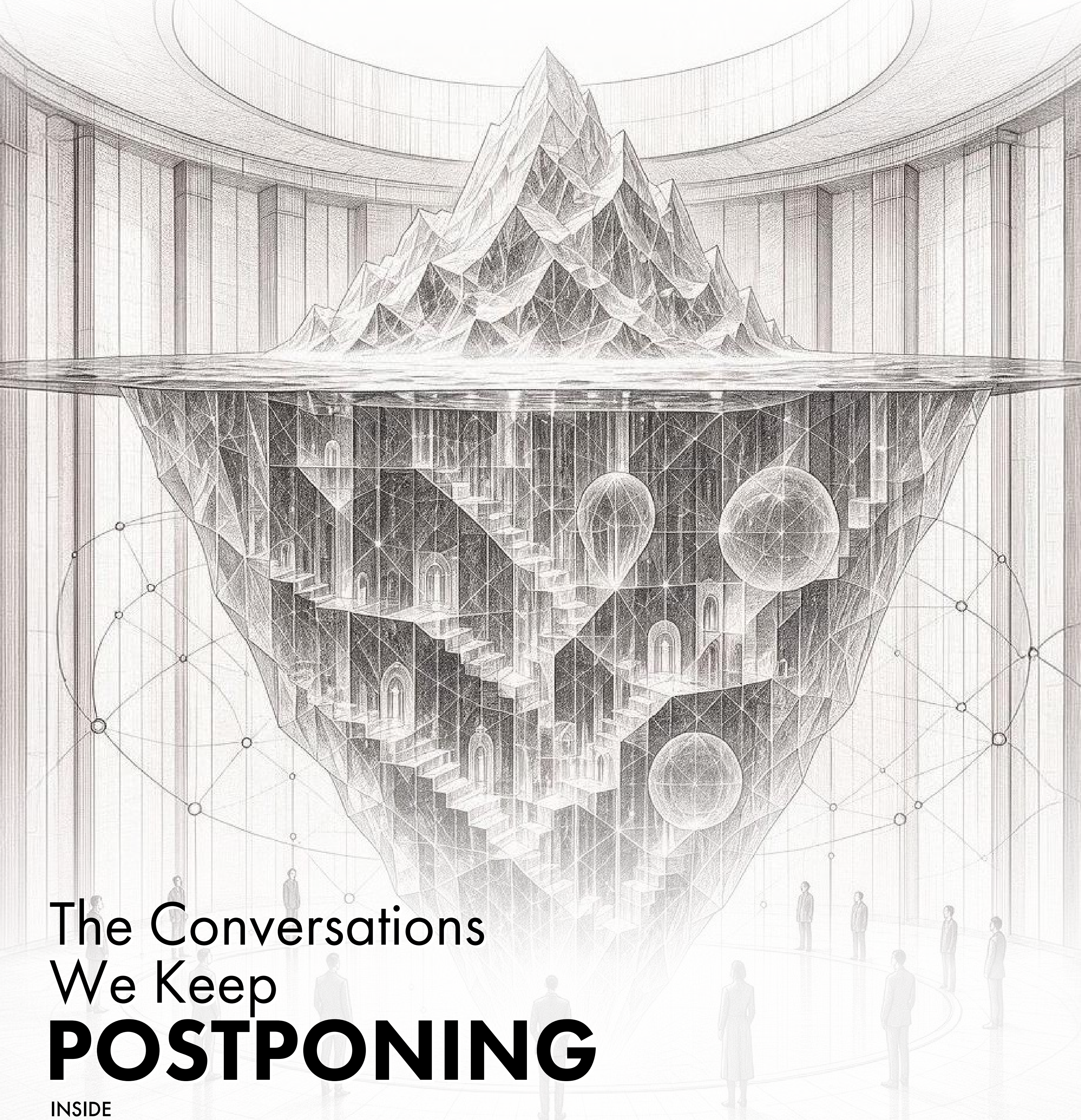

The Conversations We Keep **POSTPONING**

INSIDE

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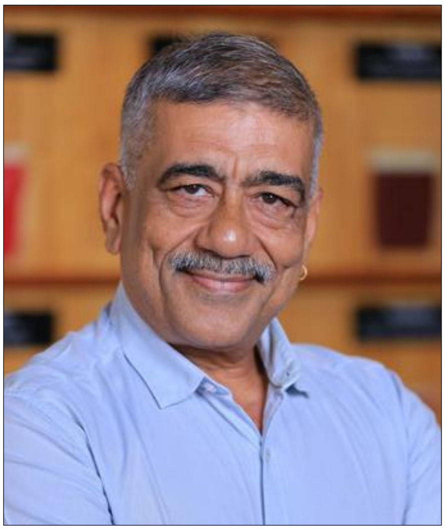

Technology may accelerate those decisions, structures may guide them and processes may standardise them. Yet judgement, trust, credibility and courage continue to determine where they eventually lead.

EVERY ORGANISATION has two versions of itself.

The first is easy to see. It appears in organisation charts, annual reports, strategies, dashboards and performance reviews. It is documented, measurable and easy to explain.

The second is far more difficult to observe. It exists in conversations that happen after meetings end, introductions that quietly open doors, decisions shaped by judgement rather than metrics, and relationships that influence outcomes long before formal processes begin.

This edition explores that second organisation.

Across these pages, we examine the invisible systems that shape modern workplaces. We look at why data alone rarely produces clarity, why recommendations often become the first bridge to opportunity, how resilience is built before disruption arrives, and why some of the most important conversations inside organisations remain postponed until they become unavoidable.

Several stories also challenge familiar assumptions. Does returning to the office always strengthen culture? Can dashboards replace interpretation? Is being easy to work with always an advantage? And what really determines influence inside organisations once formal authority reaches its limits?

Running through every article is a common recognition that organisations are ultimately collections of people making decisions under uncertainty. Technology may accelerate those decisions, structures may guide them and processes may standardise them. Yet judgement, trust, credibility and courage continue to determine where they eventually lead.

Perhaps the future of organisations will not be defined by those that gather the most information, create the most systems or write the most policies. It may belong to those willing to understand the forces operating quietly beneath them.

Narasimhan Rajkumar

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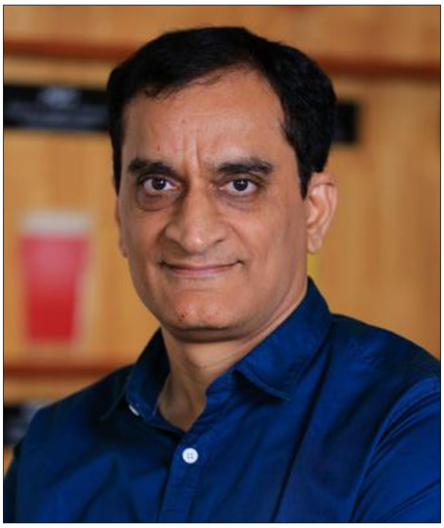

Judgement cannot be plotted on a dashboard. Credibility has no universally accepted metric. Influence rarely follows reporting lines. And the conversations that genuinely reshape organisations often begin long before they become visible to anyone watching.

BUSINESS HAS always measured what it could see — revenue, productivity, efficiency, growth.

Yet the most influential forces inside any organisation quietly resist measurement.

Trust does not appear on a balance sheet. Judgement cannot be plotted on a dashboard. Credibility has no universally accepted metric. Influence rarely follows reporting lines. And the conversations that genuinely reshape organisations often begin long before they become visible to anyone watching.

This edition is built around those realities.

The articles gathered here explore how organisations interpret information, navigate uncertainty, distribute opportunity, and exercise power. Running beneath each discussion is a deeper examination of our growing dependence on analytics, the informal networks that quietly determine careers, and what resilience, operational clarity, and leadership actually demand when certainty gives way to interpretation.

Together, they remind us that complexity is no longer a disruption to be managed — it is the permanent environment in which organisations now operate. Responding to it demands curiosity, perspective, and the willingness to question comfortable assumptions before circumstances force the question.

Some of the ideas that follow may challenge beliefs that have long been accepted without question. Others may help readers recognise what has always been present but seldom articulated.

Both outcomes make the conversation worth having.

Basant Purohit
Prof Basant Kumar Purohit
XLRI Jamshedpur

PROGRESS RARELY depends on finding better answers first.

More often, it begins by asking better questions.

Questions that feel uncomfortable, expose assumptions and questions that organisations often postpone because the existing system still appears to be working.

This edition is built around those questions.

What happens when data becomes abundant but judgement becomes scarce? How do informal networks shape careers in ways that official policies cannot? When does operational excellence become a human challenge rather than a technological one? How much of organisational culture is built through decisions that never appear in a strategy document?

These discussions span industries, functions and perspectives, yet they share a common purpose. Each invites us to look beyond visible outcomes and understand the mechanisms quietly producing them.

There is another theme that connects these pages.

Whether discussing analytics, labour, leadership, workplace relationships or organisational design, every article eventually arrives at the same conclusion: systems matter, but people interpret systems. Technology matters, but people decide how it is used. Policies matter, but people determine whether they become culture.

Perhaps that is why organisations remain endlessly fascinating. Every attempt to simplify them reveals another layer of complexity waiting underneath.

This edition is an invitation to explore those layers, question familiar narratives, and continue conversations that deserve far more attention than they usually receive.

Hari Govind Nair

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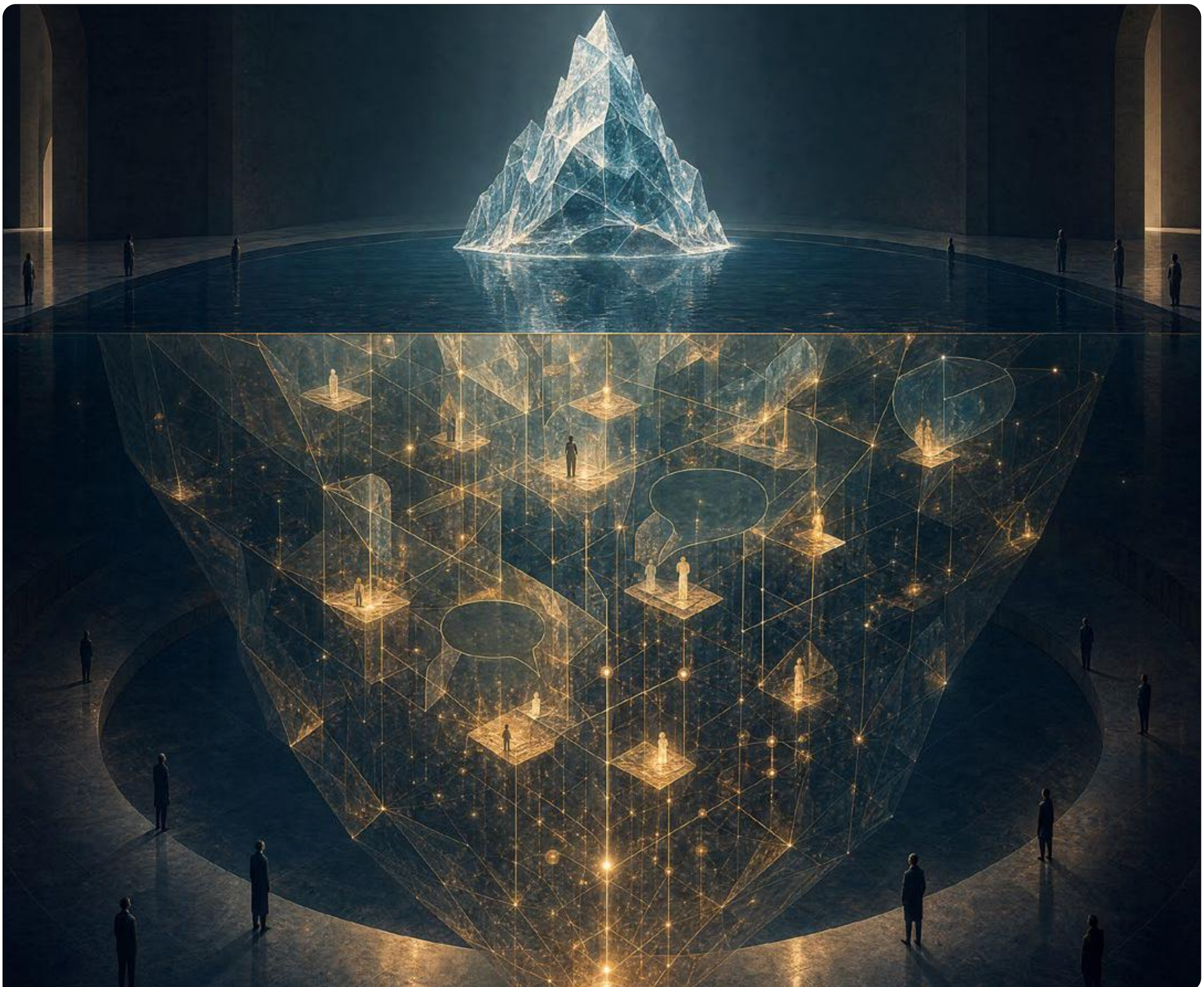
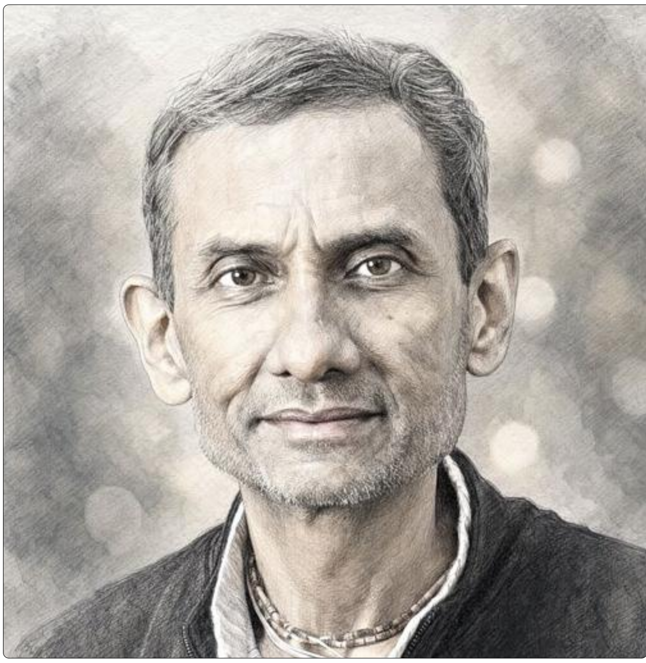
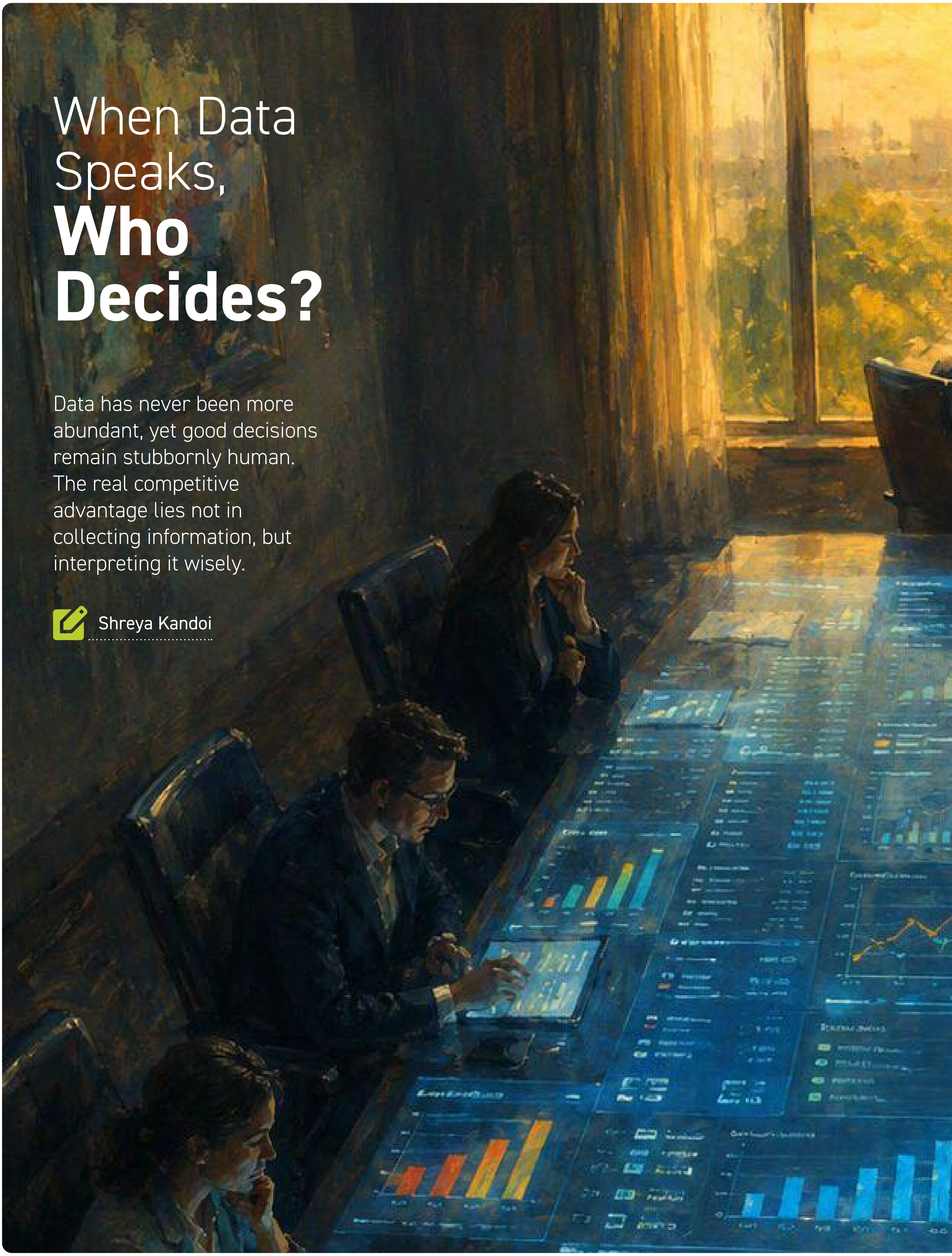


WHAT'S Inside





When Data Speaks, **Who Decides?**

Data has never been more abundant, yet good decisions remain stubbornly human. The real competitive advantage lies not in collecting information, but interpreting it wisely.

Shreya Kandoi

In most modern boardrooms, decisions do not begin with debate; they begin with a dashboard. Screens glow with real-time KPIs, and every movement of a customer, product, or process is instantly quantified and visualised. On the surface, it feels like control. It feels like clarity.

And yet, it often is not. Because when data speaks, the real question is: *who decides?*

Leaders today are surrounded by more information than at any point in history, but that abundance has not made decisions easier. If anything, it has made them harder, sometimes even overwhelming. As American social scientist Herbert Simon famously observed, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." What once sounded like a theoretical caution now feels like an everyday reality.

The problem is not a lack of data. It is what we have come to do with it.

Metrics Without Meaning

Dashboards were originally designed to simplify complexity. Over time, they have done the opposite. Layer by layer, metric by metric, they have evolved into dense systems that demand constant attention. Instead of guiding decisions, they often crowd them out.

Dashboards were designed to simplify complexity. Over time, they have done the opposite — instead of guiding decisions, they often crowd them out entirely

I have seen this up close while building reports, writing SQL queries, and designing dashboards meant to make decision-making easier. What stood out was not just how much data we had, but how often it left people circling back to the same question: *"So, what does this actually mean?"*

Because dashboards are very good at telling us *what* is happening.

They are far less effective at explaining *why.*

A spike in user activity looks like growth, until you realise it was driven by confusion and not engagement. A dip in retention looks like a crisis, until you uncover a natural seasonal shift. Numbers, in isolation, manage to be both precise and misleading at the same time.

As British statistician George Box put it, "All models are wrong, but some are useful." The risk lies in forgetting the first half.

From Data-Driven to Data-Dependent

Somewhere along the way, "data-driven" quietly became "data-dependent." Decisions began orbiting metrics, often at the cost of

intuition, context and experience. But the best decisions have never been purely numerical; in fact, they are acts of interpretation.

There is a certain rhythm to this process:

Numbers may whisper, numbers may shout,
But meaning is what we must figure out.
In charts we trust, in graphs we see,
Yet truth still needs humanity.

That missing layer — human judgment — is where direction begins.

Take something as simple as a drop in customer retention. It shows up instantly on a dashboard. At first glance, it looks like a clear problem.

But then the questions begin.

Is it the product experience? Is it pricing? Is it something breaking in onboarding? Or is it something harder to measure, like trust quietly eroding over time?

The dashboard does not answer that. It cannot.

Bridging this gap — from signal to understanding — is still a human effort.

And maybe that is where the real shift is happening. The role of data is no longer just about reporting numbers. It is about making sense of them. About connecting dots, asking better questions, and turning scattered signals into decisions that actually move the business forward.

The Discipline to Ignore

This also requires something we do not talk about enough: the discipline to ignore.

The organisations that stand out will not be the ones with the most data lakes, but those that make sense of the water

When everything is measurable, not everything is meaningful. Adding more metrics does not always bring more clarity; often, it does the opposite. The real skill lies in knowing what to focus on, and having the confidence to let the rest go.

Peter Drucker once said, "What gets measured gets managed." That still holds true. But today, it feels incomplete. Because in practice, what gets understood is what actually drives change.

The organisations that will stand out in the coming years will not be the ones with the most data lakes. They will be the ones that can make sense of the water — those that can cut through the noise, sit with ambiguity, and balance analytical rigour with human instinct.

Ultimately, dashboards do not make decisions. People do.

And while data can illuminate the path, it is judgement — shaped by context and experience — that decides where the path leads.

Shreya Kandoi
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The Favour Economy
The Currency Nobody Counts

The most influential currency in an organisation never appears on the balance sheet. It circulates through trust, favours and quiet obligations, creating opportunity for some while leaving others outside the ledger.

Pranava HS

Consider the Soviet Union. At its most sincere narrative level, it was a civilisation engineered on the principle of equality, where the market had been abolished and the needs of the people were to be met without the indignity of price. And consider how it actually ran: on favours. To get a decent meal, a hospital bed, or a word with the right official, you did not queue; you knew someone, who knew someone, who knew someone, and somewhere a debt was quietly recorded against your name.

Social scientists named this the "economy of favours"[1] — the unofficial channel through which goods and information moved through a bureaucracy too inefficient to deliver them otherwise. The most equal society on paper turned out to be infested with a ledger of who owed whom.

The favour economy did not die with the fall of the USSR; it remains embedded in the social fabric, the practices, and the moral instincts of peoples across regions. Which raises the possibility that this was never a symptom of the structure at all, but part of the structure itself. The favour is never free. French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss[2], writing about gift exchange a century ago, argued that every present carries a threefold obligation — to give, to receive, and, above all, to return — such that an unreciprocated gift leaves the recipient bound until the books are squared. The office has a softer vocabulary for the same equation: "a person easy to work with."

The Organisation Within

The favour is not a corruption of the

organisation; it is the organisation.

The reflex, on noticing the ledger, is to scrub out favouritism in the name of merit. But the favour is not the residue of the organisation; it is one of the legs it stands on. American sociologist Mark Granovetter's[3] problem with economists was exactly this: economic life is embedded in human relationships, with people leaning on particular others they trust. Trust does what contract cannot. Wherever people must co-ordinate under scarcity and uncertainty, they keep running ledgers of obligations. Strip the favours out, and you arrive at an engine that stalls.

The company, meanwhile, is the quiet beneficiary of all of it — harvesting the pooled social capital of its whole workforce for its own performance.[4]

Who Gets to Stand There

Being easy to work with is not a temperament; it is also a position.

> **The favour is not a corruption of the organisation; it is the organisation. Strip the favours out, and you arrive at an engine that stalls**

If abolition is not the way, the next honest inspection is: how is it kept? And the moment you ask that, the cosy picture of mutual back-scratching falls away. The keeping is not evenly shared. American sociologist Ronald Burt[5] put the matter into words without sentiment (paraphrased): advantage is a function of where you sit in the web of relationships, not how hard you row. Some people, astride gaps between disjointed groups — structural holes — hear of opportunities before others do. The better connected simply enjoy higher returns. Being affable, available, and fluent in reading the room's unwritten mannerisms is not simply a pleasant trait you happen to have. It is a position you are accruing.

Yet in this ungoverned space, a prior question arises — not *how* a position is accrued, but *who* is permitted to begin accruing one at all. Not everyone enters the network from

Being easy to work with is not a temperament; it is also a position. Not everyone enters the network from the same starting point

the same starting point.

A position can only be accumulated by those first allowed to stand in it. There is a blunt name for the barrier: inaccessibility. It tracks lineage, gender, ethnicity and region. But there is another term you are more familiar with — the old boys' club. The ties are inherited and activated rather than built from nothing. Which is to say, the door stood ajar for some people before they were born. The research is not subtle: women are shut out of the male networking that does the allocation — the dinners, the drinking, the rituals.

No Neutral Gallery

This brings us to the property of the ledger that makes it so resistant to reckoning: it is positional. The identical gesture — a senior pulling a junior up, a word in the right ear — reads as generous mentorship to those within, and as cronyism, gatekeeping, or the old guard to those without. Fairness here is not a property of the act itself, but a function of where you are standing. There is no neutral gallery from which to audit it.

So the discomfort does not resolve, and it is not meant to. It is the organisation; it is the unjust underbelly of how people "get things done".

What can be faced, rather than fixed, are its two asymmetries: that it pays out unequally based on which side of the debt you hold, and that it reads as virtue or vice depending on where you stand. The questions become: who is permitted to keep the ledger? And who is not permitted to pay in?

Which leaves the questions that you must answer: whose introduction first opened the door for you? And what can you do for everyone else?

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"Human Wisdom Will and Must Always Prevail"

Operations has evolved far beyond factories and supply chains, yet its fundamental purpose remains unchanged: creating value by transforming resources into outcomes customers value. In this conversation with *Rakshith S*, **Dr Ajith Kumar J**, Professor of Production, Operations & Decision Sciences at XLRI, argues that while AI, analytics and automation are reshaping operations, technology must remain guided by human judgement. He also explains why resilience, continual learning and a strong operational mindset will define successful organisations and future leaders.

Operations today is no longer confined to factories or supply chains. From healthcare to digital platforms and consulting, operational thinking seems central to organisational success. How do you define the evolving role of operations in modern business?

I've always seen operations management as a central instrument of value creation in organisations. In my view, an organisation's overall aim is to use inputs (raw materials) and resources (people, machines, knowledge, processes) to create outputs that its customers find value in and are willing to pay for. In simple words, I'd say an organisation exists to convert inputs to outputs using resources, and operations management is about identifying the tasks, processes and systems needed to do that, designing them, and then executing them. So I believe operational thinking is always at the core, and that's where an organisation's existence begins. Historically, even when other functions like marketing or corporate strategy were relatively nascent, I'd argue operations had to be mature enough to ensure the organisation's survival, let alone its success.

What I've seen change over the past three decades, though, is not the centrality of operations thinking but our growing reliance on IT systems. This shift has come from the explosive growth of IT during this time, which has made new services possible that weren't there before. So when e-commerce boomed in the early 2000s, I saw IT and the internet become the defining elements of operations. Similarly, when data analytics became increasingly commonplace after about 2010, I saw operational decisions start relying on it more and more. Today, I see AI playing an important role in operations too, just as it is in other functions. That's where I see operations changing globally.

In an era of disruptions, whether geopolitical tensions, supply chain bottlenecks, or demand volatility, organisations are constantly balancing efficiency with resilience. How should firms rethink operational excellence today?

Yes, I think the balance of efficiency with resilience is essential since disruptions occur without warning and have become common. One reliable way to achieve this balance is to establish and maintain solid integration with one's suppliers and customers using technology and develop strong partnerships with trust. When things are normal, this will help lower costs for all, while during disruptions, the understanding between supply chain members will foster the cooperation needed to return to normal quickly and bounce back.

Businesses are increasingly relying on AI, predictive analytics, and automation to optimise decision-making. In your view, where should organisations draw the line between algorithmic efficiency and managerial judgement?

I believe organisations must tightly embrace the understanding that technology and AI can never replace human judgement at the most fundamental levels. Owing to the fast rise of agentic AI, robotics and so on, I think human beings will no doubt be replaced in many roles. Yet, human thinking must guide the underlying discretion related to how AI and robotics are used. Managerial decision-making can take the aid of these but cannot be replaced by them, ever — and this is even more true at higher levels of leadership. Human wisdom will and must always prevail, and I don't think it should be blinded by the flashiness of technology, however good that technology is.

> **Technology and AI can never replace human judgement. Managerial decisions may take their aid, but human wisdom will and must always prevail**

For students from non-operations backgrounds joining the new batch, what steps would you suggest they take to build a strong foundation in this field?

My advice to them is to understand that much of operations is intuitive and common-sensical, or in other words, operations is essentially intuition and common sense with a structure.

Now, there is a basic level of numerical work involved in the study of the subject. But at the MBA level, it is not really 'mathematics' since one need not learn theorems, proofs, derivations and so on. What one needs to do, and which an XL student is very much capable of, is to visualise well and apply that visualisation to the problem at hand. Faculty members and fellow students are always available to discuss and help. The study of operations at XLRI will be an enjoyable experience if one keeps it simple and focused.

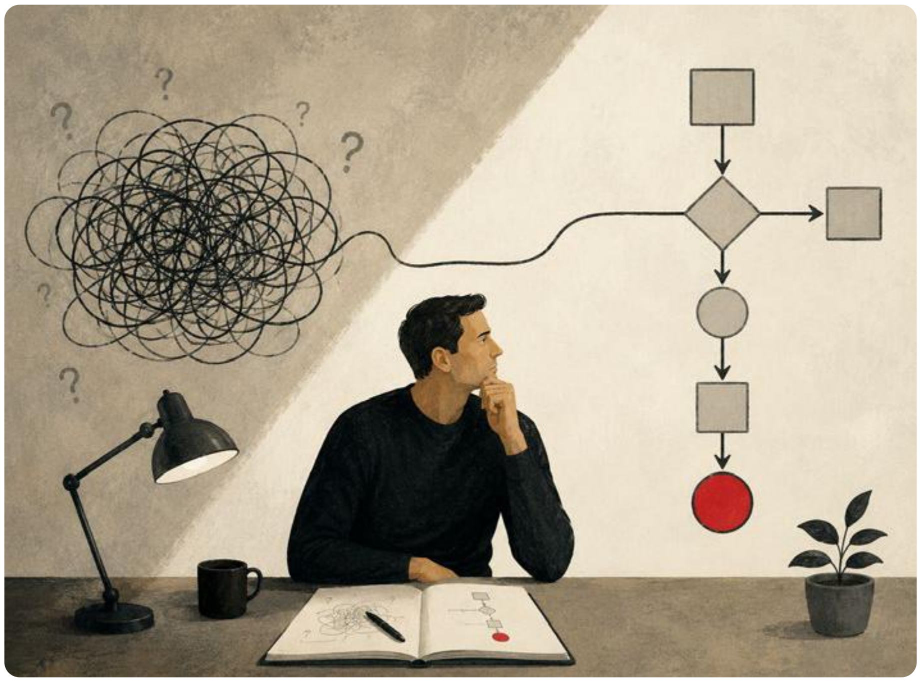
As sustainability and ESG considerations become integral to corporate strategy, how can operations leaders balance cost, speed, and scalability with the growing pressure for responsible and sustainable business practices?

My approach is to seek every opportunity to prevent harm to the world while conducting operations — whether that's reducing carbon emissions, non-degradable waste, land, water and air pollution, or noise. I think policy framing and so on is important, but at a deeper level, what's absolutely essential is a leader's inner conviction — a conscience that makes them want to not harm the world. I also think it's important for us to educate our students on the consequences of continued abuse of the external world by profit-making companies, and the harm it does to them too.

When companies pull off massive digital transformations, they usually obsess over the software. Based on your research, why do organisations so often underestimate the human learning curve during a major tech rollout?
I am not sure that they underestimate the human learning curve. In my understanding, many professional organisations today believe in human beings (their employees) as willing learners who can be trained to use the new technology. They keep that in mind when they invest. Of course, there will be resistance to learning and change, but good leaders figure out how to handle that. Then, there are considerations of speed, skill and so on, but these are also resolved by motivating employees in different ways to learn and grow.

A lot of operational wisdom is 'tacit', unwritten and picked up on the job. In today's world of remote and hybrid work, how can leaders keep this informal human wisdom from getting lost in digital silos?
I believe all wisdom essentially develops through practice and experience and cannot be formally taught. As remote and hybrid work increase, and as our engagement with AI increases owing to this relentless technology revolution, I think certain types of wisdom may become obsolete, but new and relevant wisdom will develop. When new forms of work become the norm and people gain exposure and experience in them over time, they will naturally develop the appropriate wisdom required to sustain and grow with such work. Of course, it's important for us to remember and remind each other that human wisdom cannot be superseded by technology, and that it is always more fundamental.

When we look at future tech like autonomous vehicles or automated warehouses, the media focuses on the engineering. From a management perspective, what are the hidden behavioural or structural barriers companies overlook?
From a management perspective, one major barrier is resistance to learning, which managers must not overlook. As this kind of technology is adopted, companies must thoughtfully arrange for appropriate training, motivation and mentoring so employees can learn quickly, adapt and enjoy their work.



Operations is essentially intuition and common sense with a structure. Keep it simple, visualise the problem well, and learning becomes enjoyable

For graduating MBA students stepping into the corporate world, what is the biggest mindset shift required to transition from absorbing knowledge to actively building a 'learning environment' for their teams?
I suggest that students moving from XL to the world of praxis contemplate this: we learnt plenty of concepts, theories, frameworks, methods and tools in this programme, but our best learning is not these. Our best learning is how to think clearly and comprehensively through problems without making hasty conclusions. Or, in other words, the most valuable takeaway from this programme is how to learn continually. The learning mindset.

A person with a matured learning mindset will remain open to possibilities, listen to others patiently, observe others, set the ego aside and be willing to change readily for the larger benefit of their organisation. I will be happy to see my students enter industry with this mindset. This mindset is infectious, and when others sense it in their colleagues, they are likely to appreciate it and be inspired by it. That in turn will naturally create a learning environment in the team, and over time, in the organisation as well.

Merit Needs a **MESSENGER**

Every organisation believes in merit. Few can recognise it before it proves itself. That is why recommendations matter — not as substitutes for talent, but as its first messenger.

Aryan Jain

Millions of videos are uploaded to YouTube every day. Hidden among them are masterpieces that may never be watched and mediocre ones that may become the next viral thing. The difference is rarely quality; it is visibility. Every video needs to keep proving its worth each time it is watched; first, however, it must be seen.

Meritocracy, surprisingly, follows a similar logic. While every organisation claims to uphold it, none has the luxury of discovering the merit in everyone. Somewhere between talent and


ommended.
Worth a look
Hiring.
(Project Alpha)

opportunity lies a quiet force bridging the gap: recommendation. Not a substitute, not a guarantee, but simply a messenger.

Why Merit Needs Introducing

We are tempted to think of merit as something obvious and quantifiable, captured through action verbs and numbers. But do they provide evidence of future competence? A résumé cannot reveal resilience, and an interview cannot truly measure judgement. Potential, by definition, is therefore invisible until tested.

And so every organisation confronts the same question: How do you identify merit before it has had the opportunity to prove itself?

A recommendation is often mistaken for preferential treatment or, worse, something closely related to nepotism. But the two are not the same. Nepotism succeeds without performance; a genuine recommendation merely creates the possibility of performance. The distinction is subtle but essential: one closes the doors to everything that follows, while the other simply opens the first door.

A recommendation is not a certificate of competence but a transfer of credibility from someone who has already earned it

A recommendation's true purpose, however, is something else entirely. It is not a certificate of competence but rather a transfer of credibility from someone who has already earned it. When a manager recommends a colleague or a professor advocates for a student, they are lending their reputation, not their influence — not eliminating merit but reducing uncertainty and helping organisations decide who deserves the opportunity to prove it.

Access can only begin the conversation, but merit alone must sustain it

Access Must Earn Accountability

But this function holds only as long as accountability accompanies access. When access becomes immune to accountability, recommendations stop serving merit, cease to be messengers, and become gatekeepers instead.

Every workplace runs on an invisible exchange of advice, introductions, referrals and mentorship. These circulate quietly alongside salaries and KPIs, rarely recorded in any system, yet consistently shaping careers. They constitute an informal economy of opportunity, one that operates in parallel with official processes and, for many people, determines far more about their trajectory than any formal evaluation ever will. Recognising this exchange is not a call to eliminate it, but to make it more deliberate and better understood.

Merit has rarely spoken loudly for itself. It requires someone or something to carry its message before it has the opportunity to speak for itself. Whether that messenger is a social media algorithm, a professor's letter or a colleague's referral, the underlying principle remains the same.

Access can only begin the conversation, but merit alone must sustain it.

In the end, messengers should never determine who succeeds. They can and should determine only who gets the chance to prove why they deserve to.

Aryan Jain
is a first-year PGDM(LSCM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

"Be Curious, Be Brave, Enjoy the Journey"

XLRI alumnus **Tamal Pal**, National Head of Marketing for Automotive Steels at Tata Steel India, has spent over 14 years navigating roles across marketing, sales, innovation and supply chain planning — experiences that have shaped his belief that the most rewarding careers are rarely linear. In conversation with *Arjun Raisurana*, he reflects on embracing unconventional opportunities, why curiosity and courage matter more than meticulous career planning, how marketing fundamentals remain constant despite technological change, and the transformation of automotive steel as electric vehicles, advanced materials and AI reshape one of manufacturing's most dynamic industries.

You spent over a decade at Tata Steel and today lead marketing for automotive steels in India. If you had to describe your professional journey in one theme or philosophy that has guided you through these years, what would it be?

Like a typical manager, I'll break this into three parts: be curious, be brave, and enjoy the journey.

My biggest learning from the past 13-odd years at Tata Steel is that, especially early in your career but really throughout it, you should grab any opportunity that appears interesting when it's placed in front of you, even if it comes out of turn, even if it's not what you expected. I've stayed within marketing and sales more or less the whole time, but within that I started in automotive marketing, moved to automotive sales, then into an innovation role, then spent a period handling a retail brand, supply chain, digital marketing, and setting up the housing and commercial segment of that new brand. Then I came back to automotive for a while, made a pivot into supply chain planning for a new product segment, and I've now come back to automotive in a different role again. I'll be honest, most of this wasn't planned. Opportunities kept coming up, they looked interesting, and I went for it.

That ties into the second part, be brave, because we Indians tend to keep an eye on how a decision will look on paper. Most of these moves were, on paper, unconventional choices: switching tracks in quick succession rather than specialising in one area, which very few people do. But looking back, this made my profile multi-disciplinary within marketing and sales, and that's actually given me an edge later in my career when I've gone for new responsibilities, simply because of how diverse the experience is.

And that leads to the third part, enjoy the journey. Engineers-turned-managers like me tend to believe we control our own destiny, that our 30-year career path is chalked out clearly. It doesn't work like that, and maybe that's exactly where the fun, the magic, is. You start doing one thing; something else comes up; you do that instead, and over time you realise you've built capabilities and discovered potential in yourself that you didn't know were there. Enjoying that journey, rather than being fixated only on the end goal, has probably been the real source of satisfaction in my career so far; it's a bit like that saying: the road less travelled often leads to the most profound experiences.

You started your career at XLRI and have grown through multiple roles across marketing, sales, innovation, and planning. Looking back, which role taught you the most about the steel industry and how it actually works?

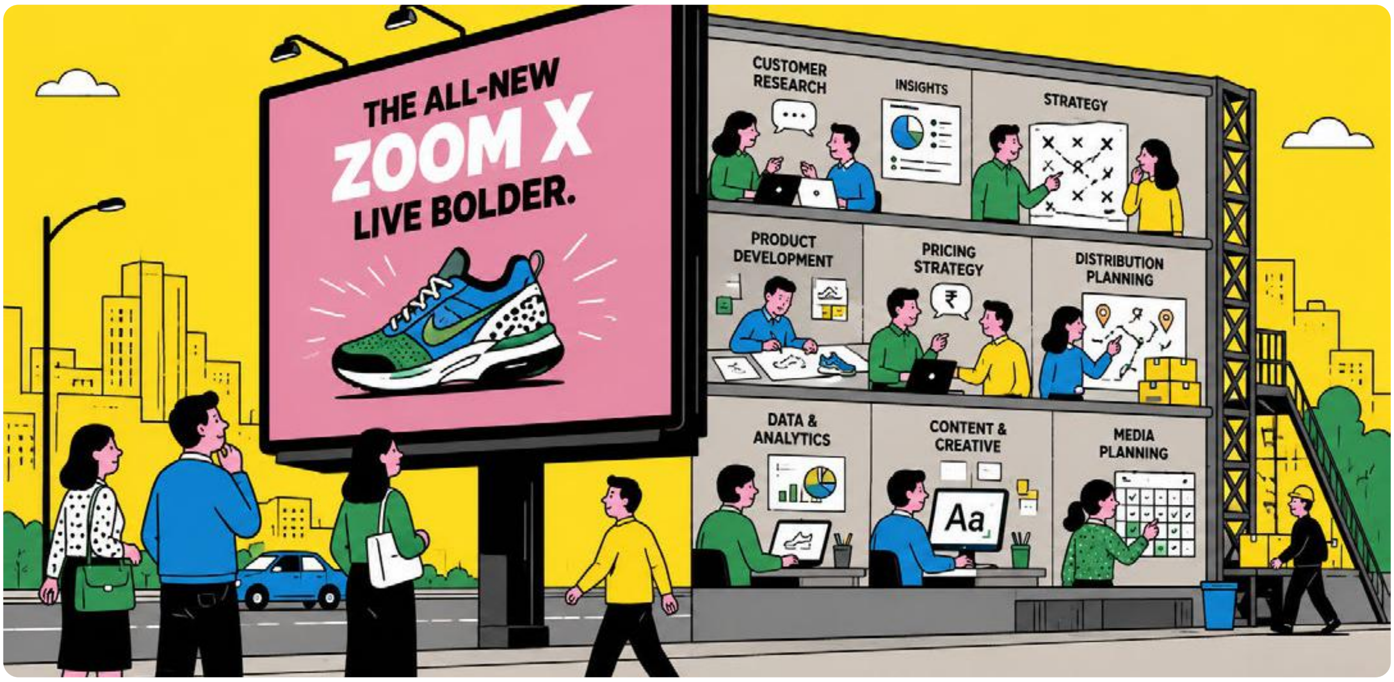
My biggest learning has been that the steel industry, at least on the customer side, is nowhere close to being the monolithic, homogeneous thing people imagine. It can be as diverse as you can think of.

On one extreme, you have large B2B customers with very specific technical requirements — the role I currently handle, automotive steel, where Tata Steel services all the major automotive OEMs in India — involves large buyers and, as textbook B2B marketing would put it, almost entirely rational decision-making. On the other side, our company also makes branded products, TMT bars, roofing sheets, and newer products like Tata Pravesh steel doors and windows, which I was actually part of during its incubation and scale-up. That's a completely different world, a retail, lifestyle product, where the decision-maker is the lady of the house, and her considerations are things like how a door will match the colour of the walls or the furniture, not purely cost versus output.

So that's the spectrum my own company operates in, and most large steel companies globally operate somewhere on a similarly wide spectrum: SME customers, government customers, B2B, B2C, each with a completely different set of buying criteria. But the one constant through all of it is that the basics of marketing and sales don't change. It always comes down to the four Ps: what does the customer need and what product am I offering; how do I reach them, my supply chain, my route to market; what's my price point, which isn't just about margin but about how I position myself in terms of premiumness, aspiration, and affordability; and finally, brand positioning, which part of the customer's decision I consciously want to be part of, because I can't be everything to everybody. On the sales side, it comes down to staying close to the customer and staying attentive to their stated and latent needs. Technology, digital tools, and now AI have augmented all of these processes over time, but the basics underneath have stayed the same; only the outward manifestation keeps changing.

The automotive steel industry itself is going through a period of rapid change, driven by EVs, the push towards lightweight materials, and ongoing supply chain disruption.

> **Grab any opportunity that appears interesting when it's placed in front of you, even if it's not what you expected**



How is the automotive steel business evolving to support this transformation?
Lightweighting, alongside crash safety, has been the key focus area in automotive for a long time, and that pushes a continuous shift towards higher tensile grades, advanced high-strength steels, ultra-high-strength steels, gigapascal steels. That's been happening since before I joined the industry and will keep happening. We're now developing next-generation steels, complex phase, TRIP steel, and press-hardened steel with strength levels reaching 1,500, 1,800, even 2,000 megapascals.

EVs have actually fast-tracked this trend, because the battery adds a fixed amount of weight to the vehicle, and if you don't offset that, your range suffers. That's pushing a shift from traditional cold-forming steels towards hot-stamping and cold-stamping steels, press-hardened steel, essentially, which practically nobody in India has been making until now, though the European, American, Korean, and Japanese steel industries have been building towards exactly this for years, and we know it will be the mainstay over the next 5 to 10 years.

EVs have also brought entirely new components that didn't exist in an ICE car — EV battery casings, for instance — where steel companies are actively working with automotive OEMs to figure out the right specification. Electrical steels are another area — until now, mostly supplied to transmission-type applications — but EVs need a higher grade, higher-silicon CRNO electrical steel, at close to 2 per cent silicon content, and we expect demand for that grade to grow 20 to 30 per cent year on year.

> **Branding and advertising is the snazzy part of marketing, but it's really just the fourth P: promotion. The real work begins with understanding the customer**

In an industry like steel, where production cycles are long and demand is volatile, how do you balance customer needs, operational constraints, and market opportunities?
I'll answer this based on how I've seen my own company handle it. We've typically operated in an environment where customer demand exceeds what we can supply, in a sense, we're lucky to have always operated in a supply-constrained scenario.

What the company aspires to do, and what I think any company should do, is take a portfolio view of the market: within your addressable product basket, try to have some presence across every market segment you can serve, however big or small. Alongside that, have very clear strategic clarity on which two or three segments are your intentional, chosen focus, based on margin, or strategic importance to future growth, and make sure you deliver superior service and hold a leadership position there. That's your day-to-day mode of operation. When disruptions happen, having presence

Technology, digital tools and AI have transformed how we work, but the fundamentals of understanding customers and delivering value haven't changed

across the whole spectrum lets you pivot and reallocate volumes in the short term, so your own output and revenue don't take the hit.

As for long lead times, that's going to remain part of the steel industry's landscape, but the push should always be to shorten it. We're not going to be able to deliver steel in 10 minutes like a quick-commerce app, but one of our senior leaders put it well in the media a while back: if not steel in 10 minutes, why not steel in 72 hours? Getting there is about better planning, keeping the right stock in the right places, and using technology, digital tools, and analytics. Now AI adds another layer of both complexity and efficiency. You have to keep innovating and pushing that boundary to stay ahead of the competition.

Many people think marketing is mainly about branding and advertising, but in industrial sectors it looks very different. How would you explain the real meaning of B2B marketing in this industry?

Branding and advertising is the snazzy part of marketing, but it's really just the fourth P: promotion. Even in industries where branding is heavily used, the other three Ps remain just as important and just as present. In B2B, advertising and branding do exist, just not in the traditional sense: we have B2B brands aimed at our SME customers, who buy our steel sheets to make fabricated items or appliances, and we still supply those through a branded route. In the automotive space, there's a second kind of brand: specific, proprietary, high-end products, similar to how some European steelmakers have branded proprietary grades of their own.

But the basics, what I as a marketing manager spend most of my time on, come down to identifying who my customer is and developing a strategy to serve them, and identifying how my customer's needs are evolving, or spotting new needs altogether. That's really the crux of B2B marketing. And then it's the same four Ps again: what does the customer want and what can I offer, how do I reach them, what's my supply chain and route to market, and how do I price it, which in a B2B automotive setup is far more complex than retail pricing, though it still follows certain formulas and benchmarks. And even in a very technical field like automotive, promotion still matters: product brochures, thought leadership, conferences, seminars, and joint development workshops with customers.

How did working in supply chain planning shape the way you think about markets and customers today?

That experience, which, in my organisation, is technically still part of marketing and sales, just the planning side of it, made me far more aware of the sheer complexity

> **The steel industry isn't the monolithic business people imagine. Every customer segment has different needs, but the basics of marketing remain the same**

of the back end: steel manufacturing, the operations around it, and the massive scale of steel logistics. When you're in marketing or sales handling customers in a region, you're vaguely aware of it, but once you get up close to a 20-million-tonne company and see how that production is planned across multiple sites, the interdependencies between them, and how the raw material side works too — 20 million tonnes of output essentially means 80 million tonnes of material moving, 40 million inbound and 40 million outbound — you get a real sense of the enormous scale of operations behind every 5-tonne or 10-tonne batch we eventually supply to a customer. That appreciation for the scale of what happens in the back end was my key takeaway from that stint.

You work closely with cross-functional teams across operations, logistics, and sales. What leadership lessons have you learned about aligning diverse teams toward a common business objective?
I have fairly strong views here. The conventional wisdom is that people in big organisations are comfortable working in silos, but what I've actually seen is that if management can lower ambiguity and raise clarity around business requirements and deliverables, that alone results in higher participation, higher enthusiasm, and far higher quality of output, even from a genuinely cross-functional, multi-disciplinary team.

Four things need to be in place for this to work. First, strategic clarity: what exactly this project should deliver, and how it fits into the broader strategy of the department or company. Second, how clearly management communicates the expected outcomes and deliverables, which flows into clear roles, objectives, and KPIs for individual team members. Third, periodic reviews and feedback, with course correction whenever needed. And underlying all of it, giving the team a sense that their work genuinely matters to the organisation: that's why senior leaders are spending time reviewing progress and giving guidance. I've seen, very directly, that getting these basics right lets even a very diverse team deliver quickly and efficiently, and the reverse is just as true when you don't.

If you were advising young professionals entering industries like manufacturing, automotive, or supply chain, what capabilities define the leaders of the next decade?
I'd frame this across three paradigms. The first is personal capability: what leaders should build within themselves. Comfort with new technologies, digital tools, analytics, and AI has to be paramount. I've watched, over the last ten years, digital tools and analytics go from being someone else's department to being close to my second language. And AI has now put that into overdrive: analysis that used to take me real time now happens in seconds. Alongside that is comfort working within a globally interconnected supply chain — even domestic-only companies today have dependencies running through other countries — and leaders need a systems-level view to operate effectively in that.

The second paradigm is what the industry and other stakeholders will expect from leaders: the ability to work with agility and adaptability in an environment that is genuinely, constantly Vuca (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous), not as a cliché, but as lived daily reality. We thought Covid was a black-swan event, and now the current Middle East conflict is having a comparable impact on supply chains to what we saw in late 2019 and 2020. Alongside that, an understanding

of ESG and environmental regulation — Europe has already shown where this is headed, and it's becoming mainstream fast across India and the rest of Asia too — and the ability to treat that not just as a compliance requirement but as a genuine lever for competitive advantage.

The third paradigm is people development. An innovation mindset, the courage and conviction to spot and back the next big shift as new technologies and business models disrupt incumbents faster than ever, will matter more, not less. And so will the ability to manage talent across genuinely diverse backgrounds and needs, because the span of generations a leader has to manage is only widening, from Boomers to Gen X to Millennials to Gen Z, and now Gen Alpha coming in, alongside an increasingly global, culturally mixed talent pool. The gap between generations that my own boss had to manage was smaller than what I'll have to manage, and it'll be wider again for the leaders who come after me.

If not steel in 10 minutes, why not steel in 72 hours? Better planning, technology and analytics are constantly pushing that boundary

Outside of work, what are some hobbies and activities that help you disconnect and recharge?

I've always dabbled in a lot of things, but a few have stuck as responsibilities have grown. First is live performances, I always prefer seeing something live over a recorded version. I'm a big stand-up comedy fan; I've been following the Indian stand-up scene for almost 10 to 12 years now, and if one of my favourites is performing in town, you can take it for granted I'll be in that auditorium. I have a similar set of musicians whose shows I never miss; some of them I've followed for so long they've genuinely become friends, since they've kept seeing me across different concerts.

Like most Indian men, I follow sports fairly religiously, but unlike most, I don't follow cricket much these days. One of my old loves that I've rediscovered since Covid is basketball; I watched a lot of NBA as a kid, and even though it's not on TV here anymore, between the NBA app, Amazon Prime, and YouTube, I've gotten properly back into it over the last four or five years.

The third thing, which I don't get as much time for these days, and I'm reminding myself as much as anyone that I need to get back to it, is making memes. A few friends and I actually set up one of the largest meme communities in Bengal, on Facebook, years ago. It's still active; we've all gotten a little older and busier, but whenever we catch up, we always say we need to get back into meme-making, because there's a particular joy in putting your own unique take on whatever's happening, that I've genuinely missed.

If you could go back and give one piece of advice to your younger self just starting at XLRI, what would it be?

This is something my younger self wouldn't want to hear, but I think it's worth sharing anyway: don't do an MBA as a fresher. I did mine straight out of college, and once I actually joined the industry, I realised how much I'd missed. Even during the MBA itself, I could see how classmates with three or four years of work experience, especially in a product-based setup, manufacturing, or FMCG sales, were able to absorb what was being taught, and bring their own perspective to it, in a way I simply couldn't. I'd draw a blank, because I didn't yet know what working in a corporate actually felt like. Once I started working, a lot of what had been taught suddenly clicked. If I had the choice again, the one thing I'd change about my XLRI journey is working for at least a couple of years before starting the MBA.

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CEO LOUNGE

The Favour Economy Has a Gender

The workplace's most valuable currency isn't always performance. It's informal access, favours and invisible labour — and women pay disproportionately for each

Prateek Singh Patel

Every workplace has two economies. The first is visible: salaries, titles and performance reviews. The second runs quietly underneath: who gets the early morning coffee chat with the managing director, whose name gets floated before a project is announced, who is called "a pleasure to work with", and who is simply called available. This hidden economy of favours, introductions and informal access is not neutral. In India, it has a gender, and it exacts a price that never appears on any balance sheet.

The Hidden Economy

In most Indian workplaces, the most consequential decisions — promotions, project allocations and client introductions — happen long before they are formalised. They emerge during post-meeting dinners, after town halls, or over an informal chai. These moments are shaped by who is in the room and who has already left for home.

Research published in the *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy* (2024) shows that workplace networks evolve through homophily, the tendency to refer and recommend people who resemble ourselves. When senior leadership is predominantly male, informal sponsorship and referrals naturally favour men. With India ranking 129th out of 146 countries in

Women are 48 per cent more likely to volunteer for non-promotable work, while managers are 44 per cent more likely to assign it to them

the WEF Global Gender Gap Index 2024, these informal networks often become the primary route to senior leadership.

Yet exclusion is only half the story. Women do not merely remain outside the favour economy; they also sustain it. Women are 48 per cent more likely to volunteer for non-promotable work, while managers are 44 per cent more likely to assign such work to them. They organise onboarding, resolve conflicts and make introductions that benefit colleagues. When men perform these tasks, they are recognised as exceptional. When women do, it becomes the baseline expectation. The favour generates career capital for others while costing women time, visibility and advancement.

The Currency of Favour and Access

To understand why women participate less in these networks, one must follow them home. India's NSO Time Use Survey 2024 shows women spend nearly five hours a day on unpaid domestic and care work, almost eight times more than men. An IIM Indore study estimates that women generate 87 per cent of the economic value of unpaid care work in India, labour that remains invisible in GDP calculations, performance reviews and promotion decisions.

The woman leaving work at 6.30 pm is often not disengaging from work but beginning another shift. She misses the networking dinner or after-hours conversation where opportunities emerge. Research on Indian corporates shows that leaving on time is frequently interpreted as a lack of commitment, even when domestic responsibilities make that choice unavoidable. The workplace rewards time, presence and availability — resources women are structurally less able to offer.

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Women do not merely remain outside the favour economy; they also sustain it. The favour generates career capital for others while costing women time, visibility and advancement

The Cost of Being 'Easy to Work With'

There is a particular compliment many professional women learn to receive cautiously: "She's so easy to work with."

Often, it describes someone who accepted the last-minute presentation, stayed back for the difficult client, or quietly absorbed additional responsibilities without asking for recognition.

Women carrying this invisible workload are 21 per cent less likely to be promoted and earn 18 per cent less than men. Every hour spent on non-promotable work is an hour unavailable for high-visibility projects or career-building skills. Over time, this becomes a structural transfer of career capital from women to the organisations that depend on their invisible labour.

When Flexibility Becomes an Expectation

Once a woman has shown she will absorb the overflow — staying late, remaining flexible and avoiding conflict — the favour quickly becomes an expectation.

Norms that reward constant availability reinforce the sticky floor, keeping women in roles filled with invisible work, while the glass ceiling limits movement into leadership. These are not separate barriers but parts of the same system. The hidden economy of favours connects them.

Opening the Ledger

If organisations are serious about gender equity, invisible labour must become visible. Companies should audit who performs non-promotable work and recognise those contributions in performance evaluations.

They must also move beyond mentorship to formal sponsorship, ensuring senior leaders actively advocate for women's advancement instead of leaving access to informal networks. Finally, flexibility should become a structural policy through hybrid work, shared parental leave, and reducing reliance on after-hours networking for career progression. Many multinational companies and several Indian firms have already begun adopting these practices.

None of these reforms eliminates the unequal care burden overnight. But workplaces that wait for society to change first will continue extracting labour from women who are effectively working two full-time jobs, only one of which appears on a payslip or advances a career.

Prateek Singh Patel *is a first-year PGDM(HRM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur*

"Pace Without Process Becomes Hype"

An Indian Army veteran with more than two decades of experience across military logistics and corporate supply chains, **Lt Col Anirban Das** now leads Risk Analysis, Loss Prevention & Business Continuity at Delhivery. Speaking with *Bhavey Malhotra*, he reflects on why resilient leaders thrive amid ambiguity, why process matters more than pace, and how organisations often tolerate the small operational losses that eventually become significant ones.

What's the simplest way to describe your day job without it sounding like a job title?
It is to protect value. As deliveries move through our network, value is generated at every step, and my day-to-day job is making sure there's no leakage of that value anywhere along the way. A good part of it is also prediction: looking at previous incidents and how we responded to them, and using that to get ahead of the next one — predict it first, then plug the gap before it opens up.

We've covered almost 95-96 per cent of India's PIN codes at this point, barring a very few, and we're still growing.

What's one operational habit from your army days that still shapes the way you work today?
Situational awareness. In the army, you simply had to have it. Every operational decision demanded that you stay aware of where you were, what could happen next, and what your next step would be if it did. That has translated very well into my day-to-day work at Delhivery as well.

You once wrote that most supply chain losses aren't hidden but tolerated. What makes these losses so easy to overlook, and how do you make them visible?
That resonates with me. That post was something of an afterthought, but what I meant then, and still mean, is this: when a system scales up, whether it's e-commerce or logistics, to the size ours has, there are very small leakages running through it. If they aren't checked, found or stopped, they have the potential to become a much larger cumulative loss.

And once it becomes a cumulative loss, those smaller pieces have already become a habit. That's where, behaviourally, we need to step in, because once people see the cumulative total, they realise it's a genuinely large number. Once they

understand what's been slipping through, nobody wants that to continue. It's always better to be safe than sorry.

Veterans are often known for staying calm under pressure. When does composure make the difference between escalation and resolution?

In a company like Delhivery — or honestly, in any e-commerce or logistics business today — pace is of utmost importance. But pace without process becomes hype, and in the long run there's a real possibility of the system breaking. There has to be a synergy, a balance, between pace and process.

If your processes are stable, if you have a phenomenally robust process in place, pace follows automatically. That's where calm comes in: you have to stay calm to bring pace and process together. It's really a matter of three Ps: people, process and pace.

Pace without process becomes hype, and in the long run there's a real possibility of the system breaking

In the army, it's often said you worry about the threats you can't see. Logistics can be much the same. What parallels do you see between the two?

Ambiguity is the thing I'd point to. In the army, you have a lot of drills in place. The processes are set so that you prepare, practise and prepare again, enabling you to handle any ambiguous situation or breakdown in the system. That's resilience.

In logistics, the difference is that you're working with a vast amount of data. So even if you can't exactly see a disruption coming, you can often anticipate it. You know there's likely to be a fluctuation here or there. Of course, there are aberrations — extreme events like what we saw during Covid, or today's geopolitical situations — where you genuinely don't know what's coming or how it's going to hit. Apart from that, though, you're generally working with trends, somewhat prepared and able to foresee at least part of what's ahead. That's where the difference lies, but at the core, the DNA remains the same.

With quick commerce and the gig economy expanding rapidly, what will resilient supply chain leadership require over the next few years?

It has to be comfort with ambiguity, if I may call it that. There are so many ifs and buts built in. We were just hearing, a while back, about a company with a ship carrying $22 million worth of shipments stuck at a port. It had all the technology, all the tracking and all the data in place, and still something happened that was

Operations Quickfire

Real discipline, to you, is...
Discipline.

The trait you trust most in operations...
Integrity.

A resilient leader must always protect...
Process.

Your default operating model in a crisis...
Process.

The most overrated word in corporate leadership...
Control.

Speed without control is...
Doom.

Your leadership style, in one word...
Disciplined.

completely beyond its control.

That amount of ambiguity means a leader today has to be technically very sound because technology — AI in particular — is advancing at a phenomenal pace when it comes to decision-making, gathering data and helping organisations act quickly. But even so, there's enormous scope for ambiguity, where things won't always resolve into a neat A, B or C. There's no plug-and-play, and there are no playbooks yet, in this age of AI.

Which operational metric do you think gets too much attention, and which one deserves far more?
From my lens, it's speed — or pace, whatever you want to call it. I wouldn't say it's overrated exactly; it's a requirement. But pace alone, at the cost of every other factor, isn't a fully robust or viable solution.

Processes, on the other hand, are genuinely underrated. If the processes aren't in place, you don't get real pace anyway. Pace is what's talked about constantly. Timelines and hourly metrics get discussed all the time, but the robustness of the processes behind them doesn't get nearly as much attention. So from where I sit, process is underrated, while speed gets most of the attention.

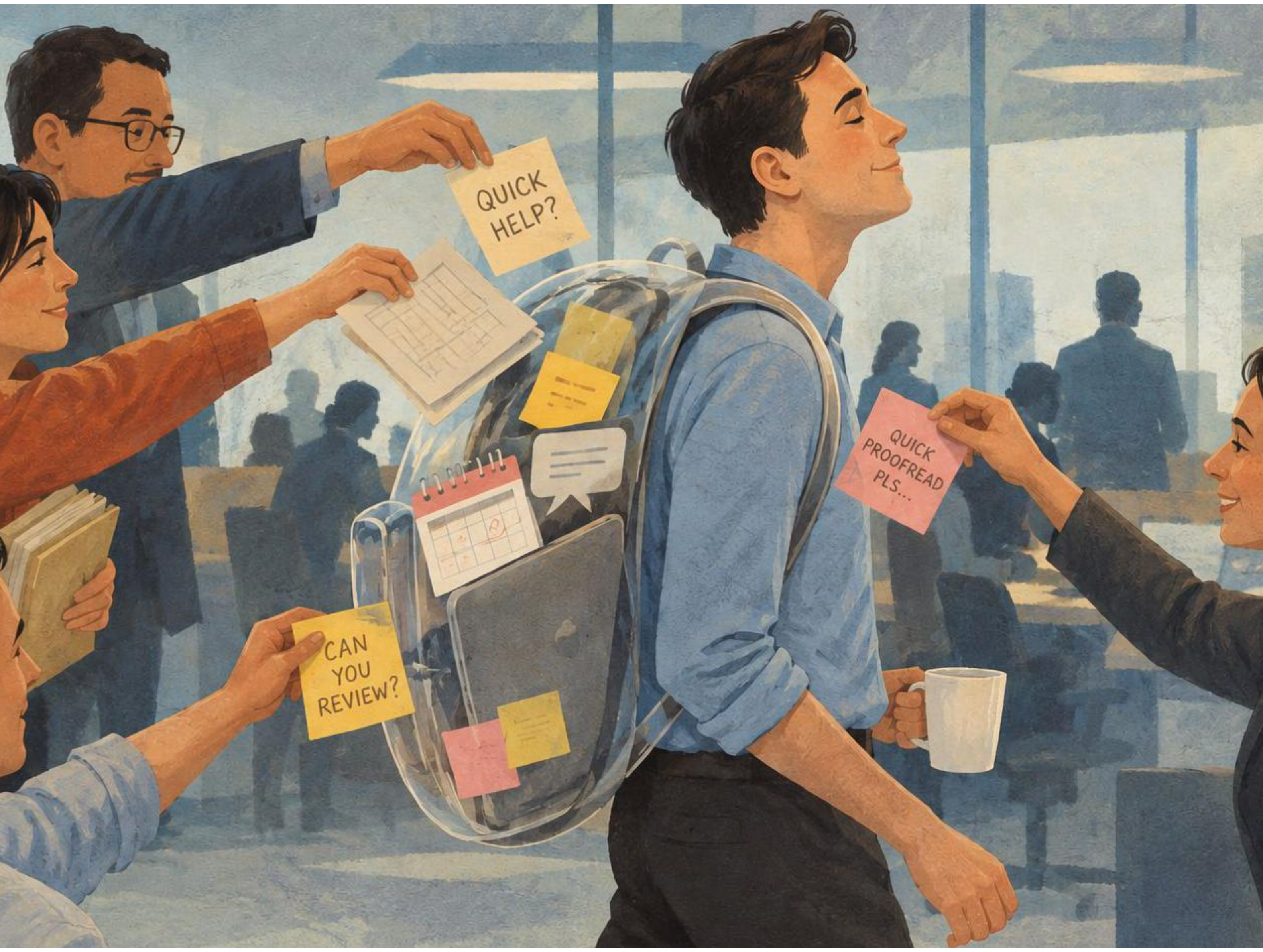
When small leakages aren't checked, found or stopped, they have the potential to become a much larger cumulative loss

Finally, for our readers, what advice would you give a young manager who wants to become exceptional in supply chain?
You have to be grounded. Operations begins on the ground. Dashboards and what's actually happening on the ground will always have some gap between them. If you're only looking at dashboards and not doing the groundwork — or only on the ground and not looking at the dashboards — the two won't match.

A young leader entering operations has to start from scratch, right on the ground. Observe what's happening around you, understand what's actually going on, and only then raise your game to see the bigger picture. The starting point is always to observe, understand how things are moving, see what's really happening, and only then come to the metrics.

The Quiet Invoice

Why the most 'easy to work with' person on your team is quietly running a deficit.



Rohan Srivastava

There is a particular kind of compliment that should worry you. It usually arrives in a performance review, or in the corridor after a crisis has been averted: "You're so easy to work with." It sounds like praise. It is often, in fact, an invoice: one that never gets itemised, never gets paid, and never stops arriving.

Every organisation runs two economies side by side. The first is the one on the org chart: titles, mandates, reporting lines, KPIs. The second is invisible. It runs on favours, introductions and goodwill, and is arguably the one that actually moves decisions. Who gets looped into the strategic email. Who gets the unofficial heads-up before the formal announcement. Who gets vouched for in a room they're not in. None of this shows up on a balance sheet, but everyone who has worked inside an institution for more than a year can feel its weight.

Harvard Business School researchers Rob Cross, Reb Rebele and Adam Grant spent two decades mapping exactly this terrain through what they call organisational network analysis — essentially X-raying a company to see who actually talks to whom, and who gets asked for what. Their finding (see Figure 1), drawn from a study spanning more than 300 organisations, is stark: a small sliver of employees — typically just 3 to 5 per cent — end up supplying 20 to 35 per cent of all the value-added collaboration in a firm. These are not the loudest people in the building. They are simply the ones who said yes once, did it well, and were never given the option to stop.

When Help Becomes Expectation

This is the cost of being easy to work with. Flexibility, the first time, reads as competence and generosity. The fifth time, it reads as availability. By the twentieth time, it has quietly become an expectation — not written into any job description, never negotiated, but somehow binding. Cross and his co-authors note that the same researchers who once cheered the rise of cross-functional, collaborative work are now watching it curdle into a structural hazard. Collaborative time has risen by more than 50 per cent over the past two decades and, at many firms, now consumes roughly 80 per cent of the working week, leaving little room for the work people are actually evaluated on (see Figure 2).

What makes this especially worth a B-school audience's attention is who tends to absorb it. The same body of research found that emotionally taxing, time-intensive helping — the kind that costs real bandwidth rather than just a quick answer — disproportionately lands on people already inclined to say yes, with a measurable gender skew in who gets asked and who gets credited for it. The favour economy, in other words, is not distributed by merit. It is distributed by whoever forgot to build a boundary.

The Invisible Tax

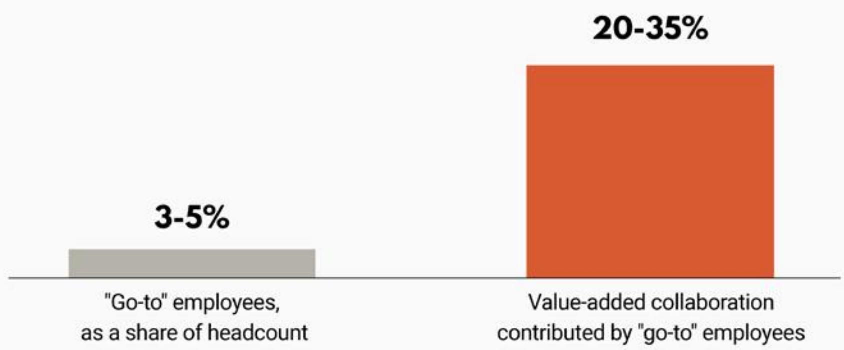
None of this is an argument against helping. Institutions like ours run substantially on informal generosity — the senior who makes the introduction, the batchmate who shares interview notes, the professor who makes time outside office hours. The point is narrower and more uncomfortable: goodwill, unmanaged, becomes a tax that falls hardest on the most capable and the most agreeable, while the ledger stays invisible to everyone except the person paying it.

The corporate world has started building instruments to make this economy visible — network maps, workload audits and the deliberate redistribution of 'go-to' status. B-schools have no such instrument yet. But the pattern is identical: the person who never says no eventually has no time left to say yes to the thing that was actually theirs.

The currency of favour and access will keep circulating either way. The only real choice is whether you spend it, or whether it spends you.

Figure 1

Who actually carries the favour economy at work



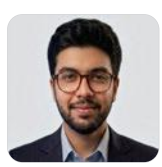
Source: Cross, Rebele & Grant, "Collaborative Overload," *Harvard Business Review*, Jan–Feb 2016. Study of more than 300 organisations; 20–35% of value-added collaboration comes from just 3–5% of employees.

Figure 2

Collaboration has quietly eaten the work week

Source: Cross, Rebele & Grant, "Collaborative Overload," *Harvard Business Review*, Jan–Feb 2016. Illustration based on the reported 50%+ rise in collaborative time and the finding that collaboration now accounts for roughly 80% of the work week at many firms. Additional supporting data: Uber internal research, cited in *Harvard Business Review*, "Collaboration Overload Is Sinking Productivity" (2021)

Flexibility, the first time, reads as competence and generosity. By the twentieth time, it has quietly become an expectation



Rohan Srivastava
is a first-year PGDM(HRM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

The Conversations We Keep **POSTPONING**

In Mumbai, the Xplore Roundtable explored a reality familiar to every organisation: the conversations that shape the future are often the ones that wait the longest. Teams recognise them, leaders sense them, and cultures adapt around them. Across industries, the discussions examined how organisations build the confidence to surface difficult truths, strengthen influence, and sustain the everyday behaviours that quietly keep work moving.

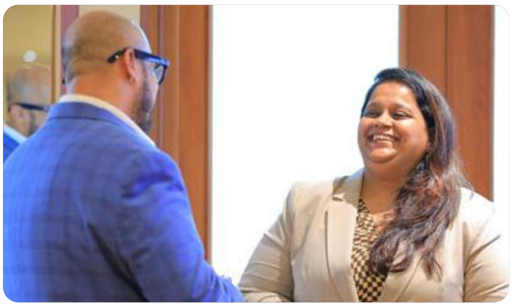
Every organisation develops its own operating language. Some parts are written into policies and processes. Others travel through habits, signals, timing, and judgement. These unwritten patterns influence how issues are raised, how decisions gather momentum, how trust develops, and how execution finds its rhythm. The conversations explored the quiet disciplines that help organisations move forward with clarity, even when the path begins with a difficult conversation.

Naming What Everyone Already Knows

Some realities arrive in a room long before they are spoken. Participants reflected on how shared awareness shapes behaviour, priorities, and decision-making, even while the subject remains untouched. The discussion explored how experienced leaders create the conditions where important conversations emerge naturally, allowing clarity to replace assumption and shared understanding to strengthen the quality of decisions.

The First Voice That Changes the Room

Every meaningful conversation begins with someone choosing to speak. Leaders reflected on how timing, phrasing, and emotional awareness influence whether a difficult point becomes an opportunity for progress. The discussion centred on creating environments where candour travels with respect, questions invite reflection, and where a thoughtful intervention can shift the direction of an entire discussion.



Attendees: **Amit Jaju**, Ankura Consulting; **Avinash Kaul**, author; **Bhavesh**, Lakhani; **Devendra Rane**, Atman Care; **Kamlendra Srivastava**, Countrywide Commodity Repository Limited; **Karthick Venkatakrishnan**, EisnerAmper; **Khushru M Mistry**, GM Modular; **Meenakshi Dubey**, Bandhan Mutual Fund; **Rajesh Prabhu**, DBS Bank; **Dr. Rajorshi Ganguli**, Alkem Laboratories Ltd; **Samiran Sarkar**, Purplle.com; **Saptarshi Bhattacharya**, Motilal Oswal Private Equity

How Influence Finds Its Moment

Influence develops through credibility, trust, preparation, and an understanding of the people in the room. Participants explored how decisions gather support through careful sequencing, framing, and attention to what others need to move forward with confidence. Outcomes often begin taking shape well before the formal decision arrives, guided by relationships that have been built steadily over time.

The Craft Behind Smooth Execution

Strong organisations often move through countless moments that pass almost unnoticed. Clean handovers, thoughtful follow-through, context carried across teams, and judgement exercised at the right moment create a rhythm that keeps work progressing with confidence. Leaders discussed how these quiet operating habits strengthen collaboration, reduce friction, and build trust that compounds through everyday execution.

The Mumbai Roundtable highlighted that organisations are shaped as much by the conversations they choose to have as by the work they deliver. Influence grows through trust, execution strengthens through consistency, and cultures mature when important realities find their place in the open. In these quiet moments of clarity, organisations discover the habits that allow progress to become part of the way they work every day.

"Ease of Compliance — Never at the Cost of Workers' Rights"

For more than three decades, **Dr Onkar Sharma** has worked at the intersection of labour law, public policy and governance. As former Chief Labour Commissioner of India and one of the key contributors to India's Labour Codes, he has helped shape some of the country's most significant labour reforms. Speaking with *Ananya Joshi* and *Shivank Kapila*, Sharma — who also serves as Visiting Faculty in Labour Law at XLRI — reflects on why good laws begin with understanding people's lived experiences, how labour reforms seek to balance economic flexibility with workers' rights, why trade unions remain central to the future of industrial relations, and what AI means for the next generation of labour policy. He argues that the Labour Codes envision a far more substantive role for trade unions — not merely as advocates, but as key stakeholders entrusted with ensuring compliance and safeguarding workers against exploitation.

Before joining the Government of India, did you always see yourself building a career in public service and labour administration, or did that path emerge over time?
I was like any other student at Delhi University. Initially, I intended to pursue a career in academics. I completed my Honours and Master's in Commerce from the Delhi School of Economics, followed by an LLB, an LLM, and a PhD. My original plan was to remain in academia.

A few years later, however, I decided to appear for the UPSC examination. I cleared it, joined the Government of India, and served for nearly 33 years. It was an immensely satisfying career, and I eventually became the Chief Labour Commissioner of the Government of India.

Even while in government, I remained closely associated with academics. For four years, I was a full-time faculty member at the VV Giri National Labour Institute, the Ministry of Labour and Employment's staff college. We conducted research and training programmes for government officers, trade union leaders, employers, senior managers, university faculty members, and members of the judiciary.

Beyond those four years, I regularly taught as guest faculty at government staff colleges that train IAS and other civil service officers, judicial academies run by various High Courts to train judicial officers and judges, and training institutes of public sector enterprises.

Throughout my government service,

I also conducted faculty development programmes for university professors, delivered sessions for postgraduate students at business and law schools, and taught in management development programmes for senior HR professionals. Alongside my responsibilities as a civil servant, I continued to pursue my passion for teaching.

From 1994 to 2013 — with a break during 2002-03 — I also taught labour laws for the postgraduate diploma programme at the Indian Law Institute on a part-time basis. The institute functions under the Ministry of Law and Justice and the Supreme Court, and I taught there regularly for nearly two decades.

How old were you when you joined the Government of India?

I received my first teaching assignment within a fortnight of completing my master's degree, but it was only an ad hoc position, not a regular university appointment. I joined the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, at the age of 27.

We cannot solve people's problems through legislation unless we first understand those problems and reflect them in the law

Labour law is often taught through statutes and regulations. Was there a particular experience that fundamentally shaped the way you understood it in practice?

Yes. At the Indian Law Institute, my first research project was on child labour. As I worked on it, I saw first-hand how children were being exploited and how their young age was being taken advantage of. It was deeply disturbing. Children as young as ten were working 14-hour days as domestic workers, in hotels, tea stalls, dhabas and automobile workshops. That experience made me realise I wanted to join the administration so I could contribute in a meaningful way.

Later, I was part of the team that drafted the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996, along with the Rules framed under it. I wanted to ensure the legislation genuinely addressed workers' problems. I did not draft that law sitting in my office. On weekends, I visited construction sites, spoke directly to workers about their working conditions, health and safety, and the way they were being compensated — their low wages, and all. My understanding came from those conversations — not from my office.

That understanding shaped the legislation. Even the 1998 Rules under the Act contain more than 200 provisions devoted to the health and safety of construction workers.

I also worked on proposed amendments to the law relating to inter-state migrant workers. To understand their concerns, I travelled on four long-distance trains in general unreserved compartments, sitting alongside workers, talking with them and sharing meals. I even wore a kurta-pyjama and rubber slippers so they would feel comfortable speaking openly with me.

Although the proposals I developed from those journeys were never enacted for various reasons, they reinforced an important lesson: we cannot solve people's problems through legislation unless we first understand those problems and reflect them in the law.

Another experience involved maternity benefits. I attended a conference promoting breastfeeding, where I learned how critical a mother's milk is for a child's health during the first six months. At that time, however, the Maternity Benefit Act provided only 84 days of leave. I spent the next three years engaging with the government, employers and industry to build support for extending maternity leave from 84 days to six months. The law was eventually amended in 2017.

The same approach guided the drafting of the Labour Codes. Before we began drafting — and throughout the process — I held extensive discussions with employers, trade unions, union leaders and industry representatives to understand the issues they faced and what they expected from the law. Even after the drafts were prepared, we held tripartite consultations as well as discussions with the Parliamentary Standing Committee.

Having worked with employers, trade unions, workers and policymakers throughout your career, what do you believe is the real cause of industrial conflict in India?

When policymakers make laws, they're also shaping public policy. The first step is to understand the genuine concerns of every stakeholder. Workers are one stakeholder, but employers and management have legitimate concerns too, and those need to be addressed as well.

When I began engaging more closely with industry around 2010, one issue came up repeatedly: the growing compliance burden. Employers spoke about the complexity of compliance, the need for greater flexibility in manpower planning, and broader industrial relations issues. My response was always the same: we would work to improve ease of compliance and address employers' concerns, but never at the cost of workers' rights. That balance is delicate, but it must be maintained.

You can see this reflected in the reforms. Under the earlier framework, employers had to maintain 88 or 89 registers across eight or nine different labour laws. We reduced that to eight registers. Likewise, 39 separate returns were consolidated into a single return. None of this diluted workers' rights; if anything, digitisation made compliance more transparent.

We also addressed long-standing issues around licences and registrations. Earlier, authorities often took far too long to issue licences. Today, the entire process is online, with defined timelines for government-to-business and business-to-government transactions. If an employer has fulfilled all the requirements and the authority still fails to act within the prescribed period, the licence is deemed approved and automatically generated by the system. Either the authority issues the licence, identifies any deficiencies, or the system generates it after the deadline. That is good governance. There is no need to visit a government office — you apply online and receive either your licence or a clear query requiring action.

Another issue was the trust deficit between government and business. There was a tendency to rely on regulation rather than trust. We therefore moved towards

I did not draft that law sitting in my office. My understanding came from conversations with workers on construction sites

self-registration. Even unorganised-sector workers were brought onto a self-registration system. More than 32 crore unorganised workers have been registered through this system.

The same approach now extends to unorganised, gig and platform workers. If people are asked to visit government offices with certificates, affidavits and multiple documents, they lose wages, incur expenses and often become discouraged from registering altogether. A self-registration system reduces those barriers and builds trust. There is no reason for the system to default to suspicion.

Do you believe any provision in the Labour Codes has the potential to fundamentally transform India's labour ecosystem?

This is what we call labour reform, and reform happens in stages: first reform, then perform, and finally transform. The Codes have come into effect only recently, and some of the rules are still being framed. Until then, the earlier rules continue to apply. So, we should wait before drawing firm conclusions about the extent of that transformation.

Codification of the labour law was only one objective of the Labour Codes. The others were rationalisation and simplification. Rationalisation means rewriting the law to address the contemporary concerns of all stakeholders — employers, employees and regulators.

Many of the earlier labour laws were enacted 70 to 100 years ago. While they served their purpose at the time, the world of work has changed considerably. New challenges have emerged, some older provisions have become outdated, and in certain cases entire laws have lost their relevance. The Labour Codes were drafted with this changing landscape in mind. In fact, 12 labour laws were repealed, along with certain provisions of others.

All four Codes contain several significant reforms. For example, the right to minimum wages, timely payment of wages without unauthorised deductions, and overtime pay for extra hours or work on rest days has been extended to every employee across every establishment. Earlier, these protections applied only to specific categories of workers and designated establishments.

Similarly, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code extends workplace safety and welfare provisions across establishments and industries, whereas the earlier framework covered only a limited range of workplaces.

I am confident that these Codes will transform the labour ecosystem by extending rights relating to wages, safe, healthy and decent working conditions, and social security to every employee — including unorganised, gig and platform workers — across all sectors.

If reform is followed by effective implementation, transformation will follow. That will improve both the ease of doing business and the ease of living for workers. But we still need time to see how that transformation unfolds.

What advice would you give young HR professionals entering the workforce who understand labour law in theory but have limited exposure to workplace realities?
There are two things I'd like to emphasise.

First, you need to be academically sound. You must have a thorough understanding of what the provisions of the law actually say. But equally important is understanding both the text and the context of the law. The text is what is written, what is in print; the context is why the law exists and why it was changed. In other words, understand both the letter and the spirit of the law — the underlying philosophy, jurisprudence and objective behind the change. Build that depth of knowledge.

I even wore a kurta-pyjama and rubber slippers on those trains so migrant workers would feel comfortable speaking openly with me

Second, once you enter the corporate world, you need to know how to apply that knowledge. It's about both interpretation and implementation. Interpretation means arriving at the correct meaning by understanding both the text and the spirit of the law. Only then can you ensure genuine compliance.

This learning does not end in the classroom. Once you're in the profession, it has to continue throughout your career. Read case law regularly and stay updated on how the Supreme Court and High Courts interpret labour legislation. Subscribe to labour law journals and make time to read them. Laws are constantly evolving. While legislatures enact laws, courts continue to shape them through interpretation. To practise labour law effectively, you must remain a lifelong student of it.

Finally, you must be able to translate knowledge into practice. Understand your organisation's HR policies and practices, identify where they fall short of current legal requirements, and work towards aligning them with the law. That is an ongoing process.

You've worked closely with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and on international labour policy, including in Afghanistan. How does India's approach to labour policymaking compare with global best practices?
When we were drafting the Labour Codes

between 2014 and 2017, the International Labour Organisation was undertaking a similar exercise through its Standards Review Mechanism (SRM), a tripartite body reviewing international labour standards, including conventions, recommendations and protocols.

I was a member of that forum, representing India alongside representatives of governments, employers and workers from other ILO member countries. Through the SRM, other ILO forums and conferences in Geneva, programmes at the International Training Centre of the ILO in Turin, and international workshops in cities such as Paris, Lisbon and Madrid, I had the opportunity to study labour policies and best practices from around the world. I also chaired some of these international meetings.

Those experiences gave me valuable insights into how labour laws had evolved across different jurisdictions and what lessons India could draw from them. Wherever feasible, I tried to incorporate those good practices into the Labour Codes.

Even where India has not formally ratified certain ILO conventions, we sought to incorporate their underlying philosophy wherever it was appropriate and practical for the Indian context. At every stage, we carefully assessed whether an international practice was workable within our own legal and economic environment.

Reform happens in stages: first reform, then perform, and finally transform

As a result, I believe our new Labour Codes reflect several important international best practices while remaining grounded in Indian realities. That was one of the guiding principles behind their drafting.

Labour law has historically evolved in response to industrialisation, factories, trade unions, contract labour and social security. As AI reshapes the workplace and algorithms increasingly influence decision-making, what should be the next big question for labour policy?

Using technology to improve worker safety is a positive development. What it should not do is become a tool for unnecessarily controlling workers. If technology simply identifies safety lapses or helps ensure compliance with safety standards, I see that as a constructive use of AI — not as a form of control.

AI is also being used in recruitment to screen résumés and conduct preliminary interviews. I don't see anything inherently wrong with that either. It is simply another tool in the selection process.

One area that did concern me was the fare-calculation model used by ride-hailing platforms such as Uber and Ola. Some of these used an algorithm to decide the fare, and earlier, drivers often had no visibility into how a fare was divided between themselves and the aggregator. If a passenger paid ₹400 for a trip, the driver frequently had no idea what share they would actually receive. That lack of transparency was troubling, particularly when I spoke to the drivers.

My understanding is that the system has since become more transparent, with many platforms now charging a fixed daily app-usage fee instead. When I discussed the issue with the aggregators, it was clear that they had also recognised the need for greater transparency.

So, from my perspective, the key issue is not AI itself but how it is used. Where technology improves health, safety or operational efficiency without undermining transparency or fairness, I see it as a positive development rather than a mechanism of control.

With the rise of outsourcing, contract labour and platform work, how do you see the role of trade unions evolving in India?

If you read the Labour Codes closely, you'll find that we're expecting a much

larger role for trade unions — particularly in ensuring compliance. For example, in cases of non-payment or short payment of wages or other dues, claims can be filed not only by the employee but also by the trade union or the inspector. Trade unions will therefore play an important role in ensuring workers are not exploited.

The Codes also introduce two important mechanisms. The first is the Grievance Redressal Committee — a bipartite forum in which trade unions represent workers and participate directly in resolving grievances. Earlier, grievance redressal was handled solely by employers and management, with no formal role for workers' representatives. Now it is a joint forum with equal representation from employers and workers through their trade unions, giving unions a statutory role in the process.

The second is the recognition of a negotiating trade union or the constitution of a negotiating council under Section 14 of the Industrial Relations Code. Under the Central Rules, we've identified ten specific matters on which trade unions play an important role in negotiation with the employer. They also play a significant part in finalising and certifying standing orders and in matters relating to worker welfare.

We also expect trade unions to play a much greater role in extending social security to unorganised-sector workers by helping ensure that government scheme benefits actually reach those they are intended for.

Understand both the letter and the spirit of the law. The text matters, but so does the context

Overall, the Labour Codes place high expectations on trade unions. They recognise trade unions as key stakeholders and entrust them with greater responsibility. I believe this will strengthen and positively shape the future of the trade union movement in India.

Many of the mobilising functions once performed by trade unions now seem to play out on social media. Do you see digital platforms assuming a larger role in representing workers?

Social media has undoubtedly created far greater awareness. I did not follow it very closely earlier, but I've come to appreciate how much awareness it has generated around the Labour Codes, new labour laws and the rights they provide. It will certainly continue to play an important role in informing workers, and that is a positive development.

However, social media cannot replace trade unions. Trade unions do far more than create awareness — they represent workers. They raise grievances, pursue cases of non-compliance with the appropriate authorities, and continue working on behalf of workers until those issues are resolved or reach a logical conclusion.

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The Data-Driven DELUSION

Why is more information making organisations less intelligent?

Rishabh Dalip Singh

The audit was supposed to be routine. The team had prepared. Documents had been created, reviewed and stored across the right systems. On paper, everything existed. But when the auditor asked for specific control evidence, no one could find it. Folders were opened, links were checked, and people started messaging each other in quiet panic. The document was there. It always had been. But in that moment, it might as well not have existed.

The organisation had data. It did not have understanding.

That distinction, unremarkable as it sounds, is at the centre of one of the most consequential and least examined problems in how modern businesses are led.

The belief driving most data investment is simple: more information leads to better decisions. Dashboards have grown richer, reports deeper and metrics more granular. By every visible measure, organisations are more informed than ever. But the quality of decisions has not kept pace. In many leadership environments, it has quietly regressed. The problem is not a shortage of data. It is that data abundance has produced a style of decision-making that optimises for safety over substance, and justification over judgement.

The Defensibility Trap

The shift is behavioural more than technical. In organisations where every decision requires a documented rationale, leaders learn quickly that being defensible matters more than being right. A failed call backed by solid data is forgivable. A successful one made on instinct remains suspect. So the incentive quietly inverts. People stop asking what the best decision is and start asking which decision they can best defend. Experience is discounted because it doesn't fit on a slide deck. Pattern recognition built over years gets overridden by a metric that tells a cleaner story. The organisation does not announce this shift. It does not need to. People figure it out on their own, and they adapt accordingly.

Underlying this is a more fundamental issue. Data is always a representation of reality, not reality itself. It is filtered, delayed and shaped by whatever someone decided was worth measuring. A green dashboard does not mean the business is healthy. It means the business is performing well on what is being tracked, which is very different.

Nokia's internal metrics in 2007 showed strong market share, loyal customers and healthy margins. They did not show that consumers were about to want something Nokia had not imagined building. Kodak had equally clear visibility into its film business right up until that visibility became irrelevant.

In both cases, the data was accurate. It was also dangerously incomplete. The organisations were not failed by bad information. They failed because they assumed their information was sufficient.

What the Numbers Never Show

The signals that go unmeasured are often

the most important ones. Consider a retail chain where store managers had been flagging the same customer complaint informally for 18 months. It never made it into a report because there was no field in the system to capture it. By the time the issue appeared in structured data, it had already cost the company a meaningful chunk of repeat business.

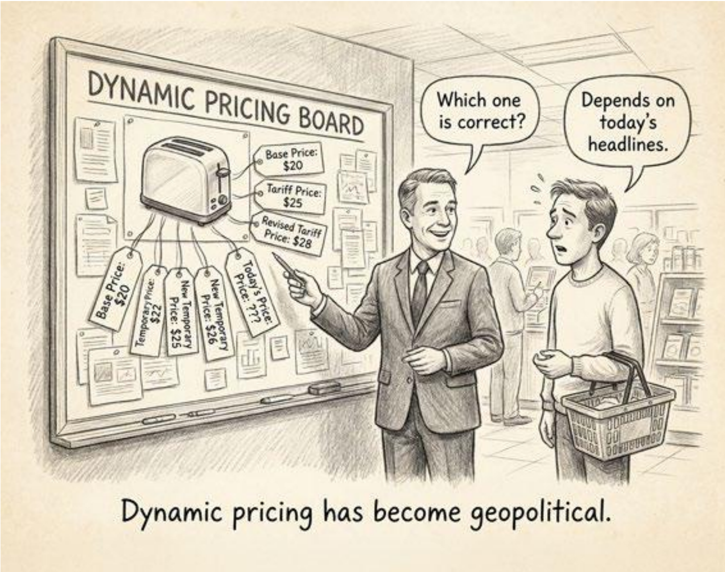
This is not an unusual story. Customer hesitation during a sales conversation, the silence after a strategy is announced at a town hall, a pattern of small grievances that each seems too minor to escalate individually. These carry real information. But because they are not structured, they are not treated as data and are filtered out long before they reach the people who most need to hear them.

Judgment Beyond the Dashboard

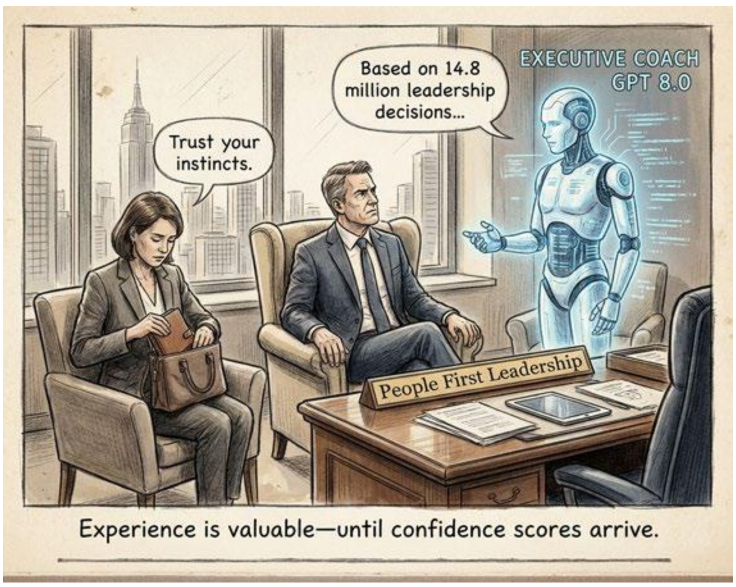
Data also has a structural ceiling that no investment can raise. It is rooted in what has already happened. It can surface patterns and reduce known uncertainty, but it cannot tell you what is about to change or whether a market is ready for something that does not yet exist. When Reed Hastings committed Netflix to streaming in 2007, broadband penetration data was ambiguous, and the licensed content library was thin. No model would have returned a confident green light. The decision required judgment operating beyond what the numbers could confirm. That is precisely the capacity that defensive, data-dependent cultures erode over time. Organisations that only move when the data is conclusive will consistently arrive late because, by the time the data is conclusive, the window has usually narrowed.

The goal was never to collect more data. It was to decide better. Those two things are not the same, and conflating them has quietly cost organisations more than they realise. The leaders who navigate complexity well are not the ones with the most information. They are the ones who know which information to trust, which to question, and when the most important input in the room is not on any screen. That is not a rejection of data. It is a more honest understanding of what data is actually for.

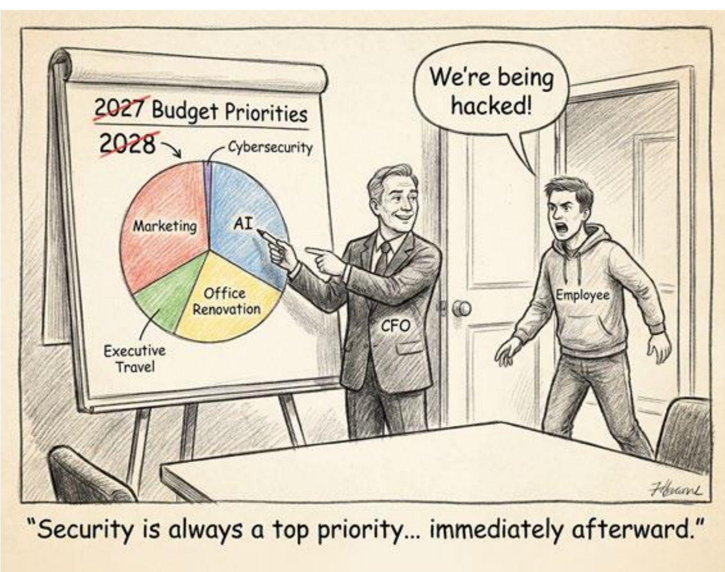
Rishabh Dalip Singh
is a PGDM(GM) alumnus of XLRI Jamshedpur



Dynamic pricing has become geopolitical.



Experience is valuable—until confidence scores arrive.



"Security is always a top priority... immediately afterward."

Twisters by **Shivam Litoria**

1 In the islands of Papua New Guinea's Massim region, anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski documented a ceremonial exchange where communities voyaged long distances by canoe to trade shell ornaments. Red shell-disc necklaces (*soulava*) circulated clockwise around the island chain, while white shell armbands (*mwali*) traveled counterclockwise. These objects were never kept permanently; their value lay in the prestige, alliances, and obligations they created across generations. What is the name of this famous ceremonial exchange system?

2 Across the Middle East and North Africa, getting a job, a permit, or even a hospital bed on time can depend less on merit and more on who you know pulling strings on your behalf. Sociologists studying the region gave this pervasive system of personal connections and intercession its own name — one that appears as often in everyday conversation as it does in academic papers on Arab governance and business culture. What is the Arabic term for using personal connections and influence to get things done?

3 A government official spends years drafting rules for an industry, then leaves office to take a highly paid role at a company those rules govern. A few years later, they return to government, now advising on the very regulations they once lobbied against. Watchdog groups have a well-worn phrase for this recurring career loop between public office and private industry. What is this term?

4 In his 1987 novel about ambition and status in New York City, Tom Wolfe gave a name to the invisible institution every power player secretly banks with: a running tally of who has done whom a favour, and who is therefore owed one in return. Deposit enough goodwill, the logic goes, and you can make a withdrawal exactly when you need it most. What two-word term did Wolfe coin for this social ledger of favours owed and collected?

5 Long after graduation, alumni of certain elite schools keep opening doors for each other — trading job tips, board seats, and introductions largely along the lines of where they once studied. Sociologists have long pointed to this alumni-based system of quiet preference as one reason certain networks (often historically male, private-school educated) remain disproportionately powerful in business and government. What is the common term for this informal, alumni-based system of mutual advantage?

1. The Kula ring 2. *Wasta* 3. The revolving door 4. The Favor Bank 5. The old boys' network (or old boys' club)

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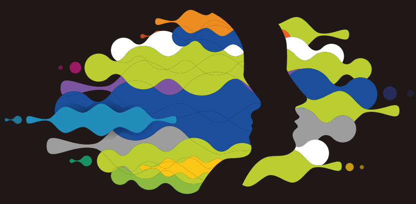
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