

Xplore

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WHEN THE SYSTEM ITSELF IS THE CRISIS

INSIDE

- Rethinking Loyalty
- Dropping The Mask
- Primetime To Reels
- The Stories We Tell



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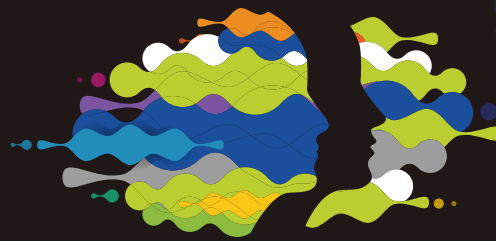
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The engaging thoughts featured in Xplore aim to encourage reflection, not to simplify complex issues into neat arguments, but to explore diverse perspectives

LET US continue to acknowledge the importance of fostering enhanced dialogue between academia and industry, as well as among industry thought leaders. Such conversations offer valuable insights from diverse perspectives and promote a cycle of collaborative learning, unlearning, and relearning. This edition of Xplore has been thoughtfully designed to offer a reflective space for these exchanges.

The engaging thoughts featured in Xplore aim to encourage reflection, not to simplify complex issues into neat arguments, but to explore diverse perspectives. Our goal is to inspire open-ended inquiries that promote exploration and shared learning experiences.

We hope this edition ignites your curiosity and encourages you to pause for reflection. In today's fast-paced world with an ever-increasing influx of information, taking the time to think critically is not a luxury—it is an essential skill. Let us embrace this opportunity to engage and think deeply together!

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It isn't about trends. It's about trajectories. What does it take to build something that lasts? What does resilience actually look like, away from the buzzwords?

NOT EVERYTHING in business is about speed. Some things are about staying power. And the stories that tend to linger, the ones people remember long after the news cycle moves on, usually aren't about who shouted the loudest. They're about who stayed the course.

That's something we've kept in mind while shaping this edition of Xplore. It isn't about trends. It's about trajectories. What does it take to build something that lasts? What does resilience actually look like, away from the buzzwords?

You'll find no silver bullets here. Just thoughtful perspectives from people who've grappled with tough calls, lived through pivots that weren't glamorous, and made sense of progress on their own terms.

We don't expect every reader to walk away with the same insight. But if something in here nudges you to reconsider an assumption, or helps name a tension you've been sitting with, we've done our job.

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EDITOR'S MUSINGS

IF YOU'VE ever worked on something that took longer than expected—something that resisted neat answers or clean metrics—you'll know what it feels like to build under uncertainty. And yet, so much of what we consume today rewards clarity, confidence, and quick conclusions.

This edition of Xplore makes room for the messier side of building, leading, and learning. The side that doesn't always get a spotlight. It's not about glorifying chaos—it's about being honest about the discomfort of doing work that matters.

We often assume progress is linear. That better outcomes follow better inputs. But most people leading change—inside companies, teams, or even themselves—will tell you otherwise. Growth is uneven. Results are delayed. And clarity often shows up only after you've made the call.

That's the energy this issue carries. Not certainty, but curiosity. Not "what's next?" in the trend forecast sense, but "what are we still figuring out?" in the real-world sense.

These pages aren't a guidebook. They're a conversation—with people who are trying, reworking, questioning. And in that process, shaping something stronger than before.

So here's to the in-between stages. The not-quite-there-yets. The unresolved, but committed. Because that's where the real work happens—and where this issue begins.

Hari Govind Nair

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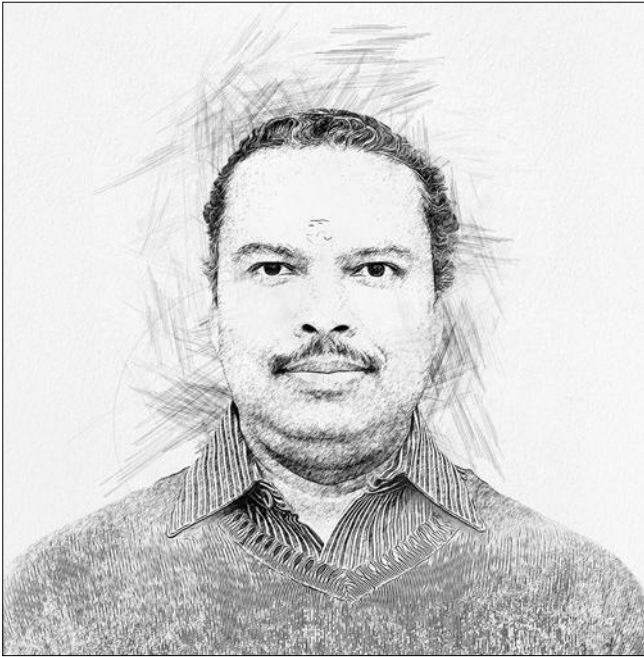
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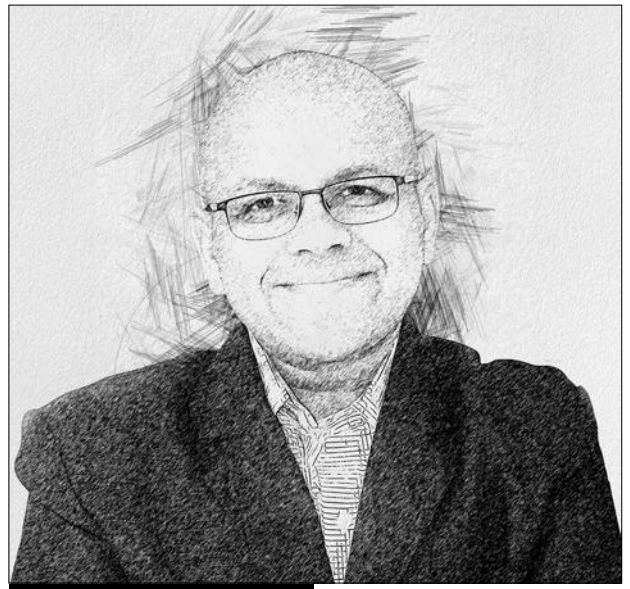
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Game On

Rethinking Customer Loyalty in India



Tired of points and punch cards, Indian brands are levelling up loyalty with gamification — blending play, culture, and strategy to win over today's dynamic customer

 by Shreyas Patil



In India's bustling markets, where diverse cultures converge, businesses are constantly seeking innovative ways to capture the attention and loyalty of their customers. One such approach, transforming the landscape of customer loyalty programmes, is gamification. Beyond mere discounts and points, gamification adds an element of fun and engagement, turning loyalty-building into an exciting game.

Tapping Into India's Play Instinct

In a country where cricket is not just a sport but an emotion, and festivals are celebrated with unmatched fervour, tapping into the cultural pulse is key for businesses. Gamification aligns seamlessly with the Indian ethos, offering a unique and interactive way to connect with consumers.

Traditionally, customer loyalty programmes involved earning points through purchases, redeemable for discounts or free products. However, these programmes often lacked the excitement needed to keep customers actively engaged. Gamification introduces elements like challenges, rewards, and friendly competition, injecting a sense of thrill into the process.

Creating a Loyalty Playground

Imagine a scenario where customers not only earn points for purchases but also unlock levels, achieve badges, and compete with friends to claim the top spot on a leaderboard. This is the world of gamified loyalty programmes, where businesses create a virtual playground for their customers.

In the Indian context, incorporating elements from popular games such as Ludo or Tambola can add a nostalgic touch that resonates with a wide audience. For instance, customers could roll a virtual dice after each purchase, earning rewards based on the number rolled. This not only adds an element of surprise but also taps into the joy of playing traditional Indian board games.



Gamification adds an element of fun and engagement, turning loyalty-building into an exciting game — moving beyond points to creating lasting customer relationships

From Points to Personal Bonds

One of the unique aspects of Indian culture is the importance of emotional connections. Gamification in loyalty programmes goes beyond transactional relationships, fostering emotional bonds between brand and customer. By personalising rewards based on individual preferences and behaviours, businesses can show customers they are valued on a personal level.

For example, a clothing brand could offer virtual fashion shows or styling challenges within its loyalty app, allowing customers to showcase their unique style and earn rewards for their creativity. This not only encourages brand loyalty but also turns customers into advocates within their social circles.

One Game Doesn't Fit All

While gamification holds immense potential, it is essential to address challenges specific to the Indian market. Ensuring inclusivity by considering diverse cultural preferences and regional variations is crucial. What resonates with customers in one region might not have the same impact in another. Customising gamified elements to reflect India's rich cultural tapestry ensures universal appeal.

Additionally, businesses must strike a balance between the digital and offline worlds. While technology is a powerful tool, integrating elements that cater

to both online and offline customers guarantees a seamless experience for all.

The Loyalty Game Ahead

As businesses navigate the evolving landscape of customer loyalty, gamification stands out as a beacon of innovation. The fusion of traditional values with modern engagement techniques creates a potent formula for success. In India, where every purchase is a story and every brand interaction an experience, gamification adds a new chapter to the narrative of customer loyalty.

In conclusion, as businesses in India strive to stand out in a crowded market, gamification emerges as a transformative force in loyalty programmes. By infusing elements of play, personalisation, and cultural relevance, businesses can create programmes that not only reward transactions but also forge lasting connections with their customers. As the gamification revolution takes hold, those who embrace this trend are likely to lead the game of customer loyalty. ◀



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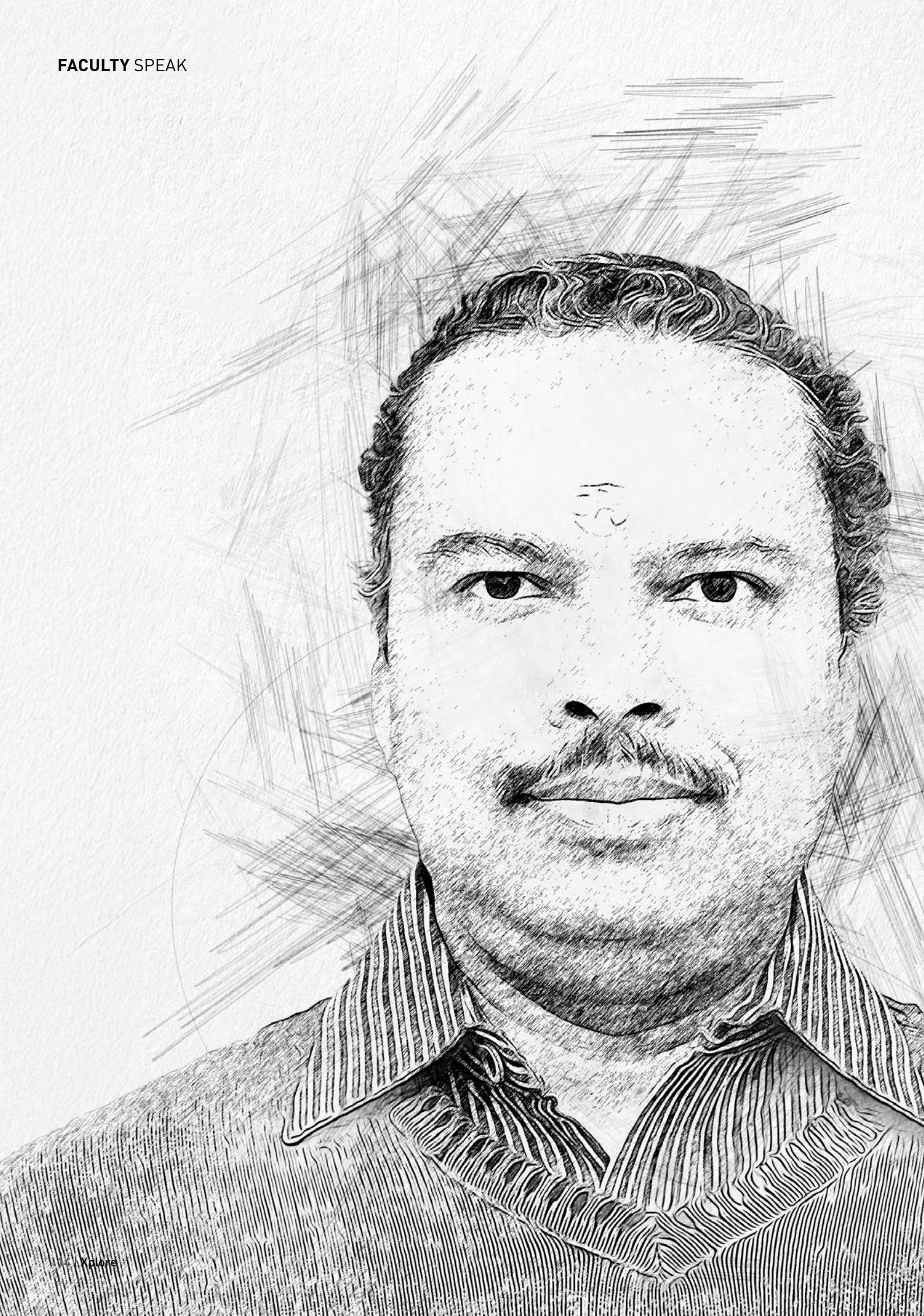
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“Livelihood Is for Life — Not the Other Way Around”

Alok Kumar, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at XLRI Jamshedpur, believes true growth lies in balancing career with personal well-being. In this interview with *Anmol Singla*, he explains why emotional intelligence, inclusive culture, and culturally grounded leadership are essential in today's workplace. Offering an OB scholar's perspective on AI-driven workspaces, he reminds MBA students that ambition must go hand in hand with fulfilment and life's broader responsibilities.

Could you walk us through your professional journey and what motivated you to specialise in organisational behaviour at XLRI?

Generally, Indian business schools club organisational behaviour (OB) and human resource management together; however, XLRI has a separate OB area with a stellar reputation for academic excellence over decades. After completing my doctoral education at XLRI, I worked at the Indian Institute of Management Ranchi before joining XLRI. It was a homecoming for me, and I had the opportunity to work with some of the best minds as colleagues and students.

In today's rapidly changing corporate environment, what qualities do you think define an effective leader?

A firm cultural grounding will differentiate outstanding corporate leaders from average ones. Indian business leaders should appreciate the distinctiveness of Indian culture and adapt their leadership practices accordingly. Emphasis on cultivating self-awareness, deep engagement with *dharma* to promote

the well-being of employees and business sustainability, continuous learning, empathy, and a sense of interconnectedness with stakeholders would characterise outstanding leaders. Promoting teamwork, transparent communication, and embracing technology will be process-related factors that help leaders adapt to the rapidly changing business environment.

Emotional intelligence is increasingly recognised as a critical skill in organisations. How can MBA students develop and leverage emotional intelligence for career success?

The ability to manage emotions is indeed a crucial skill in organisational and personal life. MBA students can enhance their emotional intelligence through OB courses on individual behaviour and leadership. Beyond formal coursework, they can adopt practices that turn difficult situations into opportunities to develop emotional intelligence. They should reflect on how effectively they managed emotions during stressful situations and seek constructive criticism from

Outstanding leaders are self-aware, empathetic, and culturally grounded — engaging with *dharma* to ensure employee well-being, sustainability, and deeper stakeholder connection

mentors, professors, and peers on handling pressure, teamwork, and communication. They should practise active listening in group projects, paying attention to non-verbal cues such as vocal tone and facial expressions. Empathising with others' viewpoints during disagreements and teamwork is also vital. Well-cultivated emotional intelligence aids teamwork, networking, communication, leadership, and resilience — critical for personal and professional success.

With organisations striving to create diverse and inclusive workplaces, what strategies can future business leaders adopt to foster true inclusivity?

Organisational inclusion practices often focus on diversity-based hiring and performance management that emphasise differences. Such practices risk reinforcing divisions by highlighting

microaggressions, stereotypes, and implicit biases. True inclusion promotes unity while recognising differences. Culturally grounded leadership that role-models empathetic communication is key. It requires a culture where people communicate without constant fear of judgment, while appreciating others' differences. Inclusion isn't about 'respecting' everyone but acknowledging surface- and deep-level differences while embracing a shared organisational identity and common goals.

Employee well-being is a growing concern, especially in high-pressure corporate jobs. What role do organisations and leaders play in ensuring a mentally healthy work environment?

Organisations need to address extended work-hour cultures by promoting timely





▶ **True inclusion is not just about respecting differences but building shared identity and goals without the fear of constant judgment**

work completion and encouraging employees to go home on time. Leaders must confront unrealistic deadlines and abusive supervision, and foster a positive work environment where people feel a sense of belonging. Organisations should also encourage well-being practices such as yoga and lifestyle habits that support healthy eating, adequate sleep, and a thriving family life. Accepting the whole person at work — including their spiritual and emotional facets — can contribute meaningfully to employee well-being.

With the rise of hybrid work models and AI-driven workplaces, how should young professionals and managers prepare themselves for the evolving corporate landscape?

People skills remain as critical in the AI age as ever. Young professionals should cultivate digital proficiency with collaborative tools, AI-aided idea evaluation, data-driven decision-

making, virtual teamwork skills, and continuous learning. Using AI and social media to build and maintain networks is another avenue. The rise of AI underscores the need for core skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and emotional intelligence. Empathy and leadership that balances performance with well-being are even more vital in this era.

What is your key message for MBA students as they prepare to enter the corporate world?

MBA students should first appreciate that livelihood is for life — life is not for livelihood. While career advancement is important, balancing family responsibilities ensures holistic growth. Lopsided growth — career success at the expense of family life — does not bring happiness. Students should consider progressing in life's *dharma* and *artha* dimensions, which are critical for fulfilment. ◀



When Lies Go Viral

The Unchecked Rise of Online Misinformation

As social media becomes the world's go-to news/information source, the unchecked spread of misinformation threatens to reshape opinions, politics, and society at large

 by Jahnavi Sivaram

A recent Statista report on the growth of social media users worldwide places the current number at 5.17 billion and estimates that 6 billion people will be using social networks by 2028. To put that in perspective, a staggering 65 per cent of the global population currently uses social networking sites, and that's expected to jump to 72 per cent by 2028.

Essentially, more people use — and will continue to use — social media than not. More people consume content on these platforms than not. And more people rely on social media as a source of information than not.

The accompanying graph (on the right) confirms that there has been a sharp increase in the number of people who rely on digital sources as their primary source of news. The following graph shows just how far behind traditional news sources have fallen in the wake of this shift.

My point is this: it is clear that there is no escape from online news. So why are we not more concerned about its lack of veracity?

When Everyone's a Broadcaster

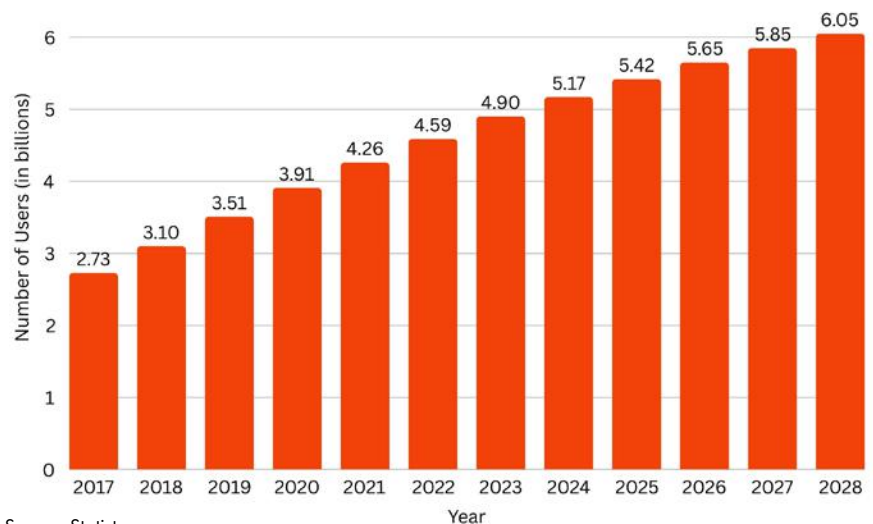
Increasing digital literacy has dramatically lowered the barrier to entry for becoming a 'content creator' on social media. Whether it's an influencer trying to convince you that hydration is easier than ever with their new hydro flask from brand XYZ, a digital artist desperately waving their work at the enigmatic, all-powerful algorithm in hopes it will catch an irresistible whiff, or a limitlessly bankrolled, mic-wielding street interviewer asking people whether they'd rather take the money or double it and give it to the next person.

Or — more relevant to this discussion — the news people. Ex-journalists who have broken away from mainstream media, non-journalists passionate about sharing underreported information, and relatives forwarding long, unverified messages in large WhatsApp groups. It's now shockingly easy to say something on social networks and have it taken as irrefutable fact.

Fakes, Facts, and Everything in Between

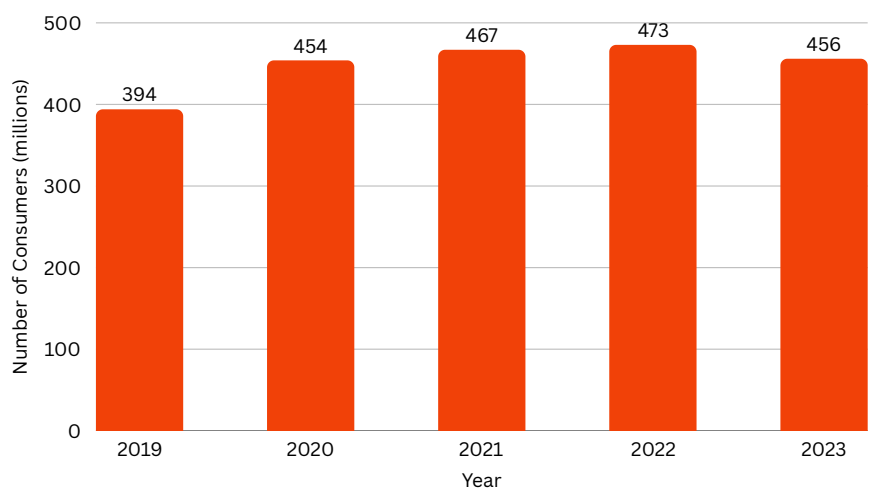
The pandemic has forever changed how the world consumes information.

Number of Social Media Users Worldwide from 2017 to 2028 (in billions)



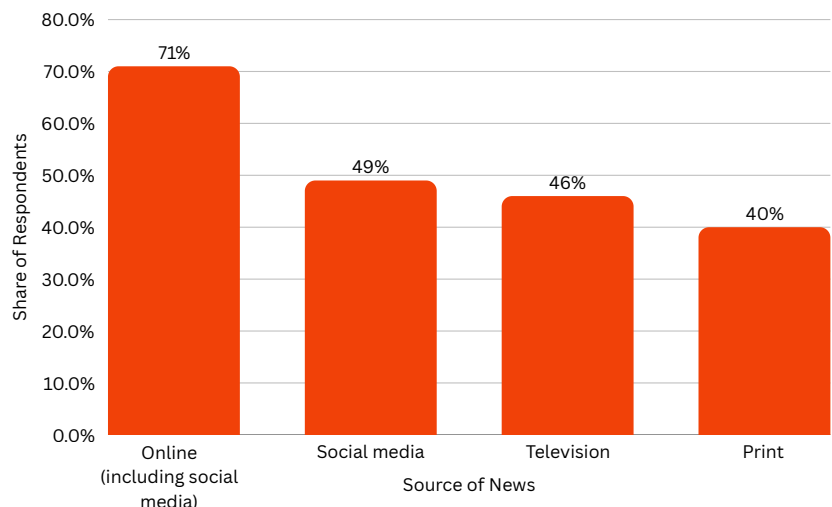
Source: Statista

Number of Online News Consumers in India from 2019 to 2023 (in millions)



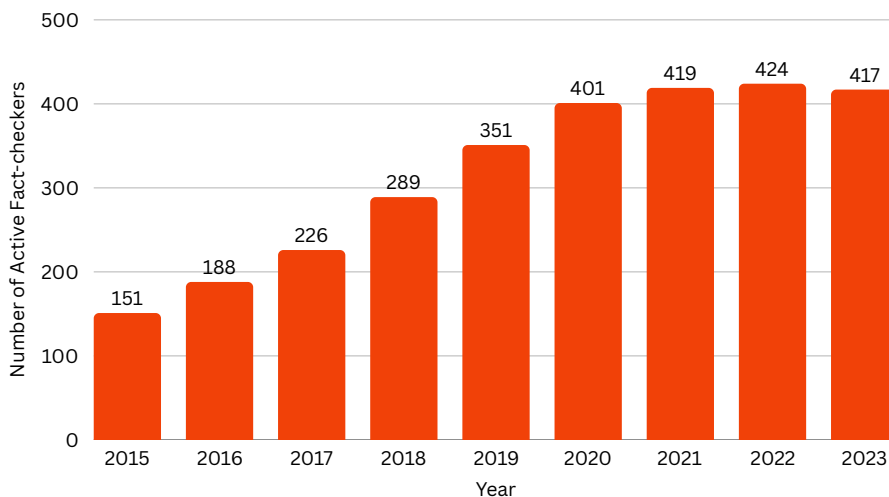
Note: In 2023, India had about 456 million online news consumers, with a rising trend driven by rapid digitisation across sectors, especially media and entertainment. Sources: comScore, EY, FICCI

Share of Sources Used to Access News Across India in 2024



Note: Over 70% of respondents in India sourced news online (incl. social media) in 2024, making it a popular form of accessing news; 40% used print. Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Number of Active Fact-checkers Per Year Globally



Note: Figures reflect the number of active fact-checkers worldwide, covering more than 100 countries
Source: Duke Reporters' Lab

Online sources reign supreme, and the number of platforms facilitating connections, networks, and information dissemination keeps

increasing. With this rise in digital spaces allowing the rampant spread of news, there has been a corresponding plateau in fact-checking.

More people now rely on social media for news than traditional sources – a shift that demands greater scrutiny of what we trust and share



According to a 2023 study by Duke Reporters' Lab, the previously sustained growth in reliable fact-checkers has slowed globally over the past three years (as shown in the graph on the left). This is especially concerning given the largely unregulated way in which news is both shared and consumed.

AI, the New Spin Doctor

It would be remiss not to mention the impact of generative AI on the digital information landscape. The technology remains nascent — and will likely stay that way for some time — in terms of both utilisation and regulation. As debates over the ethics of generative AI grow louder, so too does its use and abuse across industries.

In global politics, with more than 60 countries holding elections in 2024, generative AI has found an enthusiastic — and gravely misunderstood — home. The miraculous ease of generating videos from a single prompt has led to deepfakes of candidates being widely shared during election campaigns in Slovakia, the US, Bangladesh, and India. A new concern is candidates dismissing real videos as deepfakes, creating a convenient lack of accountability.

Fundamental worldviews and opinions are being shaped among young people coming of age in this era of (mis) information. Younger generations are exposed to an overwhelming volume of unverified news and content. UNESCO's 2023 report, *Growing Up in the Age of Fake News*, calls for urgent development of critical thinking skills in young people to help them navigate the deluge of information they encounter online.

At its core, the issue of misinformation on digital platforms is one of trust. The trade-off between reliability and convenience in accessing and sharing information is becoming increasingly unbalanced. It's crucial to approach news critically — both online and offline — to ensure our opinions, decisions, and social behaviours are rooted in well-sourced, factual knowledge. ◀



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“Change the Sign, Change the Meaning”

Hamsini Shivakumar, brand consultant, semiotician, and founder of Leapfrog Strategy, believes powerful branding begins with decoding the cultural codes that shape meaning. In this interview with *Smit Trivedi*, she explains how semiotics helps brands understand consumer behaviour, craft compelling narratives, and reposition themselves —from purposeful packaging redesigns to strategies guided by emotion and intuition. Drawing on three decades of experience, she offers sharp insights into AI, cultural context, and the enduring power of symbols.

With 30 years in brand strategy, consumer insights and semiotics, you have seen it all. Looking back, what pivotal moment or early experience set the stage for your journey in decoding brands and consumer insights?

I graduated from IIM Bangalore in '87 with a finance specialisation. P&G selected me as a finance management trainee. At that time, P&G had a 12-month trainee programme rotating you through different functions. So, I started with a stint at the factory and was assigned to work with the head of market research, Mr Joy Gupta. One of my early tasks in this department was to run through all the manuals because P&G was very committed to market research. I was deeply fascinated by the manuals and the depth of market research — and this was when I realised the foundational pillars of my marketing journey and branding were starting to take hold. I slowly climbed

the corporate ladder to become a brand manager and developed Whisper as a brand. All these were pivotal moments that firmly placed me in the world of marketing and branding.

At Leapfrog Strategy, you have been working with stellar companies such as Unilever and Hero Motocorp, to name a few. Can you share a situation where a fresh approach made all the difference?

Clients come to us at Leapfrog when they are done with familiar approaches because they need to learn something new beyond those methods. This is when they are prepared to try something radical and different, hoping it will reveal better insights than what their traditional research methodologies uncovered. This is precisely where we step in — we employ semiotics, which allows us to go beyond and deeper into the consumer realm.

**Change the sign,
and you change
the meaning.
Repositioning
a brand by
redesigning its
packaging or
symbols can shift
how consumers
understand and
feel about it**

For example, let's say we study a brand or the consumer and then examine it as consumer culture. This consumer culture study is looked at through a wide lens. We recently did a project for Softouch, which was all about understanding the intricacies of fragrances in a fabric conditioner. The difference comes when you have more than just information — you have real insight into what lies behind what consumers are saying.

To summarise, moving the needle to travel that extra mile makes your approach stand out. Taking a cue from your words about the radical approach, semiotics is a fascinating field. So, for those of us who are unaware, how would you describe the unique power of semiotics as a field? Was there a moment when a semiotic insight surprised your client?

Semiotics is a discipline like anthropology, sociology or psychology. It's the formal study of symbols and narratives. The whole focus of semiotics is to understand how we derive meaning. That means we connect something with something else. Through this process, we make sense of

our experiences. And that meaning can be very rudimentary, like basic sense-making. We scan the environment, which is full of signs. From there, we infer: should I turn left or right to go here? This is how we all construct meaning in our lives. It's inherent to humans.

So, how do you read signs? How do you interpret them?

The task of a semiotician is to uncover the underlying structures that lead to cognitions and interpretations. This is the unique power of semiotics.

We did a study for one of our biggest clients in the wellness products category, and this project is one of our big success stories in packaging redesign. Their product used stevia as a key ingredient. We started by researching different sweeteners and realised that one of the key codes of sweeteners is their source or origin. Every consumer associated white sugar with sugarcane and honey with bees or honeycombs. The problem we identified with stevia was that no one knew its origin. This was the 'aha' moment for both the client and our team. We returned to the drawing board



A key semiotic insight came when consumers couldn't identify stevia's origin — adding the leaf image on packaging helped clarify meaning and boosted the product's growth

be a movie, a web series, category communication or packaging. For us, texts are the source of data. Then, we draw inferences from them. Intuition also plays a significant role because when you're drawing inferences from numbers and texts, you're engaging in deductive reasoning. But to apply a rule and reach an inference, you need another reference point. This is not purely logical thinking — it's abductive reasoning and intuition.

Moving forward to your projects and clients, you count Colgate VedShakti and Zydus EverYouth as some of your biggest successes. Can you share what made these projects unique and memorable? Well, each project is unique. VedShakti was fascinating because Colgate was struggling with a loss of market share due to the explosion of the Ayurveda segment as a core FMCG product. We worked with a

design team, provided directions and tested concepts with consumers in focus groups. I never thought people could get excited about toothpaste packaging — but they loved it.

The project is also memorable because it proved the power of semiotic analysis. If done correctly — going into depth, thinking critically about necessary changes — it has a tangible effect. The method is this: you conduct the semiotics, develop the stimulus, test it with consumers, and their response validates the quality of your analysis.

They say organisational culture is the foundation on which pillars of success are built. How influential is culture when it comes to transforming branding strategies?

Semiotics is always interested in the symbolic dimension of things, and it treats culture as a metaphorical dimension. Social imagination is the





AI can produce images, but consumers struggle to discern truth, lies, or misinformation. Transparency about AI use in brand communication is essential for trust

shared understanding that all people have because brands embody values, concepts and notions residing in our collective imagination.

For example, respect is universal, but its manifestations differ. American culture emphasises individualism and egalitarianism — hence, the gap between a business owner and a driver is low. This is why American leaders are often addressed by first name. In more traditional cultures, like Japan, respect is formal, and informality may be seen as disrespect. Every organisation has its values, rituals and interaction styles. Studying these helps in branding.

Emotion is a core part of branding. How do you help companies and their brands tap into evoking emotions that feel natural?

Symbols are the language of emotion. Emotion is felt and expressed through body language. Reading emotions means interpreting these signs. When expressed more sophisticatedly, emotions translate into poetry, art and metaphor.

Depending on the brief, creative

teams craft stories, taglines or visuals. We guide them by suggesting directions—where to look for symbols or analogies that resonate with the target audience. Conversely, we might advise against certain paths. Creative people can explore freely, but not all directions will connect. That's how we help clients navigate emotion.

Humour has become essential to how brands deliver messages. Do you think humour will play a symbolic role in semiotics in the coming days, or is it just a short-term trend?

Entertaining and attracting people through humour is age-old. Mass-market brands like Fevicol have used humour on television, often as a surprising twist. But generally, clients prefer playing safe with neutral emotions.

Humour works best when topical. Amul's campaigns have succeeded because they play on current events with puns. New-age brands, with in-house teams, use more momentary humour — some hits, some misses — which digital platforms allow. ◀

We Are the Stories We Tell



From everyday choices to life's turning points, stories shape how we think, feel, and act. They help us make sense of the world and our place in it.



by Jomon Jose

We can call ourselves rational beings, but there is no decision we take without a story.

Whether it be deciding on a career, a dress to wear, or a project to work on, we are constantly telling ourselves a story. It might be a simple one, like: "I see the lives of my friends in that company — it looks pretty cool. I will also be able to do what they are doing." Or: "Today feels a little dull; I'll choose this coloured dress over the other." Or even: "If I take on this project, I will have an impact on this community."

We search for meaning in all that we do, and stories are a great way to communicate that meaning. But that is not the most powerful thing about them. What is unparalleled is their ability to remain etched in people's memories. Stories spark the imagination in our brains, creating permanent neural pathways that endure for years. I can never forget the story my father told me about his adventures in a foreign land. I can still feel the pain he felt. I can never forget the story my mother shared about an encounter years ago that shaped the future of our family. These stories still encourage me; they still motivate me.

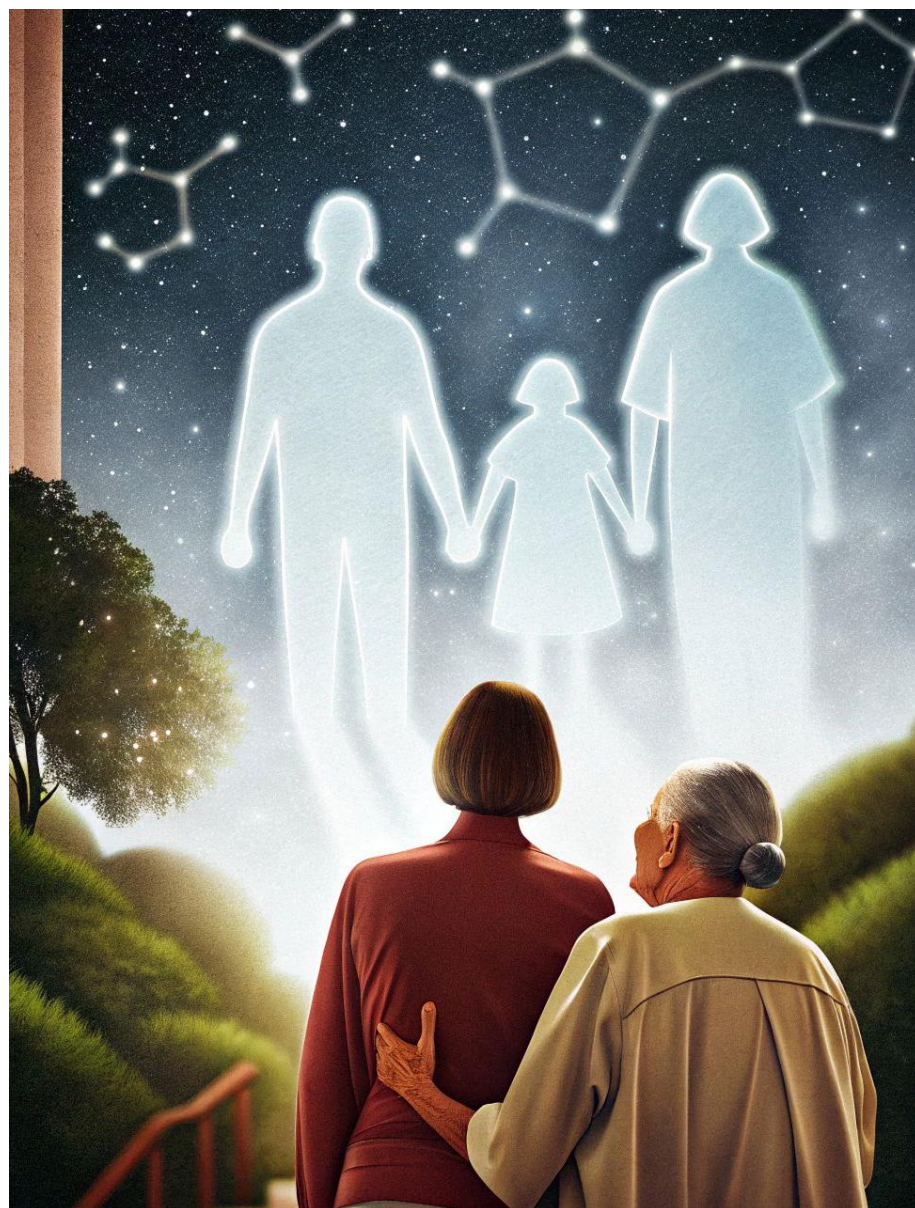
The Tales We Tell Ourselves

Another aspect of stories is their strength to take control over you while also giving you the space to shape them in the first place.

The mysterious part is that people can choose which stories to tell themselves — whether good, bad, or ugly. We can see things the way we want to see them. When you watch a child playing with a simple block of wood, you cannot help but notice how engrossed they are. It is because of the story they are telling themselves about that block. Maybe, to the child, it is a giant elephant in a forest full of lilies, an excavator climbing a white mountain, or a mighty fish in deep waters.

Stories That Outlive Us

In this fast-paced world, we have forgotten to share stories — stories of joy, struggle, pain, and turnarounds. We need to tell future generations what it took to get there, what they can learn from it, how we acted in tough moments,



No one will remember us after we're gone, but our stories will shine like stars — guiding lights for those who come after

and how we endured difficult phases. We have a responsibility to encourage them not to give up, not to lose hope, to strive for excellence, to climb despite the odds,

and to become better individuals.

Let's face it: no one will remember you or me after we are gone. We will have vanished from people's minds, and our existence on this earth will be erased. But our stories will never fade; they will always shine bright like the stars. When those who come after us look up, they will see these guiding lights, inspiring them forever. ◀



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“Once You Stop Fearing Ambiguity, You Grow”

Varun Saddi, Managing Director at Protiviti India, reflects on his 15-year journey in consulting — from early career doubts to embracing ambiguity as a strength. In a conversation with *Galla Chetan*, he discusses why agility, interdisciplinary thinking, and purpose-driven leadership are critical in today's evolving consulting landscape. Saddi also addresses the growing menace of misleading advertising and Protiviti's commitment to sustainability — both as a service and a value woven into the organisation's culture.

You began your career in 2009 as an associate at EXL Service and are now Managing Director at Protiviti Consulting. Looking back, how would you evaluate your journey—and what were some of the key challenges along the way?

Consulting has been a constant throughout my 15-year journey in India, with a brief stint in Australia. One of the biggest challenges — and later, a milestone — was learning to navigate ambiguity. In consulting, there's rarely a fixed template for your day. You walk into the office, and you're often faced with the unexpected.

I still remember my first assignment — there were acronyms I didn't even recognise, and I had just 20 days to deliver. I genuinely wondered if I was in the wrong place. But that's part of the learning curve. Over time, with experience and exposure, you begin to trust your ability to handle uncertainty. That shift — when you stop fearing ambiguity — is a major milestone.

Consulting is, at its core, about

solving complex problems. As the world continues to evolve — with rapid technological change, big data, and shifting business models — the role of consultants becomes even more critical. We have to wear different hats, adapt constantly, and provide clarity where none exists. That, I believe, is both the challenge and the value we bring.

How is Protiviti Consulting trying to bring change to the consulting landscape?

At Protiviti, we believe our greatest asset is our people. By empowering them to be changemakers, we play our part in shaping the future of consulting.

The world around us is changing rapidly—climate change, geopolitical shifts, evolving ways of working and communicating, many accelerated by COVID-19. To respond to these changes, we need individuals who can lead the charge. That's where we focus our efforts: enabling our people with the right tools, training and mindset to drive change—not just for our clients, but for society at large.

Once you stop fearing ambiguity, you start growing — consulting is all about making sense of the grey, not just following templates

As a firm, we see it as our responsibility to contribute meaningfully, and we do that by investing in people who will be the change drivers of tomorrow.

I saw a post on your LinkedIn about misleading advertisements and their impact on companies. Could you elaborate on that?

Yes, that's a timely topic — and one I feel strongly about. Misleading advertising is quite prevalent in the Indian landscape at the moment. What's surprising is that it's not just limited to smaller or lesser-known players — even some of the largest platforms are indulging in it. And it affects everyone. This isn't just about organisations — it's about consumers, and society at large.

My post was triggered by a growing sense that this issue needs more attention. Misleading advertising isn't just about making false claims. It can show up in less obvious ways — like *basket sneaking*, where a donation or charge is added at checkout without your consent,

or forcing users to share personal data just to complete a transaction.

The government has taken steps in the right direction. The Consumer Protection Act and recent guidelines around *dark patterns* are a start. But with the pace at which such practices are spreading, stronger intervention may be necessary. Of course, laws alone can't fix everything. Companies need to act ethically and engage with customers responsibly.

At the same time, raising awareness is critical. That's something we, as business leaders, must contribute to — through forums like this, by speaking to students, and by educating consumers so they can protect themselves. Sometimes, the best defence is knowledge. The more people understand these patterns, the stronger the pushback against unethical practices.

The Protiviti website says, "It's important to make the distinction that leaders and managers don't 'manage' change; they 'enable' change." Can you explain what this means in your context?





Absolutely. The idea of enabling change, rather than managing it, is at the heart of how we think about leadership at Protiviti. True change isn't forced — it has to come with commitment. If I'm not committed to changing my own behaviour or actions, I can't expect my team to follow suit.

Another vital element is communication. You need to engage stakeholders early and openly — whether they're at the top or bottom of the organisation. Whether it's senior stakeholders or those most affected on the ground, everyone needs to understand *why* we're doing this, *what* we're trying to achieve, and *what role* each person plays in that journey.

We're at a point in time where change is constant — happening almost at the speed of light. It's no longer about managing one-off transformations; it's about creating a culture where change is embedded and sustainable. That requires enablers — leaders who drive consistency, clarity, and commitment across the board.

So for us, enabling change means living it ourselves, communicating it clearly, and making sure it resonates across every layer of the organisation.

We don't manage change — we enable it by living it, communicating it clearly, and embedding it across every layer of the organisation

What skills or leadership qualities do you believe are essential for a consultant in today's business environment? How has your perspective changed over the years?

If I had to sum it up in one word, I'd say agility. That's the most critical quality for today's consultants — and it's something my perspective on has evolved over time.

The traditional model — where consultants came in as subject-matter experts with templated solutions — has changed significantly. The environment today is far more dynamic. Today, clients themselves are not always sure of the exact outcomes they want. The goalposts keep shifting, new consulting models are emerging, and clients are increasingly demanding outcome-based billing rather than the standard hourly approach.

In this environment, consultants need to be agile — not just in delivery but in mindset. They must move away from rigid frameworks and instead embrace collaborative consulting, or what I call co-consulting, where we work closely alongside clients to frame and solve problems together.

Another crucial quality is interdisciplinary expertise. We've always stressed the importance of being an

Today's consultant must evolve — blending domain expertise with technology, behavioural insights, and systems thinking to solve complex, fast-changing problems

expert in your domain. But today's problems are far more complex — they cut across technology, behavioural science, operations, and more. A consultant must be able to integrate insights from multiple disciplines to offer a comprehensive solution. And that, again, requires agility — the ability to learn continuously and adapt quickly.

In your view, what is the most pressing issue consultants are facing today, and how should they address it?

I'd say the most pressing issue is the need to become interdisciplinary experts — something I touched upon earlier as well.

As a chartered consultant, I was trained in a particular set of skills. But today, that's not enough. When I'm with a client, I often face complex problems that require more than just my primary expertise. They demand an understanding of technology, systems thinking, behavioural insights — you name it. If I don't understand the tech landscape, for instance, I can't deliver relevant, effective solutions — even if the original ask isn't tech-driven.

To stay relevant, consultants must step out of their comfort zones and gain fluency in disciplines they may

never have considered before. That could mean learning how to interpret data, understanding behavioural science, or developing a working knowledge of new technologies. It's no longer about being a lone expert in one domain; it's about being a connector of insights across domains.

In short, today's consultant must evolve — adopting an interdisciplinary approach and being willing to constantly grow beyond traditional boundaries.

How do you see the role of consultants in the context of sustainability? What are some initiatives Protiviti has taken in this regard?

Let me answer this from two perspectives.

First, sustainability as a service offering is a major growth area for any consulting organisation — and Protiviti is no exception. Whether it's environmental, social, or governance (ESG) related, these aspects now have a significant impact on organisations, and clients are increasingly serious about meeting their sustainability goals. As consultants, we have a key role to play in this journey.

At Protiviti, we're actively building our capabilities in this space. We're ramping up skills, bringing in





subject matter experts, and forming specialised teams — architects, testing professionals, and more — to deliver high-quality sustainability consulting services to our clients.

Second, there's the internal lens — what we are doing as an organisation. At the core, a consulting firm is people-driven. Our people are our greatest asset, and sustainability for us begins there.

We take employee engagement seriously — it's central to our sustainability agenda. We also focus on giving back to society through various social initiatives that involve proactive participation from our teams. These efforts are not just symbolic — they're structured and aligned with clear sustainability targets that are cascaded across leadership and embedded in team-level goals.

So yes, for us, sustainability is a key performance indicator. We are deeply committed to making meaningful progress — both in the services we offer and how we operate as an organisation.

There's a general perception that consulting is a stressful profession — or at least highly competitive. What's your view, and how should consultants approach it?

It's true, consulting often gets associated with stress, long hours, and high pressure. But having been in this field for over 15 years — including 12 years at a Big Four firm before joining Protiviti — I can tell you

that perception isn't the whole picture.

In all those years, I can probably count on my fingers how many weekends I actually worked. The truth is, it comes down to how you manage your time. If you can plan well, manage your calendar, and communicate your priorities clearly, then it doesn't feel like stress. In fact, it becomes energising.

For me, if I wake up excited to make a difference in my clients' lives or support my team, that's not stress — that's purpose. I play cricket every Sunday — it's how I unwind. Now, if I were constantly afraid of getting hit by the ball, it would be stressful. But when I start seeing it as a fun team activity, I enjoy it, I stay focused, and I give it my all. Consulting is very similar.

Yes, ambiguity is a part of the job. Sometimes, the tasks aren't clearly defined. But that's exactly why consultants exist — to navigate the grey areas. And once you realise that's your core value proposition, it becomes rewarding.

That said, stress is real, and it can build up. But how each individual deals with it makes the difference. Some people manage it better than others. The key is for every consultant to learn how to manage stress. Because once you do, the work becomes fulfilling, and life becomes far more balanced.

What has been your most rewarding accomplishment as a Managing Director so far?

As business leaders, we're all

Agility is the most important trait for modern consultants — clients don't want templates, they want co-created, flexible solutions that evolve with their needs



The magic of consulting is that you grow by helping others grow -- it's the most sustainable way to scale an organisation and yourself

driven by the usual KPIs — revenue, growth, profitability. That's a given. But for me personally, the most rewarding accomplishment has been creating a sustainable growth model for the business.

That means multiple things: building new revenue streams, adding fresh capabilities, and most importantly, empowering people to become future leaders. In consulting, that's the magic — it's a bit like those old pyramid schemes, not in a negative way, of course, but in the sense that if I help someone grow into a leader, and they in turn help others grow, the whole organisation scales organically. And in that process, I grow too — into a practice leader, a national leader, and so on.

That's the charm of consulting — you grow when you make others grow. Once you truly understand that, everything shifts. Culture becomes central. If you can foster an inclusive culture and a growth mindset, that's your biggest achievement. It's the best long-term investment you can make — for your company and for yourself.

I've only been with Protiviti for a little over two years, so there's still a long way to go. But I take pride in the small part I've played in that journey so far, and I'm excited to continue building

on it. The rewards — personal and organisational — are immense.

We have many consulting enthusiasts in our cohort. Before we wrap up, what advice would you give them to emulate your successful career journey?

The first thing I'd say is: don't follow my exact path. What worked for me may not work for future consultants, because the landscape is changing — fast. The way we work today could look very different in six months, a year, or five years.

If you're planning to get into consulting, be ready for that change. The role is evolving — from problem solver to trusted advisor. That shift demands a new mindset. You need to be agile, embrace design thinking, and adopt systems thinking. You need to develop an inclusive approach to problem-solving — and be ready to learn and unlearn constantly.

To thrive in this field, back yourself. Be confident, be curious, and stay open. Learn from everything around you. Try to become an interdisciplinary expert. And most importantly — never miss a chance to learn.

Because the consultants who succeed in the future will be the ones who embrace change, stay adaptable, and keep growing with their environment. ◀



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CEO LOUNGE

From Primetime to Reels

Where Marketing Gets Personal

As TV spots and hoardings make room for Instagram stories and influencer shout-outs, brands are rewriting the rules of connection in the digital age



by Neha Kesarkar



In the ever-evolving marketing world, brands constantly seek innovative strategies to connect with their target audiences and drive sales. With its mass reach and brand storytelling capabilities, traditional advertising has long been a mainstay of marketing campaigns. However, the rise of influencer marketing has presented a powerful new approach to reaching consumers on a more personal and authentic level.

Traditional Advertising: The Bedrock of Marketing

Traditional advertising encompasses various channels, including television, print, radio jingles, and outdoor advertising. These channels offer the advantage of reaching vast audiences simultaneously, making them ideal for establishing brand awareness and introducing new products or services. Additionally, traditional advertising provides a platform for brands to showcase their unique offerings through compelling narratives and engaging storylines.

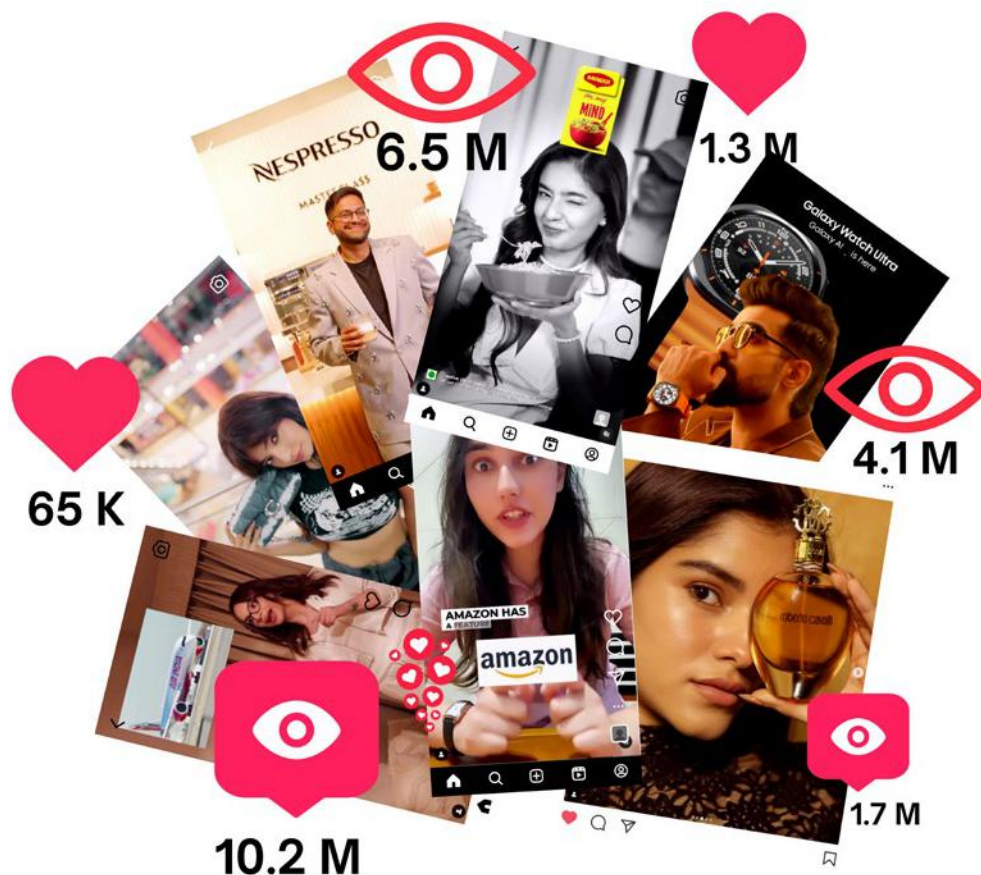
Some famous campaigns over the years:

- *Amul's topical advertising (1960s–present)*
Amul, India's leading dairy brand, has pioneered political and social satire through its topical advertising. These witty ads have successfully captured the attention of the Indian audience, making Amul a household name.
- *P&G India's 'Share the Load' campaign (2016–present)*
This ongoing campaign challenges traditional gender roles and promotes equal participation in household chores. It features commercials showcasing men sharing household responsibilities with their wives, normalising the idea of men taking on domestic duties. The campaign has sparked conversations about gender equality and inspired men to participate more actively in household chores.
- *Unilever India's 'Real Beauty' campaign (2004–present)*
This campaign celebrates

diversity in beauty and challenges unrealistic beauty standards. It features women of various ages, ethnicities and body types, promoting the message that beauty comes in all forms. The campaign has resonated with Indian women, encouraging them to embrace their natural beauty and challenge conventional notions of attractiveness.

Influencer Marketing: The Personal Connection Revolution

On the other hand, influencer marketing focuses on leveraging the power of personal influence to connect with consumers on a more intimate level. Influencers — individuals with large and engaged followings on social media — can seamlessly integrate brand messages into their content, creating authentic endorsements that resonate with their followers. This approach has proved highly effective in India, where consumers are particularly receptive to recommendations from individuals they trust.



Influencer marketing delivers an average ROI of 11.1x in India, far outpacing the 3x typically seen with traditional advertising

A Tale of Two Approaches: Effectiveness and Statistics

A growing body of evidence suggests that influencer marketing is generally more effective than traditional advertising in India. A study by HypeAuditor revealed that influencer marketing campaigns in India generate an average return on investment (ROI) of 11.1x, compared with an average ROI of around 3x for traditional advertising.

This higher ROI can be attributed to several factors:

- **The cultural emphasis on personal relationships:** Indians tend to place more trust in recommendations from people they know and respect. Through their social media presence and engaged followers, influencers can establish a strong personal connection with their audience, making their endorsements more credible.
- **The ability to target specific**

audiences: Influencer marketing allows brands to reach highly targeted audiences based on demographics, interests and behaviours. This precision targeting ensures that brand messaging reaches the right people at the right time, maximising the campaign's effectiveness.

- **Real-time engagement:** Influencer marketing facilitates real-time consumer interaction, allowing brands to gather valuable feedback and respond promptly to customer inquiries. This two-way communication strengthens brand loyalty and encourages further engagement.

Successful Influencer Marketing Campaigns

Recent campaigns demonstrate how Indian brands are leveraging

influencer partnerships to drive tangible business outcomes:

- **Nykaa's collaboration with influencers for 'Clay it Cool' mask line:** Nykaa witnessed a significant surge in sales of their 'Clay it Cool' mask line following their collaboration with a team of social media influencers. Influencers enthusiastically endorsed the product, generating positive reviews and creating engaging content.
- **Mamaearth's partnership with actor Samantha Ruth Prabhu:** Mamaearth's brand awareness and sales experienced a substantial boost after their partnership with the famous Indian actress. Samantha promoted Mamaearth's products on her social media channels, reaching a broad audience of potential customers.

Traditional advertising offers mass reach and a powerful platform for storytelling, making it ideal for building brand awareness and showcasing unique value propositions





Influencer marketing focuses on leveraging the power of personal influence to connect with consumers on a more intimate level

- *MyGlam's collaboration with fashion bloggers:* MyGlam's collaboration with a group of fashion bloggers resulted in a 40 per cent increase in brand awareness, as claimed by the brand. The bloggers showcased its latest makeup collection, generating excitement and encouraging purchase decisions.

Embracing the Evolution of Marketing

Traditional advertising can be used to establish broad brand awareness and position a brand as a leader in its industry. For example, a company that sells luxury cars could run a television commercial featuring a celebrity driving one of its vehicles. This type of advertising would not be effective at driving direct sales, but it would create a sense of prestige and desirability around the brand.

Influencer marketing can reach a

target audience and build relationships with potential customers. For example, a company that sells beauty products could partner with a popular beauty blogger to create a sponsored post or video. This type of advertising would be more effective at driving direct sales than a traditional TV commercial because it is seen by a group of people already interested in the product.

In conclusion, the future of marketing is about using various strategies to reach your target audience and drive sales. Combining traditional and influencer marketing can create a more effective and tailored approach to promoting your brand. ◀



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When the System Itself Is the Crisis

At the Hyderabad Xplore roundtable, XLRI faculty and business leaders met to examine a silent tension within high-growth organisations: Is the very system designed to enable performance now becoming the bottleneck? From agility theatre to operational blind spots, the discussions exposed what happens when chaos is rebranded as culture.

The session began with a collective discomfort, everyone claimed agility, but most described firefighting. As the conversations unfolded, it became clear: the issue wasn't just speed. It was what speed was replacing: structure, focus, and systems that actually work.

Agility or Glorified Panic?

In theory, agility is about responsiveness. In practice, it's often just reactivity. Participants admitted to celebrating teams that "move fast,"

even if it meant burning out, duplicating work, or rushing with half-clarity. The discussion called out a hard truth: chaos can look deceptively like momentum. But while the energy is addictive, the cost is sustainability, and sanity.

The Urgency Trap

When everything is urgent, no one knows what matters. This session questioned whether urgency has become a default culture rather than a meaningful trigger. The group dissected how productivity gets lost in a fog of false alarms, where

Attendees: **Agastya Sagar**, Sagar Asia; **B. Anthony Kiran Kumar**, Astra Microwave Products; **Chakravarthi AVPS**, Ecobliss India; **Debashish Banerjee**, Deloitte; **Dinesh Shenoy**, Eugia Pharma; **Devi P**, T-Hub; **Komal Agarwal**, Rajasekhar Kandepu, Power Mech Projects; **Rishi Dhand**, Thriving Springs; **Rupankar Chakrabarti**, Rain Industries; **Sresta**, Natural Bioproducts; **Phani Pattamatta**, IPhi Group; **Priti Ray**, Deloitte; **Sunder Ramachandran**, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories; **Sundari R Pisupati**, Tempus Law Associates; **Vithal Donakonda**, Cyient





leadership accidentally fuels chaos instead of filtering it. The way out, they agreed, wasn't slowing down, it was sharpening focus.

The Hidden Rot Behind Smooth Frontends

Most ops breakdowns don't start at the customer touchpoint, they start deep inside. Leaders shared stories of

backend rot, outdated systems, manual workarounds, and invisible cracks that remained ignored until the brand promise broke. The most dangerous part? The illusion that everything's working fine, until it very suddenly isn't.

The Overlooked Intelligence of Ops Teams

Perhaps the most provocative insight came from below the strategy layer: operations staff often understand the business better than leadership. They're closest to the breakdowns, the shortcuts, the friction. Yet their insights are rarely heard until it's too late. The room debated how hierarchy kills pattern recognition, and what happens when execution intelligence is treated as mere logistics.

The Hyderabad Xplore session left behind a crucial question: What if the chaos isn't a side-effect, but the system itself? In chasing speed and scale, are organisations bypassing the very structures that build long-term success? It's not just about agility anymore. It's about knowing when to pause, realign, and truly listen to the silence before the fire alarm. ◀





Drop the Mask

Let Work Meet the Real You

We've mastered the art of corporate masks — the polished, perfected versions of ourselves — but as home and office blur, it's the honest, human self that fosters trust and transforms culture

 by Sayan Kumar Roy

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”

- Oscar Wilde

Easy to say. Harder to do at work. We all wear masks. Not the theatrical kind, but the invisible ones — the “work” version of ourselves that shows up on time, speaks with polish, filters emotions, and treads carefully around unspoken rules. It is the version that smiles through stress and adds “per my last email” instead of just saying what we mean.

But here is the thing: with hybrid work, remote meetings, and the rising emphasis on authenticity and mental well-being, these old masks are starting to crack. Maybe that is not such a bad thing.

The Compartmentalisation Trap

Traditionally, we have been taught to keep our “personal” and “professional” selves in separate compartments. Do not bring your home life to work. Do not let your vulnerabilities show. Be

“professional” — whatever that means.

It is a legacy mindset. In earlier generations, work was a place you went to. You wore formals, punched in, and tried not to let your boss know if you were having a bad day. Personal life stayed at the door.

But now, work has entered our homes — literally. Our dining tables became desks during the pandemic. Team meetings gave our coworkers front-row seats to our clutter, kids, pets, and sometimes even our tears.

So, is the separation still realistic? Or even healthy?

Real Talk: Who Are You at Work?

Take Priya, a friend who works in corporate human resources. In the office, she is articulate, confident, and a sharp dresser. But during remote work, she found herself letting colleagues see her in her natural state — without make-up, with a curious toddler occasionally barging into video calls. She cringed at first.

But then something shifted. People warmed up to her. Conversations became more genuine. Colleagues

shared more too — about their burnout, about ageing parents, about feeling overwhelmed. And work did not suffer; in fact, relationships strengthened. The team performed better, not despite the personal stuff, but because they had stopped pretending it did not exist.

Showing Up Fully

This is not about oversharing or being unfiltered. It is about alignment. The closer the version of you at work is to the real you, the more energy you save, the more trust you build, and the better you lead.

Research backs this up. A 2021 study found that employees who felt they could be authentic at work were 32 per cent more engaged and 40 per cent less likely to consider quitting. That is no small deal.

But the benefits are not just statistical — they are human.

When a team lead says, “I’m having a rough week — can we shift this to tomorrow?”, they are not being unprofessional. They are being real. And they are giving permission for others to be real too. That is culture in the making.

The Fear of Being Too Much

Still, many fear that being “too real” could backfire. That someone might think they are not cut out for leadership or not serious enough. This fear is valid — especially in environments where empathy has not yet caught up with performance metrics.

But change often starts small.

It starts when we stop apologising for being human. When we normalise saying, “I don’t have the answer right now” or “I need a break.” When we allow others to do the same.

The New Professionalism

Professionalism is not about perfection. It is about consistency, respect, and responsibility. You can be professional and vulnerable. You can be polished and authentic.

We are not machines. We are not avatars. We are people — with lives, layers, and yes, multiple versions. The goal is not to choose one version and discard the rest — it is to bring them



We’ve been taught to keep ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ separate: Don’t bring home to work. Don’t show vulnerability. Be ‘professional’ — whatever that means

closer together. To integrate.

Because integration breeds integrity.

So, What Version of You is at Work Today?

Look around your virtual or physical workspace. What stories do you and your teammates carry that no one talks about? What would shift if people felt safe to be fully themselves?

Start with curiosity. Lead with empathy. Share something real. Ask someone how they really are — not as a greeting, but as a question.

The versions of us do not have to be at odds. When we honour all parts of who we are, we show others they can do the same.

That is not just good for morale — it is good for business.

Because where authenticity thrives, so does trust. And where trust lives, teams soar. ◀

Sayan Kumar Roy
is a PGDM(GM) student at XLRI



“Digital Runs on Strategy, Not Just Tech”

With over two decades of global experience across digital strategy, transformation, and tech-led innovation, **Vipin Gupta**, Partner – Digital and Emerging Technologies at EY, believes the real challenge isn't in adopting technology but in aligning it with business outcomes. From inflated expectations to skill shortages, Gupta unpacks today's digital dilemmas in a candid conversation with *Isha Banerjee* — and offers a pragmatic roadmap for transformation that delivers measurable value.

You've worked extensively on digital transformation. How do you think it impacts clients? How can innovation happen through it, and what major changes does it bring to businesses?

Digital transformation is really about using technology to create tangible value for the business. Earlier, people used to talk about IT strategy, then technology strategy, and now digital strategy. But the core question remains: with all the technology available — cloud, mobility, analytics, data platforms, AI, GenAI — how do we apply it meaningfully?

One of the biggest challenges is structuring and prioritising. Any business can be broken into three layers: front office (like sales, marketing, dealer management), middle office (supply chain, manufacturing), and back office (ERP, finance, legal). The key is to decide where you want to use technology, what kind of technology, and what benefits you're expecting — whether it's improving sales, reducing cost, or enhancing customer experience.

For instance, you might use

analytics and mobility not just to cut costs, but to grow revenue — like a Starbucks app that gives personalised recommendations to drive higher sales. In supply chain, on the other hand, tech might be focused on cost reduction. Prioritising based on your business strategy is key — some might want to start with supply chain transformation, others with finance.

There's also the question of how much to focus on foundational tech (like ERP), transformational (smart analytics), or exploratory (GenAI, blockchain). If innovation is your goal, then you may need dedicated teams or centres of excellence. Many large Indian conglomerates are running startup accelerators for exactly this reason — partnering with external innovators to solve internal challenges.

Ultimately, the question is: I have a traditional business — where and how do I inject technology, and what outcomes do I expect? Be it more revenue, reduced costs, or improved customer experience — digital

Digital transformation isn't just about tech – it's about injecting it where it creates real value: revenue growth, cost reduction, or customer experience

transformation is about driving growth and profitability.

You mentioned organisations need to analyse which technologies to implement and to what extent. But digital transformation can feel overwhelming. Some companies might not be ready, or might choose the wrong solutions. How do you approach such situations?

That's a great point — and interestingly, the trend is shifting. Earlier, the biggest blocker used to be change management. Today, it's almost reverse change management.

Let me explain. Earlier, employees were hesitant to embrace technology. But now, with tools like ChatGPT embedded in everyday platforms like WhatsApp, even non-tech-savvy users are adapting quickly. For example, my wife — who's not in tech — recently prepared for a psychology exam almost entirely using ChatGPT. That's how pervasive and accessible these

tools have become.

So now the problem is no longer lack of awareness or resistance to change. It's the inflated expectations people have. For instance, everyone wants a mobile app because they think it's quick and easy. But apps are complex — difficult to build, maintain, and scale. Setting the right expectations is critical.

The two real challenges now are:

- 1. Legacy systems** – You may want a CRM or analytics dashboard, but if your data infrastructure is outdated, integration becomes a nightmare.
- 2. Scarcity of skilled talent** – Demand for roles like digital or solution architects is skyrocketing. Costs have nearly doubled, making it difficult to scale projects affordably.

So yes, transformation can be overwhelming. But the real blockers today are not willingness or awareness — they're legacy tech and talent availability. Helping clients navigate these with clear expectations and a phased strategy is the key.





People no longer question whether they should adopt digital solutions; they are asking how quickly, at what cost, and with what level of sustainability this transformation can be achieved. The challenge for leaders now is managing expectations — ensuring that while technology feels accessible and exciting, its implementation remains practical, strategic, and aligned with business needs.

As more organisations move from legacy systems to cloud technologies, what do you think is the biggest challenge in such transitions?

That's a very relevant question — and while it might seem like a continuation of the previous one, it brings out a critical angle.

Let's take a practical example. Suppose I have a loyalty system running on a traditional data centre, and now I want to move it to the cloud for better scalability and innovation. The assumption is that cloud will automatically be better. But here's the catch: cloud is increasingly becoming more expensive than legacy setups.

Many businesses are surprised by

this. In traditional environments, they might be running older servers with minimal overheads. But once you move to AWS or Azure, you're working with top-of-the-line infrastructure. Add to that the need for security, monitoring tools, and data services, and suddenly your cost could shoot up by 1.5 to 2 times.

Now, when the CMO sees the cost go from ₹50 lakhs to ₹75 lakhs, the obvious question is: What's the ROI? Will I see a 30 per cent increase in loyalty registrations? And the honest answer often is no — at least not immediately. The real value of cloud lies in agility, scalability, and resilience, but these are harder to quantify in direct revenue terms.

Then there's the talent issue. In a legacy setup, you may have had a partner managing everything with a ₹15 lakh resource. Move to cloud, and suddenly you need someone who understands cloud architecture and DevOps — and such skills now demand ₹30–35 lakh salaries. That's a huge jump.

Plus, think of the spikes in business. Say a retailer runs BOGO (Buy One Get One) events four times a year. The

The biggest blocker today? Legacy systems and talent scarcity — not resistance to change. Everyone wants tech, but few can implement it right

Cloud isn't automatically cheaper. Without strategy, costs can shoot up — and ROI isn't always in immediate revenue, but agility and scalability

system must scale 4x during those periods — but should I really invest heavily in infrastructure for something that happens only a few times annually? That's where cloud should make sense with its elastic scaling. But in practice, if not planned right, even this flexibility becomes expensive.

So in the end, it comes down to three big challenges:

1. **Change management** — or rather, expectation management.
2. **Skill availability** — the right people are hard to find and costly.
3. **Cost vs value** — justifying increased spends when direct ROI isn't always visible.

These challenges are very real, and not everyone has figured out how to balance them yet.

While we've talked about how digital transformation is impacting organisations, what kind of impact is it having on customers? How are they benefiting — or being affected — by this shift?

The impact on customers is actually huge — and that's where you really start seeing the tangible value of digital transformation. Of course,

it depends on how an organisation approaches it, but wherever it's done right, it makes a significant difference to the customer experience.

Let me give you a concrete example from Starbucks. Earlier, we used to offer beverage subscriptions twice a year for just a week — you'd walk into a store, pay around ₹1,800–₹1,900 for 10 drinks (which would otherwise cost ₹2,500), and get a physical card valid for three months. It was clunky and limited.

Now, with the mobile app, the whole experience has gone digital. Subscriptions are available throughout the year, and we've also made the product more intelligent. Instead of a one-size-fits-all offer, we've made it segmented. So if you're someone who already buys five drinks a month, we offer you a pack for eight — making it more appealing for both you and us. The redemption is seamless too — through the app or even WhatsApp. So the customer gets convenience and choice, and the business gets better engagement and revenue.

And Starbucks isn't the only one. Airlines are another classic case. Today, almost 100 per cent of transactions



happen online — ticket bookings, cancellations, seat selections, even customer service. When was the last time you saw a physical Indigo or Air India ticket counter in the city?

Banking is perhaps the most striking example. When I started my career, people were still warming up to internet banking. Now, 98 per cent of transactions in most major banks happen through apps. The branch network, while still there, has lost its traditional relevance for everyday banking.

Then, of course, you have the digital-native brands — they were born in this ecosystem, so the customer experience is deeply embedded in their DNA.

So yes, digital transformation has made things faster, more accessible, and more personalised for customers. But the caveat is: not every brand has cracked it. Some are still catching up. But the potential is massive — as long as companies are willing to reimagine customer journeys with digital at the core.

You've worked with boutique firms as well as Big Four consultancies. What would you say are the key strengths and challenges unique to each type of consulting firm?

Very interesting question. Based on my experience, I'd actually categorise the consulting landscape into four types — each with its own distinct way of working.

First, you have the traditional System Integrators (SIs) — like a TCS. These firms are largely delivery-focused. Their strength lies in IT execution. The teams are process-oriented — they take a requirement, develop the solution, and deliver it. But they're not necessarily groomed for problem-solving. In fact, in such firms, maybe just 0.1 per cent of the talent is trained to think beyond the brief. Most people follow a very input-output model: "Tell me what to do, and I'll do just that." The culture, training, hiring — all of it is built around efficiency, not strategic thinking.

Then you come to the Big Four — they're consulting firms but also heavily process-driven. Their engagement models typically involve predefined methodologies. So, if a client says, "Assess my risk framework," they'll apply a checklist-based approach



Starbucks' app didn't just digitise — it made subscriptions intelligent. Segmentation boosted sales while giving customers convenience. That's transformation done right

and deliver a maturity score. But sometimes, there's a lack of deeper insight — do they truly understand why they're doing what they're doing or whether it genuinely solves the client's problem? Not always.

Next, you have firms like Accenture, which I think sit somewhere between high-end consulting and large-scale execution. They bring a strong blend of strategy, process, and delivery capability. They're closer to a hybrid of an SI and a strategic advisory, and that's a powerful combination in today's environment.

And finally, you have the strategy consulting firms — the McKinseys, BCGs, and so on. These firms don't come in with rigid methodologies. They start with the problem statement: "What are you trying to solve?" and build everything — hypotheses, frameworks, and solutions — around that. It's very client-specific and intellectually driven. But they usually don't handle large-scale implementation or development work.

So each type plays a unique role in the consulting value chain. Strategy

firms can't always execute. Process-driven firms may not innovate. SIs might struggle with business problem-solving. But organisations need all of them at different stages — whether it's strategy formulation, process design, or tech implementation.

With your long career in consulting and the rapid advances in AI and automation, how do you see the role of strategy consultants evolving over the next five to ten years?

Many people say that with all the developments in AI and technology, the role of strategy consultants might diminish. I completely disagree.

Yes, AI is advancing rapidly and moving closer to mimicking human judgement. But at the end of the day, strategic thinking still requires something deeply human — instinct, context, and experience. I was just reading a quote yesterday that felt very relevant. Steve Jobs once said that when he came to India, he saw so many successful businesspeople operating purely on instinct, without much data.

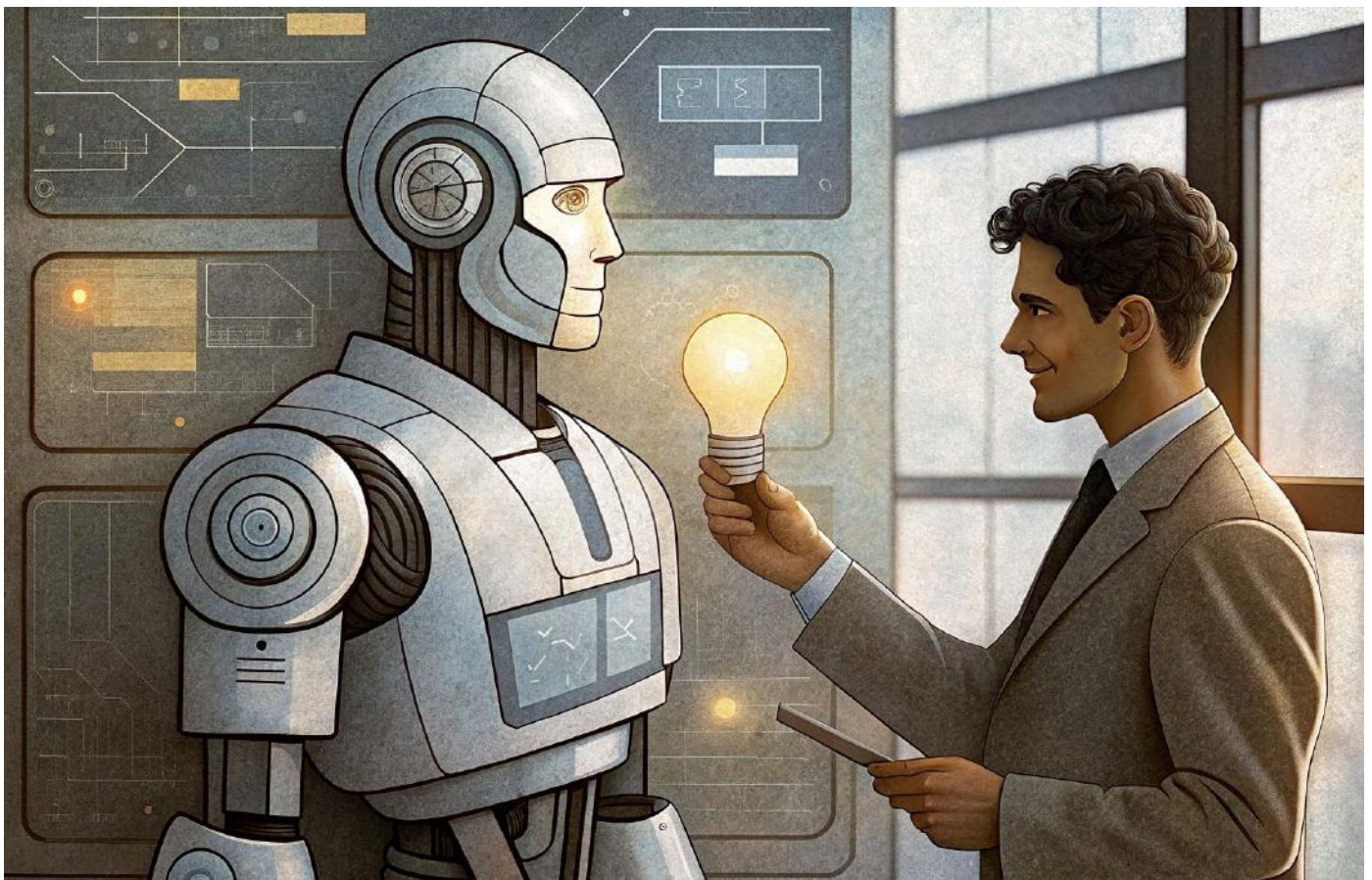
AI won't replace strategists. The human edge? Instinct and context. Steve Jobs built Apple on intuition — data alone can't replicate that

And he admitted that most of his own decisions at Apple were driven more by intuition than data — and we all know what Apple became.

So while AI will definitely enhance our ability to gather and process data, the ability to interpret that data in context, to guide clients through complex decision-making — that remains very human. In fact, I believe AI will amplify the role of strategy consultants, not replace them. Consultants will have more data, better tools, and richer insights — but they'll still be the ones helping clients make sense of it all.

Also, it's important to realise that consulting isn't just about telling clients what to do. Most CXOs already have a sense of what they want. I've been on that side as a CTO, and often I knew what the right direction was — I just needed more validation, more confidence to move forward, or the right data to back it up.

Very few people in organisations — maybe 0.1 per cent — have the skill set to truly interpret complex data and turn



it into actionable insight. That's where strategy consultants come in. They help collect the right data, make sense of it, draw the right inferences, and guide the organisation's decisions. And that's not a one-time thing. The best consulting firms stay with you through the journey.

For instance, firms like McKinsey will often return for a second or third-year review — not just to check on the execution but to realign the strategy if needed. Strategy today is no longer a five-year plan. It's more like an 18-month to two-year rolling journey. With the pace of change on both the demand and supply sides, you need constant recalibration — and that's a space where good strategy consultants will continue to add immense value.

It's reassuring to hear that strategy consulting is here to stay. But it's not always smooth sailing. Can you share a project that didn't go as planned, and how you handled the situation?

Actually, my current project is a textbook case of that — it's been really tough and quite stressful. I joined midway, and the project had already been sold — possibly by someone who didn't fully understand its complexity. It might have been won based on relationships, or it was significantly undersold to the client, which created unrealistic expectations from the start.

To give you an idea: it was a fixed-cost project meant to be delivered in two months. I joined towards the end of that two-month window, thinking we were just a couple of weeks behind. But it turned out we were already two months late by then — and now we're four months past that original deadline. We're finally hoping to go live next week. So, yes, it's been that bad.

The client is understandably frustrated, the team is stretched thin, and trust has eroded. In a situation like this, the most important thing is to rebuild credibility — and that's incredibly difficult once it's lost. Honestly, it's not something one person can solve. The entire organisation has to step in and support the effort.

As a leader, you're juggling multiple fronts: managing the client relationship, supporting your team, and keeping your executive leadership informed. Every



A delayed project taught me: underselling complexity erodes trust. Rebuilding credibility takes longer than delivery. Transparency saves partnerships

escalation goes up the chain, so you have to make sure communication is clear and consistent.

You also have to empathise with the client's position. Imagine you hired a contractor to finish your house in six weeks, and twenty weeks later, it's still not done. You'd be furious — and rightly so. That's the kind of baggage we're dealing with.

So, resilience becomes key. You have to stay calm, keep everyone aligned, and do whatever it takes to bring the project back on track — even if that means owning the mess and cleaning it up, one step at a time.

For those interested in joining your firm — or any consulting firm — what's one piece of advice you'd offer? What qualities or experience do you think are most valued?

I'd actually highlight three key qualities that, in my view, are absolutely critical —



Master three things to succeed in consulting: communication, structured problem-solving, and relentless curiosity. Without them, the demands will overwhelm you

and I believe most consulting firms would agree, especially when hiring fresh talent.

First and foremost: communication skills. That's a deal-breaker. If you can't communicate clearly or don't have the confidence to express your ideas well, consulting can become an uphill battle. It's a client-facing, problem-solving profession — you have to get your point across effectively.

The second is structured thinking. Your ability to break down a problem and approach it logically matters a lot. Let me share a quick example: I've been hiring laterals for my team recently and conducted about 15 interviews. I asked every candidate a simple question — "How would you estimate the total number of cars in Mumbai?" Surprisingly, 14 out of 15 couldn't answer it — not because they didn't know the number, but because they couldn't even figure out how to approach the question. These were people from

top-tier firms. So if you can't structure your thoughts or show basic problem-solving skills, that's a red flag.

And the third one is attitude — a combination of curiosity, positivity, and drive. You can't fake it. You need to genuinely have that fire in the belly, the hunger to learn, connect, and go the extra mile. Consulting is demanding — not just in terms of work hours, but the pressure, the client demands, the internal expectations. For instance, just this week, I flew in after a full week of work, took an 8 am flight, and tomorrow I head back — again at 8 am — with barely a day off before jumping into another 16-hour workday.

But I do it because I want to. That enthusiasm to engage, learn, meet people — that has to come from within. If it doesn't, consulting might not be for you. It's a high-intensity environment, and unless you genuinely thrive on that, it's going to be difficult to sustain. ◀



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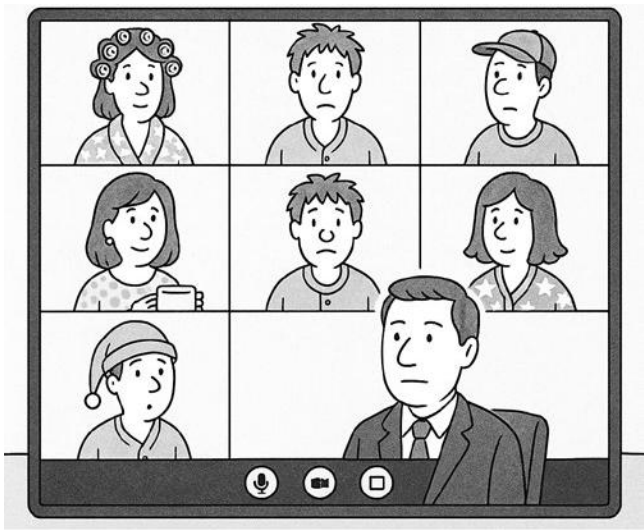
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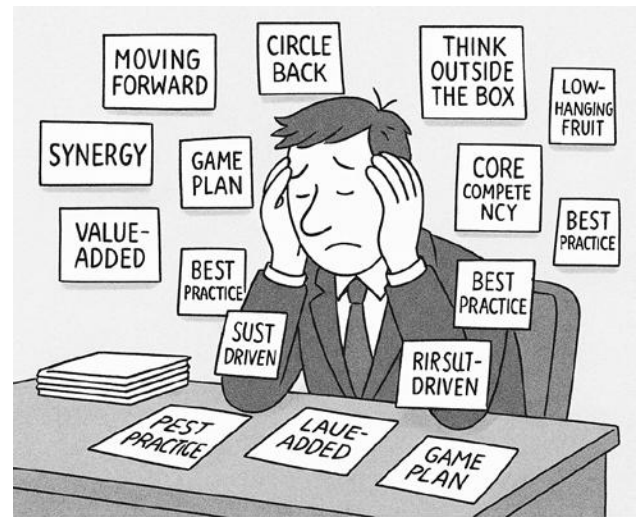
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Bob still thinks showing up to the virtual office makes a difference.



So... does anyone know how to go viral, or are we just hoping for the best again



“If he hears one more buzzword, he might actually pivot out of the building”

Twisters by **Abraham Aby**

1 Bal Gangadhar Tilak wanted to bring people together and fight the British, who had imposed a ban on public gatherings. To do so, what did he revive and popularise in 1893?

2 He lost his parents, a brother, and two sisters during the Partition riots, leaving him orphaned and deeply scarred by the violence. Disillusioned with life, he even considered becoming a dacoit. However, his brother Malkhan persuaded him to apply for recruitment to the Indian Army. There, he was introduced to athletics and went on to set national records in the events he competed in. Who are we talking about?

3 In 1864, _____ was declared the summer capital of British India, succeeding Murree, located northeast of Rawalpindi. After Independence, the city became the capital of Punjab.

4 Connect: India – 1947 – UK
South Korea – 1945 – Japan
Bahrain – 1971 – UK
Republic of the Congo – 1960 – France

1. Ganesh Chaturthi 2. Milkha Singh 3. Shimla 4. They all gained independence on August 15.



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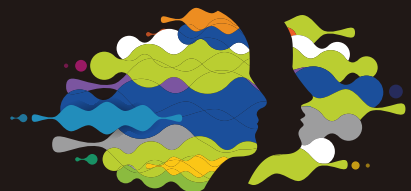
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