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The Weight of CHOOSING WELL

Prof Pingali Venugopal, Kaushik Mitra, Fr. Nelson A. D'Silva, S.J, Ashish Nayyar, Maneet Sehgal, Ramit Gupta, Amrendra Mishra, Sushant Bhushan, Harry Chawla, Pankaj Tomar, Sujit Bose, Puneet Gehani, Bhavna Batra, Atul Kashyap, Varun Das, Gopalji Mehrotra (L-R from top)

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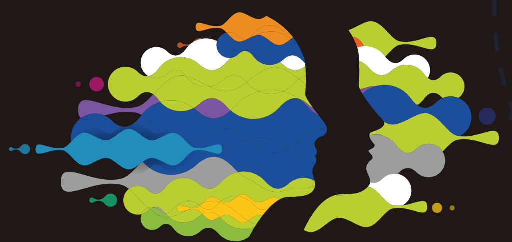

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WORK IS being reshaped through everyday choices rather than headline moves.

Across organisations, momentum is forming through how teams plan their time, structure their conversations, and decide what deserves focus. This edition reflects that shift in attention, from scale as a goal to coherence as a capability.

You'll notice a growing emphasis on systems that support continuity. Tools are becoming more responsive. Processes are being designed to accommodate change without constant disruption. Decision-making is gaining texture, shaped by context rather than urgency.

What stands out is a renewed respect for rhythm. Workflows are aligning with how people actually think and operate. Leadership is expressing itself through clarity and steadiness. Progress is being measured through sustained movement rather than sharp spikes.

These patterns signal a deeper maturity. Organisations are investing in frameworks that help people stay engaged over time. The result is work that feels intentional, balanced, and grounded.

The stories across these pages reflect that direction, where awareness strengthens execution and design supports endurance.

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Kanagaraj Ayyalusamy

Prof Kanagaraj Ayyalusamy
XLRI

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FACULTY TEAM

Professor Kanagaraj Ayyalusamy
kanagaraj@xlri.ac.in
Professor & Convenor Corporate Relation and Placements

Professor Narasimhan Rajkumar
rajkumar@xlri.ac.in
Associate Professor

Professor Rahul Kumar Shukla
rahul.shukla@xlri.ac.in
Assistant Professor & Convener - Admissions

Professor Sunil Kumar Sarangi
sunilsarangi@xlri.ac.in
Assistant Professor & Co- Convenor- Placements

CORPORATE RELATIONS

Mr Rajni Ranjan
ranjan.rajni@xlri.ac.in
Vice President - Corporate Relations

This edition explores intelligence that can predict your next move and remember your last one; systems that remain effective without needing to be loud.

EVERY SURFACE you interact with today is powered by a deeper system, quietly syncing inputs, behaviours, and bias. But in the rush to build what's next, something subtle is returning: the need to feel rooted in what already exists.

This edition explores intelligence that can predict your next move and remember your last one; systems that remain effective without needing to be loud; and people who lead without needing to be seen. As systems grow more seamless, the real challenge isn't how much we can automate, but what we choose to remain present for. What we protect. What we make room for, even if it slows us down.

Because design isn't just how something works. It's also what it leaves behind.

Gloryson R B Chalil

Prof Gloryson R B Chalil
XLRI

STUDENT TEAM

Sai Moukthik Konduru
b24149@astra.xlri.ac.in
Secretary (Jamshedpur)

Abraham Aby
b24113@astra.xlri.ac.in
Treasurer (Jamshedpur)

Vithal Gulati
b24478@astra.xlri.ac.in
Joint Secretary (Delhi)

Raghavendra P R
b24459@astra.xlri.ac.in
Joint Treasurer (Delhi)

SENIOR EXECUTIVE MEMBER

Anmol Singla
h24128@astra.xlri.ac.in

Bhavya Taneja
b24011@astra.xlri.ac.in

Dyuti Ghosh
b24018@astra.xlri.ac.in

Madhura Kuthe
b24448@astra.xlri.ac.in

Riya Jain
h24047@astra.xlri.ac.in

Sagnik Das
b24401@astra.xlri.ac.in

Shreiya Tandon
v24022@astra.xlri.ac.in

Shreyansh Thakur
b24207@astra.xlri.ac.in

Vashi Agarwal
b24415@astra.xlri.ac.in

Vedant Bhayani
b24053@astra.xlri.ac.in

JUNIOR EXECUTIVE MEMBER

Aarushi Boora
b25055@astra.xlri.ac.in

Ananya Joshi
h25009@astra.xlri.ac.in

Anushka Aggarwal
v25006@astra.xlri.ac.in

C P Malikah
h25078@astra.xlri.ac.in

Chaitanya Sharma
b25347@astra.xlri.ac.in

Faria Choudhry
b25327@astra.xlri.ac.in

Harnam Singh Malhotra
b25179@astra.xlri.ac.in

Indranil Ghosh
b25129@astra.xlri.ac.in

Juhi Agarwal
h25150@astra.xlri.ac.in

Pratyush Raj Singh
b25087@astra.xlri.ac.in

Rakshith S
b25197@astra.xlri.ac.in

Saraswat Majumder
b25316@astra.xlri.ac.in

Senthil Sidharth
b25372@astra.xlri.ac.in

Shivam Litoria
b25100@astra.xlri.ac.in

Vanchhita Nigam
b25213@astra.xlri.ac.in

Vedanshi Tripathi
b25342@astra.xlri.ac.in

ARE STRONG organisations built through accumulation or acceleration?

Over time, systems develop character. They reflect the habits they encourage, the behaviours they reward, and the pace they sustain. This edition explores how that character is taking shape across contemporary workplaces.

You'll find recurring signals of intentional design. Teams are distributing responsibility with clarity. Leaders are creating conditions that allow decisions to travel well across levels. Individuals are shaping their own working patterns with greater awareness of energy and focus.

There's a noticeable shift in how performance is understood. Output is supported by recovery. Ambition is guided by context. Success is shaped by how well systems absorb complexity while remaining steady.

Financial thinking is expanding to include personal security and long-term confidence. Organisational frameworks are being refined to support adaptability without constant reinvention. Technology is playing a supportive role—enhancing judgment rather than replacing it.

These developments point toward a more durable way of building. Progress compounds quietly, alignment reduces friction, and culture is reinforced through everyday decisions rather than declarations.

This edition reflects that stage of evolution. It highlights how organisations strengthen themselves by refining what already works and deepening the structures that support people over time.

What endures is rarely dramatic. It is designed, practiced, and carried forward through intention.

Hari Govind Nair

Hari Govind Nair
Editor

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PUBLISHER
Deepak Yadav
deepak@ceolounge.net

EDITOR
Hari Govind Nair
hari@ceolounge.net

DEPUTY EDITOR
Amit Ranjan Rai

ART DIRECTOR
Santosh Nirala

DESIGNER
Suman Kumari

DIGITAL STRATEGIST
Vikas Raghav

VIDEO & PHOTOGRAPHY
Gurvinder Pal Singh
Gagan Arora

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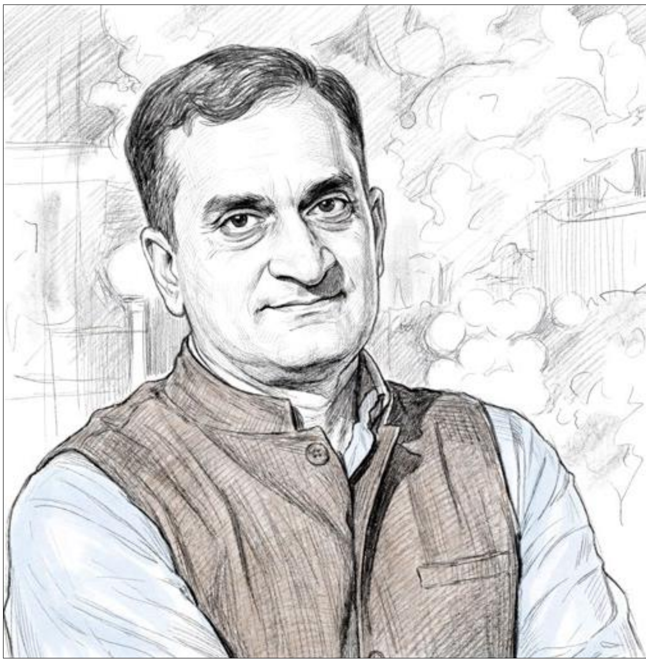
Power, Proximity and the Limits of Selection



WHAT'S Inside

Power, Proximity and the **LIMITS OF SELECTION**

As individuals rise through organisations, power grows through proximity. Yet the systems used to select leaders expose how limited our ability is to judge who should ultimately be trusted with authority

by Aditya Pardeshi

From the moment a baby is born, it begins to undergo various experiences — some good, some bad. These experiences develop a range of skills within that individual. One such skill is decision-making. Over time, the person learns to understand what is right and what is wrong, what should be done and what should not.

The knowledge base developed over the years is what makes an individual suitable for a job, corporate or otherwise. Upon entering the corporate world, they are provided with limited resources and responsibilities. They can make decisions only within the smaller jurisdiction defined by their role.

An entry-level position grants the authority to observe events and pass information to higher authorities in a prescribed format. Here, they may record observations but cannot edit the format itself. Their immediate manager, the section head, presents these observations at a higher level. This manager holds a modest power to interpret events, yet is kept distant from higher authority — essentially, from the head of the section — as there remains much to learn.

As experiences accumulate and knowledge deepens, the individual progresses to the next role. Gradually, as they climb the corporate ladder, they are given subordinates. This journey hones decisive skills, making them eligible to make decisions for a group. This eligibility is awarded with additional power and, hence, authority. Even as responsibilities grow, the individual is often content, because growth increases their proximity to power — a source of personal satisfaction.

Proximity and Power

Once absolute power is attained, they are very close to wielding full authority. The question that arises then is: what will they use that power for? It may be used for self-improvement or for the collective good; to uplift the company or merely to perform a mediocre job for the salary.

These possibilities make it crucial to select leaders through multiple screenings, ensuring they will behave as the company expects. A leader's behaviour is reflected in their decisions, which shape the company's future. Given this risk, companies select a specific type of leader and grant them

more or less power according to how well their behaviour aligns with corporate goals. Those who think as the company does are granted greater power; those who do not are kept away from it. This discrimination by proximity is intended to ensure things happen according to plan.

The Fragility of Selection

The most critical question remains: how do you choose the right person for the job? Behavioural interviews, psychometric testing and leadership assessments can offer some insight into how a person might behave when empowered. But do they measure the root causes from which decisive skills were derived? Do they account for the varied experiences an individual has harboured since childhood? The answer is no. These methods allow a candidate to present — and sometimes carefully craft — an image that convinces the jury they are the right fit. Some can fabricate traits to secure the role. This also raises the question of whether it is truly possible to judge someone within such a limited window of time.

What if a candidate presents what the jury wants by sheer luck, shadowing the most capable person? There is no definite answer. The world works on statistics: decisions are made based on the representative sample a person presents in interviews. We can never access the totality of their past actions. The process judges only what someone is likely to become, never what they definitely will become. These uncertainties make selection more crucial, complex and tedious.

The HR manager who can identify the right person for the job must be skilled enough to find a gem in a coal mine — something AI alone cannot achieve while relying solely on well-known personality and competency assessments. Hence, there remains a need for the conscious human practitioner whose job AI cannot replace; if it is forcibly replaced, the result may be chaos — consequences not felt today, but realised much later.

Even as responsibilities grow, the individual is often content, because growth increases their proximity to power — a source of personal satisfaction

Aditya Pardeshi
is a PGDM(GM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

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Why Circularity Must Become a BUSINESS IMPERATIVE

Rising waste, supply risks and climate pressures are exposing the limits of the linear economy. Circular models promise measurable emissions cuts, cost resilience and new revenue — if businesses act decisively

by Yash Kushwaha

Across the world, rising waste levels and shrinking natural resources point to a serious problem. The current "take, use, discard" model is putting pressure on land, water and the climate. This linear system results in lost materials, high emissions and increased business risk. In this context, the circular economy presents a clear and practical alternative. It aims to keep materials in use for longer, reduce waste, and design products that can be reused, repaired or recycled. Yet, despite growing interest, the idea still does not receive the strategic attention it deserves.

The circular economy is more than a sustainability concept; it is a solution with measurable impact. Studies show that five major industries — cement, steel, aluminium, plastics and food — could cut 9.3 billion metric tonnes of CO_2 equivalent by adopting circular systems. This is equal to the current emissions of the entire global transport sector. For industries facing cost pressure, supply chain risk and climate regulations, circularity is becoming a business necessity.

The current 'take, use, discard' model results in lost materials, high emissions and rising business risk, while the circular economy offers a clear and practical alternative

Why Companies Struggle
The shift to circularity is not simple. Firms must redesign products, rethink services and reorganise supply chains. These steps require new skills, tools and investments. Early costs are often high, and returns may take time. Many products today are also not made for repair, reuse or easy material recovery, which raises the cost of circular systems. Clear standards are lacking in many sectors, adding to the uncertainty.

Short-term challenges include redesign work, new handling systems and training. But long-term gains are clear. Circular models reduce exposure to volatile raw material prices, lower waste disposal costs and improve compliance with climate laws. They also open new revenue paths in repair, resale and component recovery.

Sector Examples
Construction
The construction sector is a significant contributor to global waste. The cement industry alone accounts for 2.4 per cent of global CO_2 emissions from energy and industry. Circular ideas here include the reuse of demolition waste, modular design and material recovery. Old buildings can supply steel, timber and blocks for new projects, reducing both extraction and emissions.

Textiles
The current fashion system promotes rapid consumption and disposal. As a result, more than $500 billion is lost each year because clothes are thrown away after limited use. Much of this ends up in landfill or is burned. A circular textile model focuses on extending product life, using recycled fibres and reducing the rate of disposal. It also challenges the fast-fashion cycle that fuels waste.

Furniture
Furniture is durable, yet a large share ends up in landfill. A UK study found that 42 per cent of bulky waste in landfill comes from furniture. Another revealed that 80 per cent of the raw materials used in furniture production are lost during the manufacturing process. Work from the Danish furniture industry shows progress: 44 per cent

of firms include maintenance in their plans, 22 per cent offer take-back programmes and 56 per cent design products that can be recycled.

Critiques of the Circular Model
Circularity is not without limits. Recycling and recovery need energy, water and labour. As the share of recycled content rises, the cost and effort rise at a non-linear rate.

Another concern is the lack of a social justice lens. Many circular plans do not address how benefits and burdens are shared. Waste workers often face unsafe conditions, despite being central to circular systems. These concerns show the need for stricter rules and more inclusive planning.

Financial Investments and Market Growth
Interest in circular business models has grown sharply. A 2025 study by Circle Economy and KPMG shows that firms raised $164 billion in circular business funding between 2018 and 2023. Many funding rounds have exceeded $37 million, backed by more than 18,000 investors worldwide.

Market forecasts also show strong growth. One report estimates that the global circular economy market could rise from $554.5 billion in 2023 to $1.89 trillion by 2033, at a growth rate of about 13 per cent. Another analysis shows a smaller but steady rise, from $392.7 billion in 2024 to $758.7 billion by 2033. Digital circular services are growing at rates exceeding 20 per cent annually. These numbers suggest that circularity is emerging as a significant economic sector, not just an environmental concept.

The circular economy offers a practical, scalable and financially sound path. It helps firms reduce waste, conserve resources and create long-term value. With rising investor interest, clear market growth and substantial climate benefits, circularity is no longer optional. It is a strategic need for industries that want to stay competitive and responsible. The opportunity is significant, and the time to act is now.

Five major industries could cut 9.3 billion metric tonnes of CO_2 equivalent through circular systems — matching the emissions of the entire global transport sector

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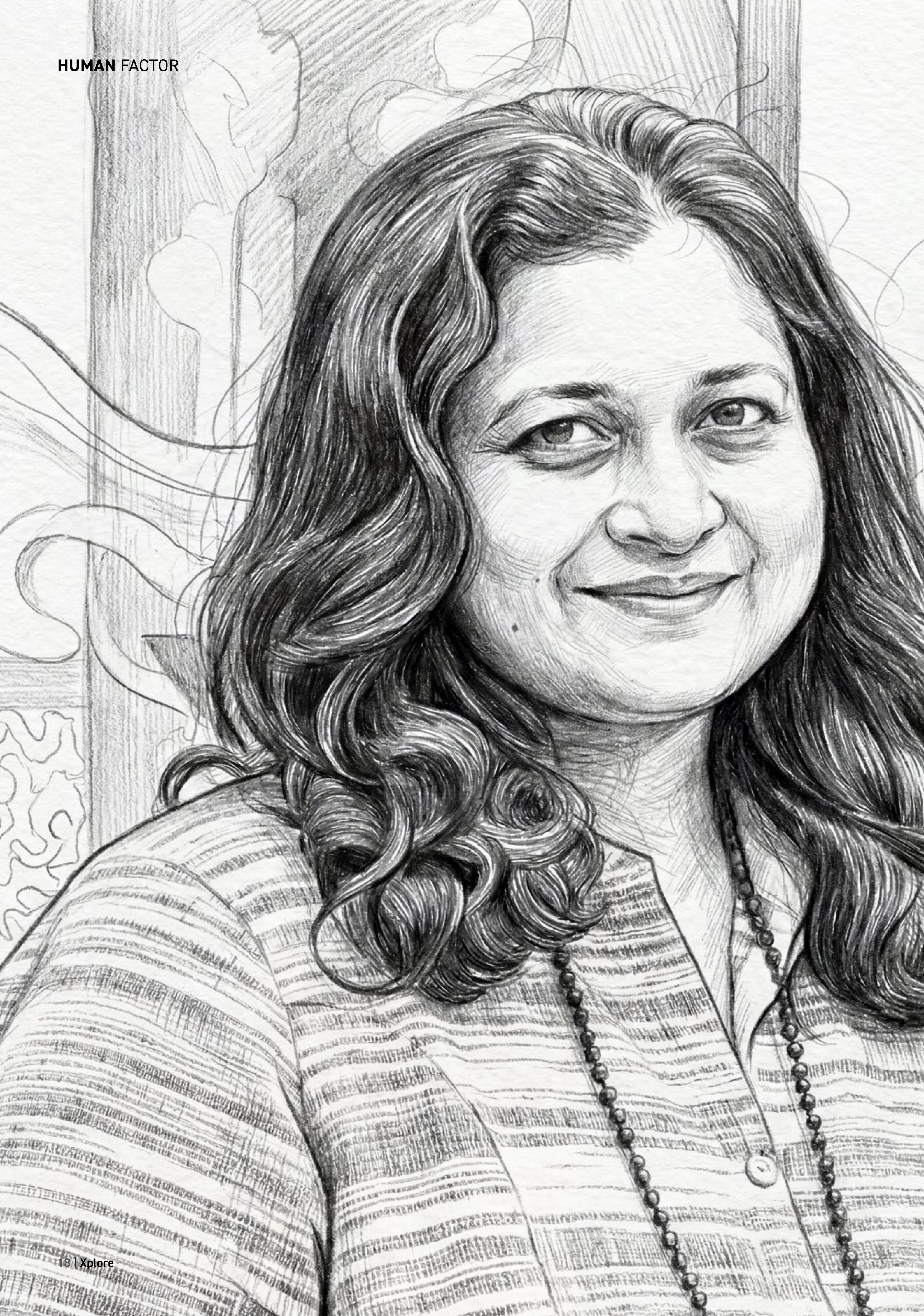
Yash Kushwaha
is a first-year PGDM(BM) student at XLRI Delhi-NCR



"Dignity at Work Is Foundational to Management"

In an era where organisations are evaluated not only on performance but on how humanely they operate, questions of dignity, care and ethical responsibility have taken centre stage. *Ananya Joshi* speaks with **Dr Ayatakshee Sarkar**, a faculty member in Organisational Behaviour at XLRI Jamshedpur, whose work spans humanistic management, non-violence and workplace justice and well-being. Drawing on 15 years of experience, including research at Cambridge Judge Business School, Sarkar examines how academic ideas translate into everyday organisational practice. They discuss placing human dignity at the heart of work, and why care-oriented perspectives may be among the most critical "unturned stones" in the future of management.

You spent time at Cambridge after completing your doctorate. How did that experience shape your thinking on humanistic management and dignity at work?

Dignity at work and humanistic management are foundational to human resource management everywhere. What my time at Cambridge really sharpened was how these ideas move beyond abstract moral values and become lived organisational practices.

Humanistic management was deeply embedded in everyday processes, such as how feedback was given to students, how guests interacted with staff, how colleagues treated one another, and even how vendors were engaged. These values were not confined to classrooms or policy statements; they were visible in daily behaviour. That experience shaped my understanding of humanistic management not as a "strategy," but as a practical, everyday practice.

In India, while the importance of these values is well acknowledged, we still have some distance to travel in terms of making them truly practice-based. Organisational values often speak about dignity and humanity, but the challenge lies in integrating them into routine systems and processes.

> **Humanistic management is not a strategy; it is a practical, everyday practice, visible in how people give feedback, interact with colleagues, and engage even with vendors**

Organisational behaviour theories are primarily Western in origin. Given India's cultural diversity and its own workplace characteristics — and your work on dignity, non-violence and spirituality — do we need India-specific OB frameworks?
This is a very relevant question. Even today, most OB textbooks and frameworks, such as those by Robbins, are primarily Western, with limited contextual adaptation. While examples may occasionally draw from Indian settings, deeper integration is still lacking.

India's organisational context is incredibly complex. Diversity here goes far beyond gender; it includes ethnicity, caste, language, region and dialect. Indian workplaces are characterised by collectivism, a higher power distance, a sense of moral duty, and deeply rooted spiritual worldviews.

I've seen this clearly while conducting corporate programmes. When I introduce ideas using spiritual language, participants often engage deeply and enthusiastically. However, when I rely solely on Western tools, like standard emotional intelligence questionnaires, the concepts sometimes feel distant or linguistically disconnected. Adapting them to Indian cultural meanings becomes essential.

My work on non-violence and dignity shows that harm in Indian workplaces is often subtle, relational and normalised rather than overt. Therefore, organisational behaviour in India must pay closer attention to cultural contexts, especially in understanding employee emotions, silence, resilience and the meaning-making process.

The Supreme Court recently clarified that Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) can conduct inquiries even when the respondent is from another department. As a trainer for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, how do you see this change?
This clarification is essential. In my experience as an ICC presiding officer, many individuals, women and sometimes men, hesitate to file complaints when the respondent is from another department, a higher authority, or an external consultant. The fear of retaliation creates a significant psychological barrier.

Allowing preliminary inquiries irrespective of departmental boundaries makes redressal mechanisms more accessible and humane. It prioritises the complainant's sense of safety over procedural convenience. In that sense, it lowers reporting barriers and reinforces trust in institutional processes.

Beyond legal compliance, how can organisations ensure that ICCs are perceived as safe and fair spaces?
Let me share an example from within my own institution. Initially, POSH awareness and training sessions were conducted by external consultants. While well-intentioned, their examples and frameworks sometimes felt disconnected from our institutional realities, especially for staff members.

Over time, we transitioned to conducting these sessions through internal ICC members. I personally spearheaded this initiative. The difference was remarkable; staff, students and faculty felt more comfortable, could relate better and were more willing to open up.

Beyond compliance, ICC members must be trained in trauma sensitivity, empathetic listening, non-judgmental engagement and procedural fairness. Awareness and sensitisation must be embedded within the organisational culture rather than imposed externally.

Indian workplaces demand contextual understanding; harm here is often subtle, relational and normalised, requiring organisational behaviour frameworks rooted in culture, meaning-making and lived experience

This issue of our magazine focuses on "niche industries of the future." From a dignity and well-being perspective, which emerging domains matter most?
Through repeated discussions in corporate advisory board meetings, one theme consistently stands out: care-oriented and relational forms of work.

These include roles involving emotional labour, mediation and support. While such work is often invisible, feminised or undervalued, it is critical to sustaining organisations in the long run. Recognising and legitimising these forms of work is essential, not just for specific sectors, but for any organisation striving to be genuinely human.

Do you see workplace well-being, ethics and restorative practices becoming specialised career paths?
Absolutely. These areas are no longer peripheral HR functions; they are becoming

> **We rarely ask when everyday incivility, neglect or silence becomes a violation of dignity; management must focus more on harm, its outcomes, and restoring dignity**

core organisational capabilities.

As workplaces grow more complex and fragmented, organisations will increasingly need professionals trained in restorative practices, conflict resolution, ethics and well-being. These roles demand great skill, moral judgement and institutional recognition. They cannot be treated merely as goodwill initiatives or "soft" capabilities.

With the rise of gig work and project-based employment, what new care-related challenges do you foresee?
Fragmentation in gig and project-based work often dilutes responsibility and accountability. No single organisation feels fully responsible for employee well-being or dignity.

This raises serious concerns: Who ensures fairness? Who listens to worker voices? What happens to grievance redressal? These questions remain loosely coupled with modern work arrangements, and addressing them will be a significant leadership and HR challenge in the future of work.

Will skills like self-awareness, ethical judgement and emotional intelligence become key differentiators for leaders?
Definitely. Technical skills are easier to automate and replicate. What will truly differentiate leaders is self-regulation, emotional regulation, relational awareness and ethical judgment.

I often hear alumni say that while finance or technology skills were easy to learn, understanding people remains their greatest challenge. These capabilities are not "soft skills"; they are foundational for navigating complexity and moral ambiguity in the workplace.

Finally, what is one "unturned stone" in management thinking that we often overlook?
"The threshold of harm." We rarely ask when everyday incivility, neglect or silence crosses the line into a violation of dignity. Management research must focus more on the outcomes of harm, beyond just conflict management techniques, and also on how dignity can be restored and protected within organisational cultures.

This conversation reminds us that the future of management is not only about efficiency or innovation, but about how humanely organisations choose to operate.

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CYBERSECURITY The Strategic Blind Spot Businesses Can't Ignore

While AI dominates attention, cybersecurity quietly determines what survives. From trust to scale, it has become the unseen force shaping digital strategy, leadership and long-term business value

by Rishabh Dalip Singh

The world today is fascinated by artificial intelligence. It fills conferences, headlines and classrooms. But beneath this excitement lies a quieter story. While AI gains attention, cybersecurity bears the consequences of the digital world. It is the unturned stone that will determine whether tomorrow's technologies succeed or fail. And unlike AI, which is widely discussed, cybersecurity remains underestimated, even though it is becoming the foundation of everything we build.

Every digital step we take produces data. Companies store it, customers share it, and technologies depend on it. AI also relies on this data, but it works well only when the data is clean and protected. When data is unguarded, everything becomes fragile. A breach can shut down a business. A leak can erase years of growth in days. This is why cybersecurity is no longer a side function. It is the shield that protects the value companies create and supports every digital effort.

Security as Strategy

Businesses once viewed cybersecurity as an expense — something that kept machines running quietly. However, as organisations become digital-first, they realise that cybersecurity is a strategic asset. It shapes how companies design products, run operations, manage customers and plan for growth. Strong governance in cybersecurity shows discipline and responsibility. In a marketplace where data move quickly, this responsibility becomes an advantage.

Trust Becomes the Brand

Cybersecurity is also becoming part of how companies communicate with the world. People care about how their information is handled. When a company shows that it invests in secure systems and respects privacy, it builds trust that lasts. Safety becomes an integral part of a brand's identity, often determining which companies thrive and which are quietly abandoned.

Cybersecurity itself is entering a new phase. The field is expanding beyond traditional protection into areas such as cloud security, digital identity, data governance, and AI safety. New roles, such as risk analysts, threat strategists, and security architects, are emerging. Entire sectors, from healthcare to finance to public systems, now depend on specialised security skills.

> **Cybersecurity is no longer a side function. It is the shield that protects the value companies create and supports every digital effort**

This demonstrates that cybersecurity is not a static discipline, but an ever-evolving industry. As technology advances, the need for individuals who understand both digital systems and their associated risks will increase. This shift opens new spaces for innovation, policy-making and leadership.

AI adds another layer to this story. Attackers seek new methods to exploit data and manipulate AI systems through covert signals or manipulated inputs. At the same time, security teams utilise AI to detect unusual activity and respond more quickly. This mix of risks and opportunities makes cybersecurity even more critical. In many organisations, AI adoption is outpacing the ability to secure it.

The importance of cybersecurity also extends beyond AI to the wider digital ecosystem. As organisations adopt connected devices, cloud platforms and digital supply chains, the number of digital touchpoints continues to grow. From smart factories to connected consumer products, each new system adds efficiency but also introduces new vulnerabilities. These technologies may differ in purpose, but they share a common dependence on secure foundations. In this environment, cybersecurity becomes the stabilising layer that allows digital innovation to scale without losing control.

The Leadership Gap

This brings us to business schools. MBA programmes teach strategy, operations, technology, digital transformation and AI. These subjects prepare students to lead modern organisations. But one essential element is often missing. Future leaders must understand cybersecurity because they will make decisions about how data is handled, how products are secured, how companies work with partners, and how they comply with regulations. They will be responsible for trust, and trust depends on cybersecurity.

Cybersecurity leadership is not a technical job. It requires foresight, clear thinking and the ability to connect safety with business goals. As organisations adopt more technology, the demand for professionals who can combine business understanding with cyber awareness will grow. This makes cybersecurity a meaningful path for MBA graduates. It is a field where leadership matters as much as technical skill.

Cybersecurity may not dominate headlines as much as AI. It may not always draw attention. But it is the force that decides whether digital progress succeeds or fails. It protects data, supports systems and keeps organisations running. In the future, leaders who understand this will be the ones shaping industries.

It is not just an unturned stone. It is the stone that everything else stands on. As the future unfolds, the real story of innovation will be decided not by what we build, but by what we are able to protect.

Rishabh Dalip Singh
is a PGDM(GM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

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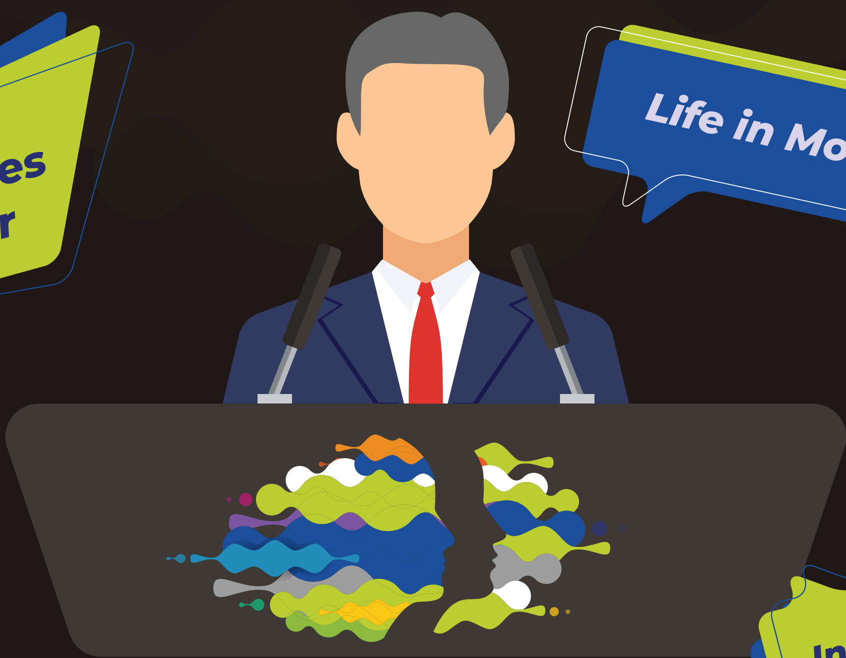

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CEO LOUNGE

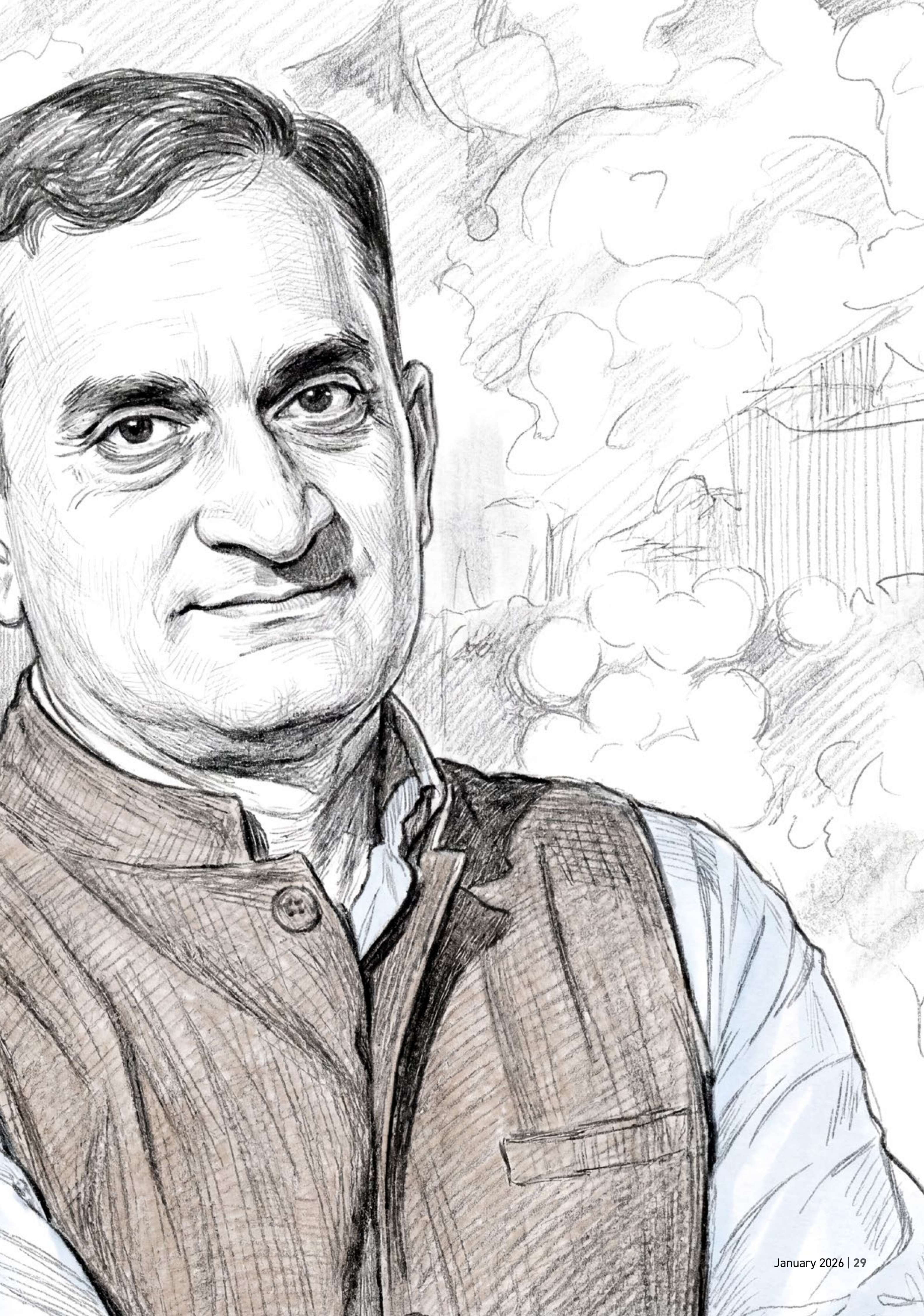
"Consumers Aren't Consistent — Context Shapes Choice"

In a marketplace defined by data abundance and human contradiction, marketing is being quietly re-engineered. Consumers no longer belong to fixed segments; they shift identities, values and behaviours across contexts. In this conversation with *Juhi Agarwal*, **Dr Basant Purohit**, Professor of Marketing at XLRI Jamshedpur, reflects on how firms must rethink segmentation, preserve brand coherence, align talent with evolving roles, and use case pedagogy to navigate real-world complexity. He also outlines what Indian heritage sectors can learn from global exemplars in moving decisively from volume-led growth to premium value creation.

Marketing today operates in an era of fragmented consumer identities — minimalists, maximalists, sustainability-driven shoppers, luxury tribes, and niche digital communities. How should marketers rethink segmentation in such a diverse landscape?

Consumers have always been unique individuals with different consumption behaviours. However, about 30–35 years ago, the markets were very different. There were only a few brands available for most products and services, so choice was limited. Consumers mainly received information through non-digital media, which was homogeneous and mostly one-way, meaning marketers communicated to consumers without much interaction. People also followed societal norms closely, which meant consumption behaviour was more or less uniform and differences were less noticeable.

Today, consumption behaviour has evolved dramatically. With many brands, digital media and interactive platforms, consumers express varied preferences and identities. These include minimalists who prefer less, maximalists who enjoy abundance, shoppers focused on sustainability, luxury brand enthusiasts, and many niche digital communities. The paradox is that an individual consumer often exhibits contradictory behaviours, adopting a minimalist approach in one



context while leaning maximalist in another.

Given today's diverse market, relying on traditional demographic segmentation is insufficient. Marketers must pivot to focus on deeper factors — individual values, lifestyles and attitudes. This requires segmentation to be flexible and dynamic, leveraging robust data analytics and digital insights. By doing so, brands can move beyond broad categories to create highly personalised experiences and forge stronger, more relevant relationships in the current fragmented consumer landscape.

When faced with so many distinct sub-groups, how can firms decide which segments to prioritise without diluting their core brand identity?

Firms can decide which segments to prioritise without diluting their core brand identity by using the 'Brand Resonance Pyramid' provided by Keller (2016). According to Keller, marketers can build a strong, loyal relationship with customers via the four phases:

- **Identity:** Marketers should ensure that their brands are identified by their target customers and remain at the top of their mind awareness (TOMA) in multiple situations.
- **Meaning:** Marketers should focus on establishing the full totality of brand meaning in the minds of customers via rational and emotional routes.
- **Response:** In this phase, marketers should focus on eliciting appropriate customers' rational response (measured by judgment) and emotional response (measured by feelings) to the brand identity and brand meaning.
- **Relationship:** Marketers need to strengthen emotional bonds by encouraging active customer participation and making them feel part of a group or community.

An individual consumer often exhibits contradictory behaviours — minimalist in one context, maximalist in another — making static, demographic segmentation increasingly inadequate

You've written extensively on salesforce structure and overqualification. How can organisations align roles, skills, and expectations in today's rapidly evolving marketing and sales environment?

Employees feel "overqualified" when they

believe their skills and knowledge exceed what the job requires. This sense of overqualification arises because of:

- Poor fit between the job and employees' skill sets;
- Slow career progression;
- Constant, selective exposure to lucrative job offers on multiple job portals and social media;
- Lack of opportunities to utilise expertise and skills in the current job.

Organisations should understand the heterogeneity of the motives and skills repository of employees at different career cycles and assign roles accordingly. Firms should provide challenging opportunities to such perceived overqualified employees, such as involving them in creating challenging marketing and sales campaigns, marketing research and mentoring new employees in their exploratory stage. Managers should share career paths, examples of internal promotions and market volatility to neutralise the external 'illusion' of lucrative jobs.

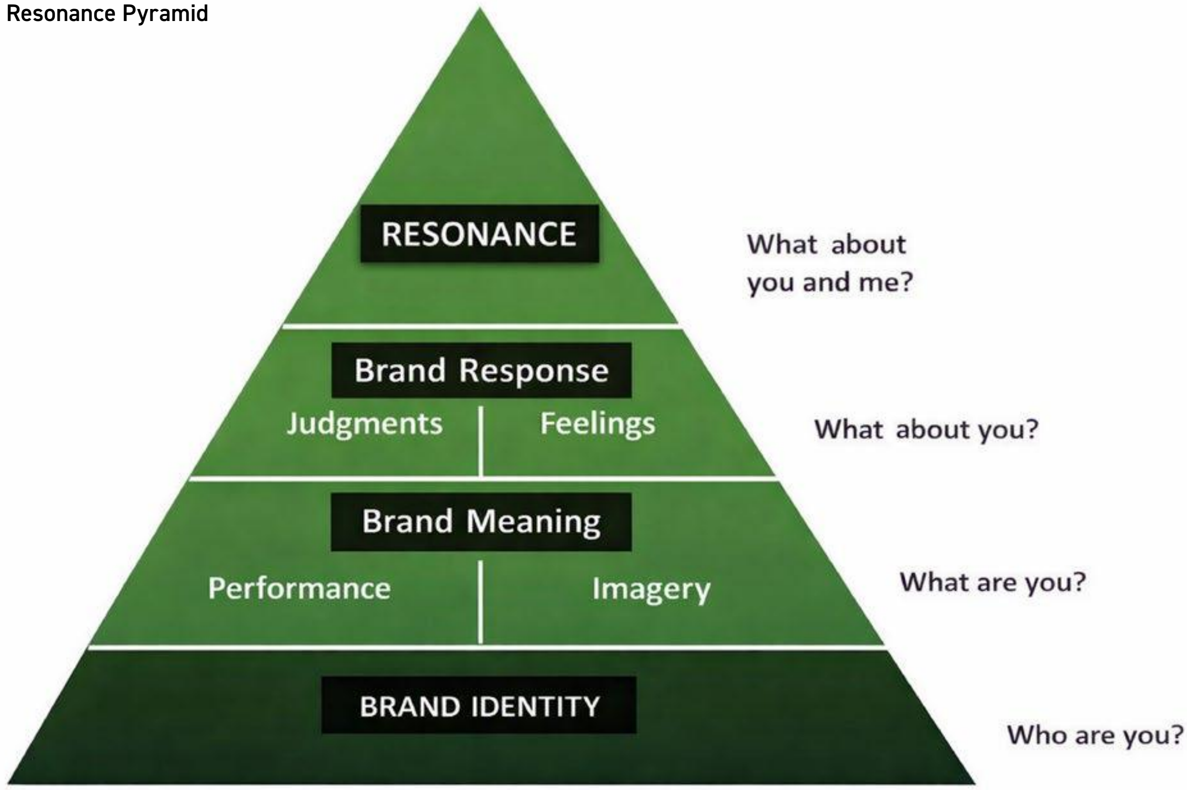
Marketers must move beyond broad categories and focus on values, lifestyles and attitudes, using flexible, data-driven segmentation to create highly personalised brand experiences

Your cases, RPL, Saligram, and others, highlight deep insights into consumer behaviour and organisational design. What inspires your case-writing, and what role do you believe case pedagogy plays in shaping future marketers?

We leverage feedback from alumni in marketing, sales, HR and analytics who often discuss their current operational struggles as the critical starting point for developing relevant case studies. To effectively write case studies, we require material that moves beyond the typical textbook oversimplifications and accurately demonstrates the difficult, multi-faceted trade-offs faced by marketing professionals.

Case pedagogy moves learning from a passive absorption of textbook theories to an active engagement with real-world complexity, which is essential for success in a dynamic field like marketing. Case studies deliberately present situations with incomplete data, conflicting objectives and uncertain outcomes. Students are expected to analyse the case and defend their recommendations logically, persuasively and concisely against colleagues who hold different views. Students move beyond memorising theoretical frameworks to understanding when and how to apply them under specific conditions.

Keller's Brand Resonance Pyramid



> **Brands can prioritise segments without dilution by building identity, meaning, response and relationships – strengthening emotional bonds and community rather than chasing every sub-group**

What strategic shifts are required for Indian heritage sectors to transition from volume-driven models to premium global positioning?
The volume-driven and thin margins in Indian heritage sectors are primarily explained by the interaction of fragmented supply chains, followed by lack of economies of scale, lack of quality controls, low intellectual property protection, inadequate creation of brand equity, and a failure to capture premium value from authenticity.

For these heritage sectors to evolve into premium global brands, they need rigorous quality practices, sharper segmentation and targeting, and authentic storytelling rooted in India's heritage. Coupled with premium pricing, distinct value creation and robust intellectual property protection, this will enable a successful shift from volume to value.

In your view, what can India learn from countries like Japan and South Korea, which have successfully transformed their cultural heritage into global soft-power industries?
What India can learn from Japan: obsession with quality *(Kodawari)*, continuous and incremental improvement *(Kaizen)*, consensus-based decision-making *(Ringi-sho)* by involving relevant stakeholders.

What India can learn from South Korea: setting the sights on global dominance from the outset *(Segyehwa)*, harmony *(Inwha)* and emotional connection *(Kibun)* at the workplace to transcend from mere professional transaction to long-term commitment.

For young marketers entering the profession, what essential skills or mindsets are needed to navigate a world defined by digital complexity, cultural fragmentation, and heightened ethical scrutiny?
Three essential skills or mindsets for young marketers entering the profession are as follows:

- **Core skill:** Being customer-focused and developing a marketing strategy.
- **Technical skills:** Digital integration, product management, customer experience, partnership marketing, monitoring and measuring effectiveness, risk and reputation management.
- **Behavioural skills:** Collaborative, influential, creative, entrepreneurial, innovative and inspiring.

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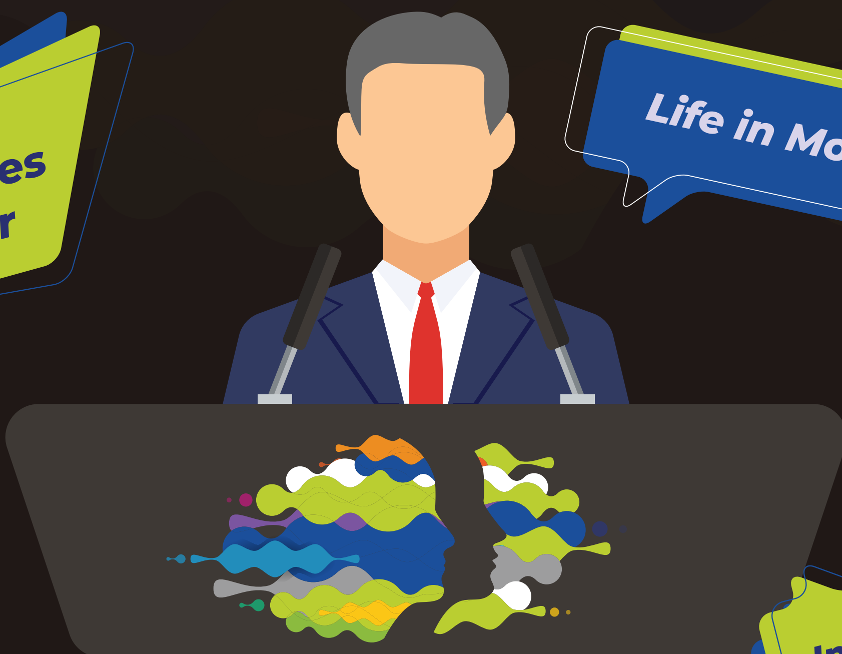

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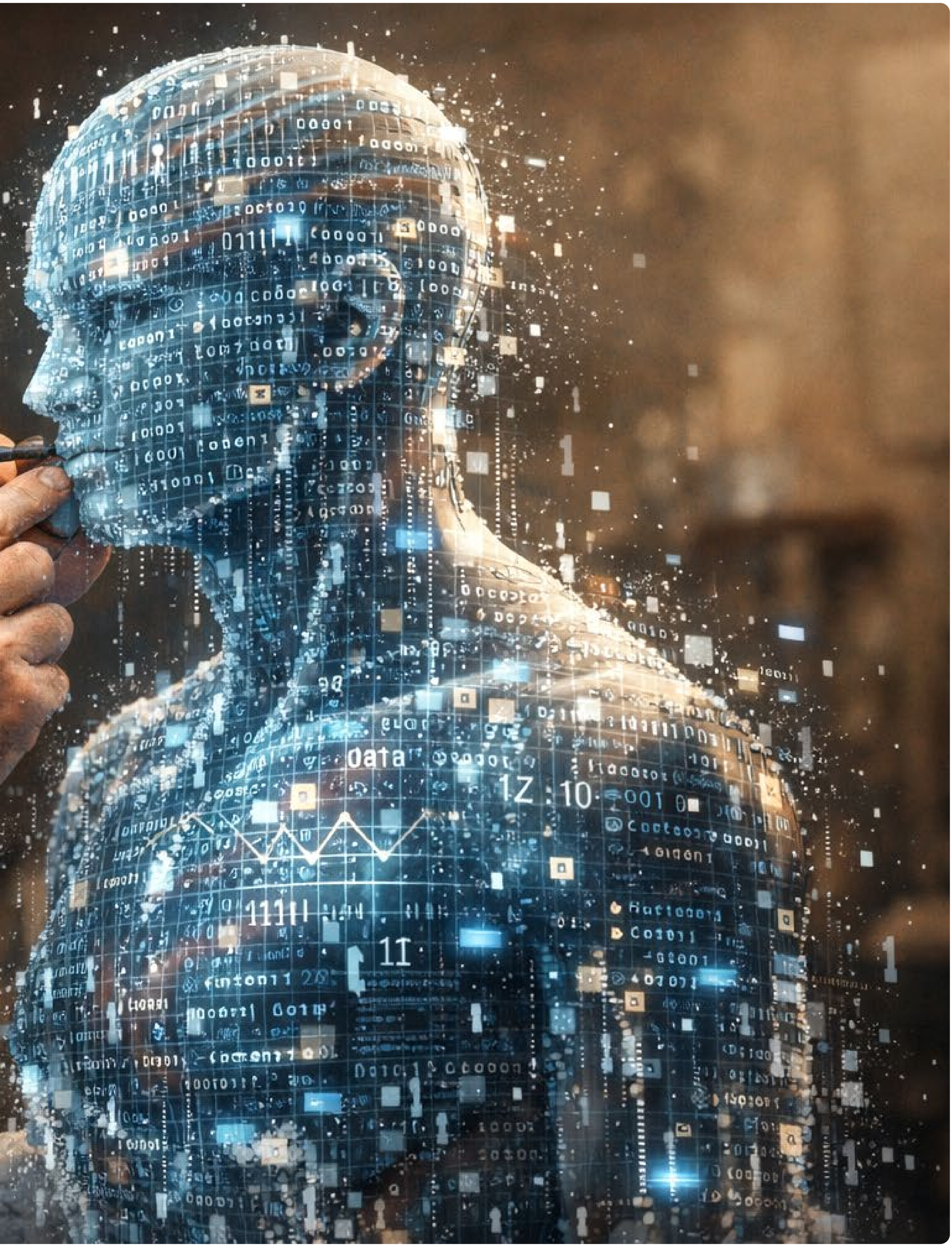
CEO LOUNGE

Will We Shape the Algorithm?
Or Will it Shape Us?

AI is changing work at speed; the real test for leaders is whether they can redesign talent, skills and culture quickly enough to ensure AI augments people rather than replaces them

by Piuly Paul


Data

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation are no longer science fiction; they are a reality in our lives and are steadily reshaping the way we live and work. At this juncture, organisational leaders are faced with a critical question: how can we reimagine *talent strategy* to thrive in this transformation?

The World Economic Forum estimated that automation will displace 85 million jobs by 2025, but also create 97 million new roles — a potential opportunity for crafting roles that utilise unique human capabilities which no AI can match. The main question to consider is whether leaders will be able to redesign work fast enough to keep humans gainfully employed.

Work Reimagined: Humans and Machines in Partnership

Competing with AI and robots can seem like a Hollywood nightmare; thankfully, the reality is not about domination but collaboration. It is time to reimagine teams where humans and machines work side by side, not in a servant-master relationship, but as collaborators, each complementing the other's strengths to boost innovation and solve complex problems.

Some pioneering organisations are already exploring this partnership. For instance, Accenture's SynOps platform uses AI to automate routine operations, allowing employees to focus on higher-value activities. Unilever uses an AI-based recruitment process to evaluate a candidate's potential objectively beyond their CV.

The crystal ball predicts that the future of work will be a symphony of human ingenuity and machine intelligence. This is an excellent opportunity for HR leaders to orchestrate this collaboration and create a productive environment where both humans and AI can thrive.

Rethinking Skills and Learning

In this fast-changing job and skills landscape, reskilling and upskilling are essential for career longevity. Research by the McKinsey Global Institute shows that companies that invest in AI fare better than their peers only when they also invest in reskilling their workforce. Many organisations are already acting on this insight. IBM's Watson Career Coach uses AI for personalised skill-gap analysis and learning paths, while Siemens leverages its Global Learning Campus and "MyLearningWorld" platform to upskill employees in AI, data analytics and advanced manufacturing.

In the era of AI, the traditional, one-size-fits-all training programme will no longer be effective. HR leaders will be required to curate dynamic learning

The future of work is not about domination but collaboration, where humans and machines work side by side, each complementing the other's strengths to drive innovation

experiences that enable employees to guide their own growth.

Strategic Talent Management

AI-powered solutions are being adopted across HR functions to manage the employee lifecycle: talent acquisition, training and development, performance management and employee engagement. However, AI implementation alone is not enough; it must be bolstered by redesigning roles, workflows and processes to unlock AI's full potential. Many companies face issues with algorithmic bias, data privacy and resistance to automation. To address this readiness gap, organisations must connect their AI use with ethical, transparent and inclusive HR practices.

Leading with Empathy in the Age of Algorithms

AI has brought about not just technical disruptions but emotional challenges arising from employment uncertainty, and fatigue from constant upskilling and reskilling. There is a real possibility of employee burnout, mental turmoil and "quiet cracking." AI can read data but not feel or understand the complex nuances of human emotions. For HR, this translates into leading with empathy, creating environments that nurture employee wellbeing, and building trust, transparency and ethical processes.

Empathy is a core human trait and cannot be outsourced to machines. Balancing human values with machine prowess can not only attract and retain the best talent but build emotionally intelligent and resilient businesses that can thrive in the age of automation.

Building Fair, Human-Centred Automation

Unfettered use of automation raises ethical questions: the possibility of increasing the gap between high-skill and low-skill workers and widening income inequality. Therefore, ethical AI usage must be a core part of talent strategy. Making decisions transparently, providing fair and accessible reskilling options, and intentionally including diverse datasets to avoid algorithmic bias can help mitigate some of the impact.

It is imperative to engage diverse stakeholders, such as trade unions, policymakers and businesses, to create ethical, forward-looking policies around the use of AI to ensure a holistic balance between automation and human rights.

Companies benefit from AI only when they invest equally in reskilling, enabling employees to adapt, grow and guide their own learning in a changing job landscape

Augmenting, Not Replacing Humanity

Recent news of large-scale workforce reductions at companies such as TCS and Amazon reminds us that AI implementation is not without its challenges. Navigating the automated future of work will require both technological foresight and human sensitivity.

The aim for the future workplace is not man versus machine, but man with machine. The future belongs to organisations that view technology as a tool to uplift humanity, creating work that is more innovative, inclusive and meaningful. HR stands at the frontline of this transformation — the opportunity is immense, but so is the responsibility. The real question is: will we shape the algorithm, or will the algorithm shape us?

Piuly Paul
is a first-year PGDHRM (Online) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

The Quantum Era
Is Your Business Ready?

From optimising supply chains to accelerating drug discovery, quantum computing is moving from labs to boardrooms — forcing businesses to rethink speed, scale and competitive advantage

by Siddarth Narayanan

From the factory worker calculating each product one by one with pen and paper, to the computer using tools like Microsoft Excel to automate calculations, and now onward to the quantum computer — able to evaluate millions of demand, supply and cost combinations simultaneously to find the optimal outcome in seconds — we have come a long way. We are now moving at lightspeed to develop technologies that solve large-scale personal and business problems at a moment's notice.

Quantum computing can be defined as a new computing paradigm that leverages the laws of quantum mechanics to provide significant performance improvements for certain applications and to enable new frontiers in computing, compared with existing classical systems. It becomes essential when problems grow too complex or too large for today's machines.

Bits vs Qubits: The Core Distinction
Classical computing works in binaries, generating bits that function like electrical switches with two states: 1 (ON) and 0 (OFF). Quantum computers generate and manipulate quantum bits, or qubits, which behave more like a ceiling fan

running at multiple speeds — occupying multiple states at once. Thus, qubits can represent numerous combinations of 1 and 0 simultaneously, enabling quantum computers to crunch through many possible outcomes at the same time.

Consider computing applied to voting: a classical computer would ask each voter one by one, while a quantum computer could listen to everyone at once. Or, imagine finding the best route for a delivery driver; a classical computer might test streets sequentially, but a quantum computer could explore all possible streets in the city simultaneously to find the shortest path in a fraction of the time.

Why it Matters to Business

Artificial intelligence has automated many business processes and transformed numerous industries. Quantum computing becomes important where business decisions involve a vast number of variables, outcomes depend on probability, or — most critically — where significant optimisation is required to stay relevant in the market.

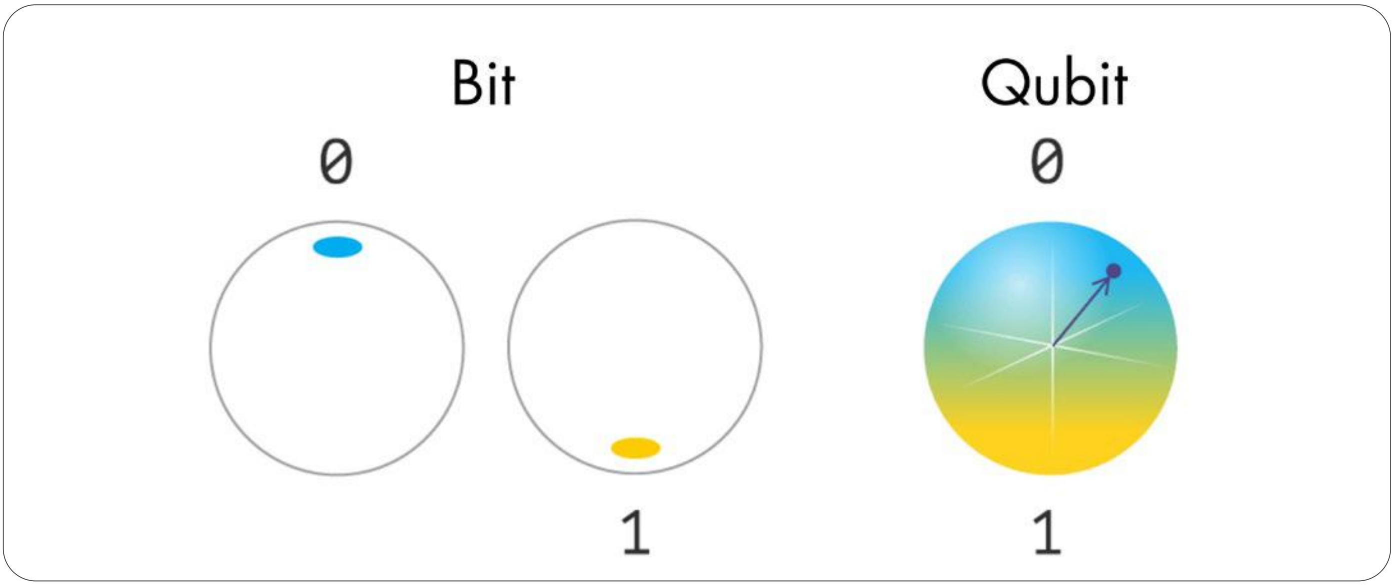
Quantum computers can evaluate millions of demand, supply and cost combinations simultaneously, finding optimal outcomes in seconds — a leap classical systems simply cannot match

Quantum technology is currently in early-stage development and research, but McKinsey projects quantum computing companies will generate $28 billion-$72 billion in revenue by 2030. Companies are already earning an estimated $650 million in revenue in 2024. Startup investment in quantum technology grew by 50 per cent year on year to $2 billion in 2024. Major technology giants, including IBM, Google and Microsoft, have announced significant breakthroughs in processor performance and scalability.

It is only a matter of time before quantum processors become the norm, and industries will have to adapt by adding a quantum layer to their existing computing systems.

Practical Applications

One industry where quantum computing could be massively impactful in the near term is pharmaceuticals. Quantum simulations could accelerate research and development and drug discovery, where large molecular datasets can be processed to understand specific interactions and



Unlike classical bits that are either on or off, qubits exist across a spectrum of states, enabling parallel exploration of multiple outcomes

chemical processes. This could create a global market opportunity of roughly $15 billion-$30 billion.

The automobile industry has already started using quantum technology: Volkswagen and Daimler are applying it to simulate the chemical composition of electric-vehicle batteries to improve performance. Airbus provides another example, using quantum computing to calculate the most fuel-efficient ascent and descent paths for aircraft.

In early stages, quantum computing may be used to solve optimisation problems (logistics, scheduling), financial simulations, cybersecurity and analytics, among others. Soon, however, its applications will broaden to areas such as drug discovery and personalised medicine, climate modelling and energy systems, and the early detection of potential disease outbreaks.

Qubits can occupy multiple states at once, allowing quantum computers to explore numerous outcomes simultaneously rather than testing possibilities one by one

What Can You do to be Quantum- Ready?

1. **Educate:** Focus on building quantum literacy across your organisation. Global bodies such as Global Quantum Education, and Indian organisations including QpiAI, QNu Academy and the Bharat Tech Foundation, offer courses to develop a quantum-ready workforce.
2. **Identify specific problems** that involve complex optimisation. Empower and educate the relevant departments to create a strategy for applying quantum technology. Many specialist firms, such as Deloitte and LTI Mindtree, offer strategy and implementation services.
3. **Invest in quantum-safe cybersecurity:** The rise of quantum computing brings new digital threats that could exploit its speed to decrypt software and breach data. This creates a pressing need to adopt new, quantum-safe encryption methods.
4. **Collaborate:** Partner with academic institutions and non-profits in India to develop indigenous quantum infrastructure. This allows industry to gain expertise, research patents and lower-cost solutions without building all capabilities in-house. The Indian Institute of Science and the IITs are already engaged in cutting-edge quantum research.

Quantum computing remains a niche technology, with conversations largely confined to academia and research labs — but so once were the internet and artificial intelligence. Quantum technology will soon shape business models, regulations and markets. It is not merely a technical curiosity, but a strategic frontier that will profoundly redefine competitive advantage.

We now have the opportunity to prepare, sufficiently early, for the next era of computing: the quantum era.

Siddarth Narayanan
is a first-year PGDBM (Online) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

“Product management is about constant altitude shifts”

The role of the product manager is often simplified as the “CEO of the product”, but that shorthand obscures the real complexity of the job. In this interview, *Nandita Gaur* speaks with **Venkat Subramanian**, Product Manager at Google, whose career spans engineering, research-adjacent product roles, and leadership across Atlassian, Oracle, Couchbase, and multiple startups. Venkat reframes product management as a discipline of constant altitude shifts — moving between hands-on execution and long-term thinking. He reflects on how AI and multimodality are reshaping classical product frameworks, why innovation must stay grounded in user value rather than vanity metrics, and how leadership today requires both a gardener’s mindset and a student’s curiosity.

The role of a product manager is often described as the “CEO of the product.” You seem to disagree with this framing — why?
The “PM (product manager) as CEO” analogy sounds aspirational, but it hides the real nature of the job. Product management is less about command and more about constant altitude shifts. On some days, you are deeply hands-on — working with teams to ship, unblock issues, and make trade-offs close to execution. On other days, you need to step back and think strategically about trust, systems, long-term impact, and user behaviour. The challenge is switching seamlessly between these levels without losing clarity or ownership. That ability, not title-based authority, defines effective product management.

You distinguish between $0 \rightarrow 1$, $0 \rightarrow 0.1$, and large-scale growth work. How should product managers think about these phases today?
Traditionally, $0 \rightarrow 1$ meant something truly path-breaking, while $0 \rightarrow 0.1$ was about stabilising early ideas and making them usable, and later stages focused on scaling. These frames still matter, but AI and multimodality blur the boundaries. With new interfaces and capabilities, you can rethink what products are possible

much earlier. Natural language queries over databases, multimodal inputs, and intelligent agents allow teams to experiment with ideas that previously required heavy infrastructure. AI enables faster iteration across these stages, forcing PMs to rethink rigid categorisations.

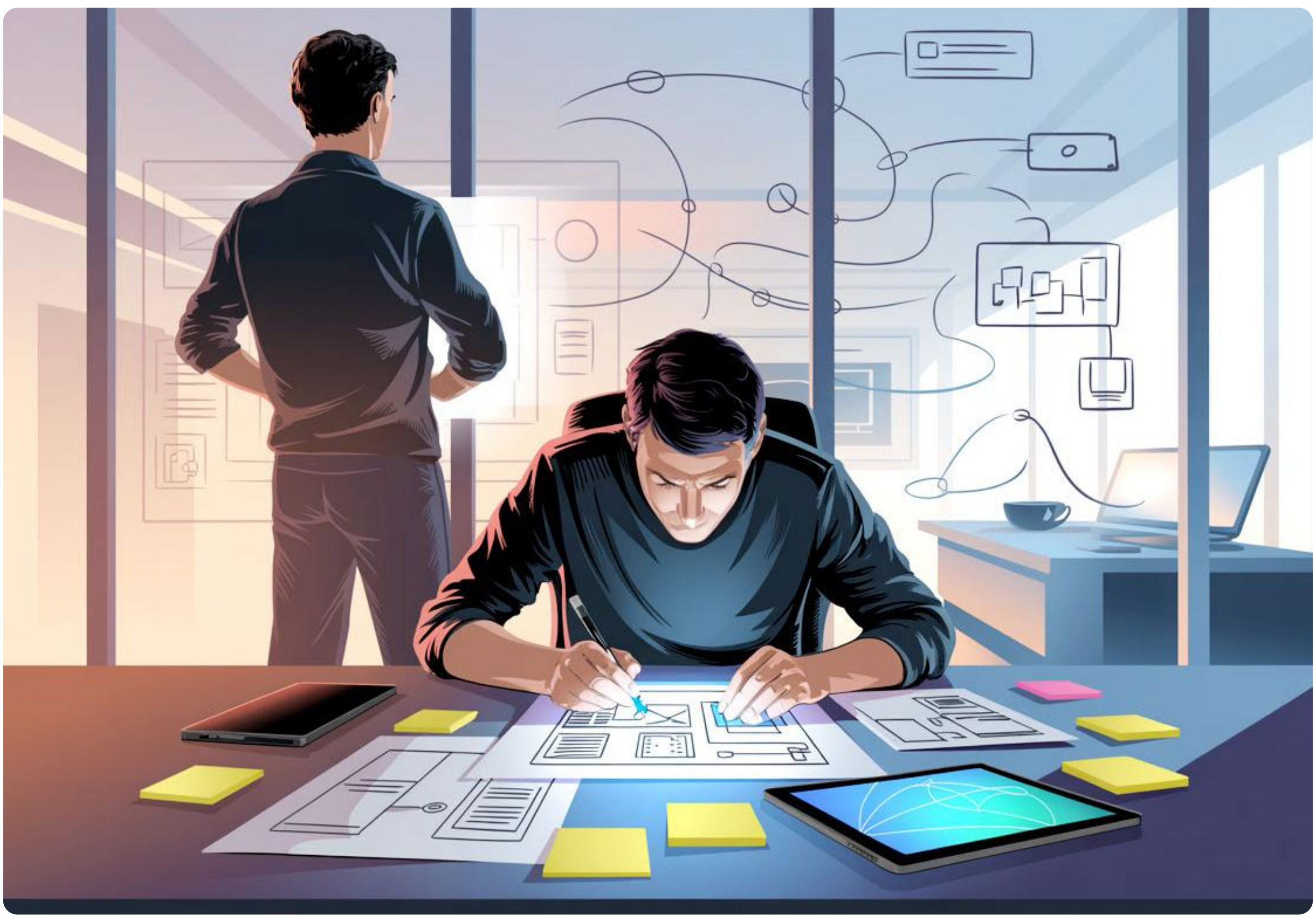
With rapid innovation, how do you decide whether something should be patented or simply shipped quickly?
Patents are outcomes, not goals. The primary responsibility is to solve a real user problem and ship value. When innovation changes something foundational about how systems work, patents often follow as a defensive mechanism. Optimising directly for patents can distract teams from impact. Much like revenue, intellectual property is a signal that something meaningful has been built, not the reason to build it in the first place.

You have moved from engineering into product management. What drew you toward the PM role?

Product management is less about command and more about constant altitude shifts — moving between execution and strategy without losing clarity, ownership, or responsibility

Early in my engineering career, there were no dedicated product managers on the team, so understanding users and their workflows became part of my responsibility. I had to infer whether people were actually getting value, often without sophisticated analytics. That process of connecting technology decisions to user outcomes was deeply engaging. Over time, working alongside experienced peers showed me how product thinking could amplify impact beyond code, and that learning naturally drew me toward a career in product management.

How do you translate complex research and technology into products that feel simple to users?
The starting point is always the user, not the technology. Even at Google, products are rarely designed for "the masses" in an abstract sense. They are built for specific user segments with clear problems. Technology like AI or multimodality evolves underneath, while



AI and multimodality blur traditional 0→1 and scaling boundaries, enabling faster experimentation and forcing product managers to rethink rigid product-stage classifications

the surface experience may appear stable. What changes are relevance, efficiency and capability. The key is resisting the temptation to showcase complexity and instead focusing on whether behaviour or outcomes are meaningfully improved.

Many Google products have become verbs in everyday language. Is that something teams deliberately design for?
Becoming a verb is not a forcing function; it emerges from widespread usefulness and adoption. Often, users take products in directions teams never anticipated, which can be both exciting and challenging. When that happens, product managers must think carefully about trust, privacy, and incentives. Virality amplifies responsibility. The important discipline is continuous learning and iteration, especially when a product moves rapidly along its adoption curve.

What leadership mindset has been most valuable to you at Google?
I believe strongly in the gardener mindset. Leadership is about creating fertile soil rather than commanding outcomes. That means enabling smart teams, ensuring psychological safety, encouraging healthy disagreement, and being clear about priorities. When people feel safe to challenge ideas and explore alternatives, better products emerge. As a PM, your role is often to enable clarity and alignment rather than to dictate solutions.

With AI evolving so quickly, how do you personally stay grounded?
By keeping a student mindset. The pace of change is such that what was once impossible may now be trivial. Waiting for certainty can lead to paralysis. Small experiments, curiosity, and hands-on exploration help cut through noise. The tools are more accessible than ever, and learning by doing remains the most reliable way to stay relevant.

Which areas do you see as having the most meaningful near-term impact from AI?
Agentic systems, safety-critical autonomy, healthcare, and domain-specific automation are particularly promising. In these areas, the goal is not just efficiency but reliability and trust. Autonomous driving, diagnostics, and large-scale automation raise high-stakes questions, and solving them well requires deep collaboration between technology, product, and policy perspectives.

What advice would you give aspiring product managers and students entering this field?
There is no instruction manual to follow and no need to replicate someone else's path. Focus on your strengths, stay curious, and learn by experimenting. Product management rewards judgment, empathy, and the ability to operate across altitudes. Titles and frameworks change, but the discipline of understanding problems deeply and enabling teams to solve them compounds over time.

The Weight of **CHOOSING WELL**

In Delhi, the Xplore Roundtable shifted the conversation inward — away from frameworks and processes, and towards the instincts, signals, and silences through which leaders shape behaviour. Ownership, trust, responsibility, and judgment may sound like familiar ideas, yet in practice they reveal how deeply culture is felt in the moments when choices carry weight.

Leadership rarely reveals itself in declarations. It shows up in how autonomy is granted, confidence is signalled, how risk is absorbed, and how the "right thing" is understood when no script exists. Across industries and leadership journeys, these conversations explored how values move from vocabulary into lived experience — and how conviction is built quietly, through practice rather than intent.

Where Ownership Begins — and How It's Understood

Is ownership an instruction, or a climate in which people feel responsible for outcomes even when no one is watching? The group reflected on how structures, guardrails, and role clarity influence initiative — and how freedom, when paired with purpose, turns accountability into instinct rather than obligation. Leadership presence, signalling, and example-setting emerged as subtle forces that help people recognise when a decision truly belongs to them — and when support still stands behind them.

The Texture of Trust

Trust becomes meaningful only when it is experienced as confidence backed by systems that enable judgment without fear. The discussion examined how trust shifts during uncertainty, pressure, or underperformance, and how alignment is sustained when outcomes diverge from expectation. What emerged was a view of trust as an environment that allows people to act with courage because they know they will not be abandoned when situations stretch beyond control.

Attendees: **Amit Boni**, Ensuredit; **Amrendra Mishra**, ADM; **Ashish Nayyar**, OakNorth India; **Atul Kashyap**, Maison D' Auraine; **Bhavna Batra,** S&P Global; **Gopalji Mehrotra,** Acme Group; **Harry Chawla**, Luthra and Luthra; **Kaushik Mitra**, PepsiCo; **Maneet Sehgal**, iQor; **Pankaj Tomar**, AXA Climate; **Puneet Gehani**, Gallagher Insurance Brokers; **Ramit Gupta**, IBM; **Sujit Bose**, Blue Tokai Coffee; **Sushant Bhushan**, Circle K; **Varun Das**, Airtel

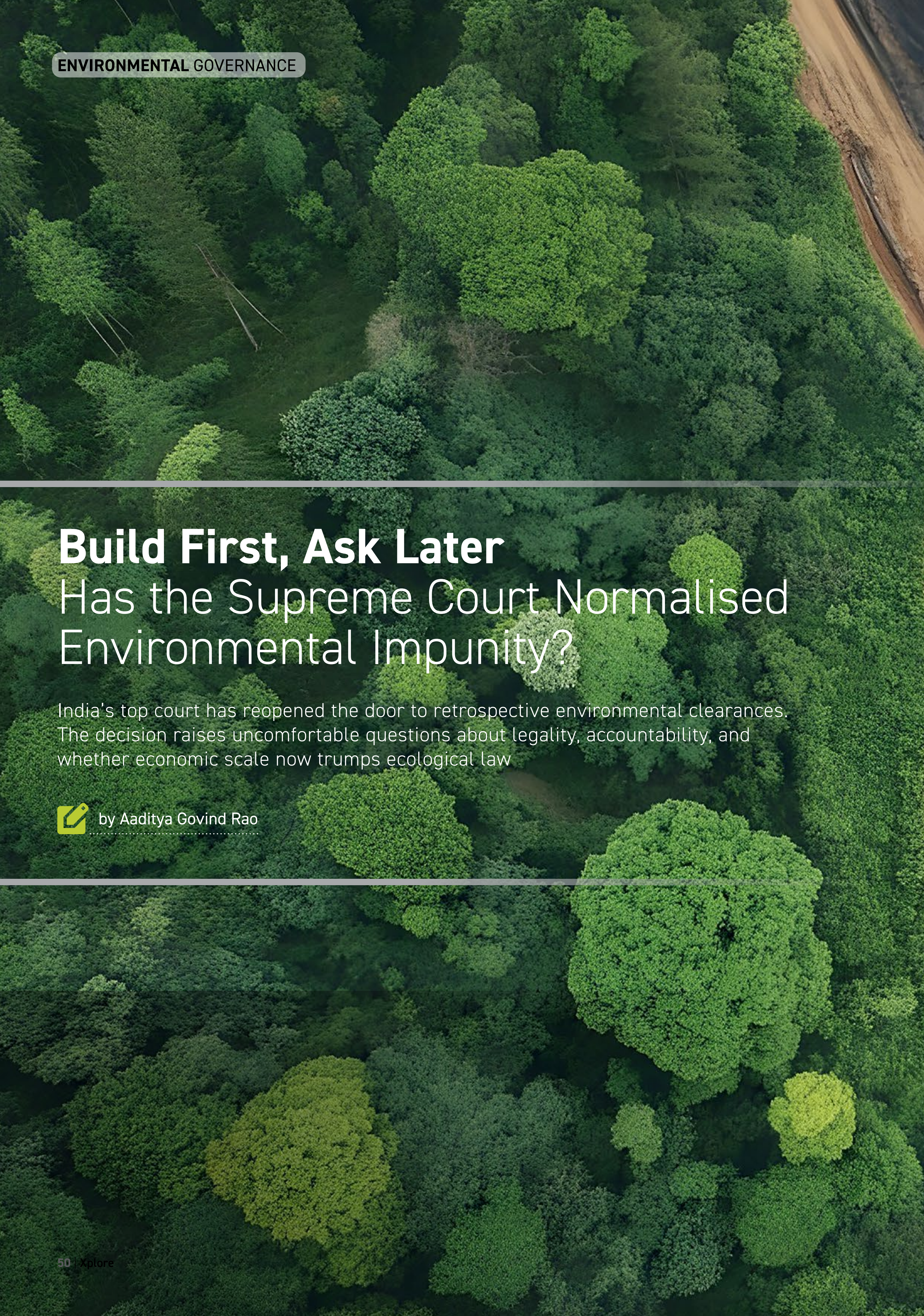
Responsibility Beyond Narrative

Responsibility today lives in a landscape where communication is constant and scrutiny is immediate. Leaders reflected on how intent, consequence, and sincerity interact in decisions that travel across stakeholders. The conversation moved beyond language and positioning, towards the quiet discipline of doing what holds integrity even when recognition is absent. Responsibility, in that sense, becomes less about signalling alignment and more about standing by choices that are ethically sound — even when they demand patience or discomfort.

When Clarity Arrives After Action

Not every decision offers clarity in the moment it is taken. Many leadership dilemmas unfold between competing goods, where cost and conviction coexist. The group explored what support, reflection, and inner steadiness are required when the "right thing" isn't obvious — when teams are affected, outcomes are uncertain, and reassurance comes only in hindsight. In those spaces, judgment becomes a shared capacity — strengthened by cultures that allow leaders to pause, examine, and move forward with honesty.

The Delhi Roundtable revealed that leadership strength is rarely loud. It is built in how ownership is nurtured, how trust is upheld, how responsibility is carried, and how choices are honoured when the path ahead does not immediately align. In those quiet intersections between belief and action, organisations discover what they truly stand for — and who they become when decisions matter most.



Build First, Ask Later
Has the Supreme Court Normalised Environmental Impunity?

India's top court has reopened the door to retrospective environmental clearances. The decision raises uncomfortable questions about legality, accountability, and whether economic scale now trumps ecological law

by Aaditya Govind Rao

In a massive setback to green lobbyists and policy experts, the Supreme Court in mid-November recalled its landmark May judgement, which had declared *ex-post facto* environmental clearance for construction projects illegal.

While disappointing from a sustainability perspective, the Supreme Court, in a majority verdict, said its earlier order could have "devastating" consequences and put thousands of crores of public investment at risk.

This rationale prompts the question: have we, as a country, accepted defeat against red-tapism? Is the ingrained bureaucracy so insurmountable that we would rather let corporations violate laws instead?

Under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notifications of 1994, major construction and industrial projects in India are required to obtain environmental approvals before they can begin.

In May, the court had struck down a 2017 notification and a 2021 office memorandum issued by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change that allowed retrospective environmental clearances — a decision it has now backtracked on.

The court reiterated its 2021 verdict,

The Supreme Court reversed its earlier ruling on retrospective clearances, saying the order could have "devastating" consequences and put thousands of crores of public investment at risk

which had allowed Vedanta's Electrosteel Steels to keep its Bokaro steel plant running because of its economic value, even though it was found to be operating on land different from what was originally approved. It also cited a 962-bed AIIMS hospital in Odisha that had commenced construction without final environmental clearance, saying demolishing the structure would be a waste of national resources.

This sets a dangerous precedent, giving potential violators a window to ignore environmental impact until they are caught, which can be too late. The argument of employment and economic value does not justify the long-term environmental deterioration this could lead to.

Economics Over Ecology

It is easy to assume that stopping such large projects is economically impossible, yet other nations demonstrate that the rule of law need not be held hostage by sunk costs. Consider Australia, a country notorious for being excessively reliant on its natural resources firms for value generation.

In 2022, the Australian Federal Court set aside a drilling approval received by Santos, the second-largest domestic oil and gas company. The decision forced Santos to suspend drilling activities for over a year at Barossa, its largest development to date.

Activity was only allowed to resume after the company rectified its failures and concluded necessary negotiations with indigenous tribes. The court effectively ruled that the project's $4.5 billion price tag was not a 'get out of jail free' card for bypassing due process.

That does not mean regulations cannot be designed to make business easier; they just need to be crafted the right way. In October, Australia introduced a new environmental protection bill aimed at speeding up the approvals process while also providing clearer definitions for "unacceptable impacts" and more severe penalties for breaches.

India, too, has tried to streamline the process. Last year, the MoEFCC eliminated the redundant dual-compliance structure, under which clearance also needed to be sought from state pollution boards. This is the correct approach: reducing bureaucratic friction without lowering the environmental bar. We must reform the system, not create backdoors to circumvent it.

This sets a dangerous precedent, giving potential violators a window to ignore environmental impact until they are caught — when the damage may already be irreversible

The Cost of Compliance

However, such measures may be futile if we continue to provide an out for corporations. According to an investigative report, between June 2017 and June 2021, the ministry had granted *ex-post facto* clearance to 112 projects under the violation category. That is 112 large-scale projects that were essentially allowed to buy their way into compliance.

This dynamic creates a perverse incentive structure. If corporations know the judiciary will ultimately view a constructed factory as 'too big to close,' the rational business strategy becomes: build first, apologise later. Strict regulation is meaningless if the penalty for breaking it is simply a delayed permission slip. We are not just failing the environment; we are institutionalising a culture of impunity.

Aaditya Govind Rao
is a first-year PGDM(HRM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

"Product Leadership Begins with Judgment and Empathy"

For **Sagar Gupta**, Director of Product at Razorpay, product leadership rests on fundamentals such as judgment, empathy, and trust rather than titles, tools, or visible features. Shaped by early experiences in engineering and college startups, his approach reflects a belief that strong products emerge from owning problems end to end. In conversation with *Akshay G*, he discusses a career that spans building companies out of modest beginnings and designing systems that now process millions of transactions. In fintech, he argues, the most valuable work often happens out of sight -- quietly ensuring that complex systems function reliably and earn user trust.

Your journey began in engineering and early-stage startups before moving formally into product leadership. What sparked that shift toward product management?
I entered product management before it was even a well-defined role in India. Right after my third year of college, I joined a startup as a founding member, and we literally lived and worked out of a two-bedroom apartment. In those early days, you are not thinking in terms of titles. You are doing everything: design, development, talking to users, understanding journeys, and figuring out what works and what does not. That experience made me realise that building a product is not just about writing code. It is about owning the problem end-to-end. Over time, that naturally pulled me toward product management because I enjoyed shaping the *what* and the *why* as much as the *how*.

How did building a startup out of a college apartment shape the way you think about products today?
Those early startup days taught me that a product is born out of doing, not from PowerPoint decks or formal job descriptions. When you are that close to the problem and the customer, you develop instinctive judgment. You learn very quickly what matters and what does not. That grounding has stayed with me to this day. No matter how large the system or the organisation, the core discipline remains the same: you solve real problems for real users, and everything else falls into place.

You have spoken about a single conversation that changed the trajectory of your career. Why was that moment so pivotal?
After my first startup experience, I joined another early-stage company where I worked closely with a founder who had global product exposure. That one interview and the subsequent conversations opened my eyes to how product thinking could scale beyond just India. It showed me that who you work with can dramatically

compress your learning curve. Mentors and peers shape how you think, what standards you hold yourself to, and what kind of problems you believe you are capable of solving. That realisation stayed with me and influenced many of my later decisions.

Fintech products demand extreme reliability. How do you think about innovation in such a high-trust environment?
In fintech, innovation and reliability are not opposing forces. In fact, they are deeply intertwined. We sell trust. Some of the most significant innovations in payments are often invisible to users but significantly enhance system robustness. Features like self-healing payments, automated reconciliation, or real-time escrow flows are innovations that customers may never explicitly notice. When money movement becomes predictable, stable, and transparent, trust compounds. Once you earn that trust, growth becomes much easier.

Many people associate innovation with flashy features. How do you reframe that idea within payments and banking?
In payments, true breakthroughs often happen behind the scenes. A customer might only see a successful transaction, but underneath that single action, there may be hundreds of systems communicating with each other. Reducing failure rates by even a small percentage at scale has an enormous impact on businesses. That is where innovation lives in fintech. It is about engineering confidence into the system so that users can operate without anxiety about where their money is.

What role do you see AI and agents playing in the future of fintech products?
AI can add value at both tactical and strategic levels. On the tactical side, agent-driven self-healing payments can automatically recover failed transactions. Smarter fraud detection systems can adapt as bad actors evolve. Automated reconciliation and accounting can significantly reduce the operational burdens on businesses. On a more strategic level, AI can unlock insights around cash flow and working capital that were previously inaccessible. When products help users make better financial decisions, that is when technology truly creates leverage.

> **Building a product is not just about writing code. It is about owning the problem end-to-end and shaping the what and the why, not just the how**

Having worked across startups and scaled organisations, what fundamentals of product management have remained constant for you?
Technology keeps changing, but the fundamentals stay remarkably stable. I believe there are three core pillars. The first is customer empathy, which is the ability to deeply understand pain points. The second is judgment, which comes from clear thinking and first-principles reasoning. The third is creativity, because solving hard problems often requires non-obvious solutions. If you invest in these fundamentals early, you will not get distracted by shiny tools or buzzwords.

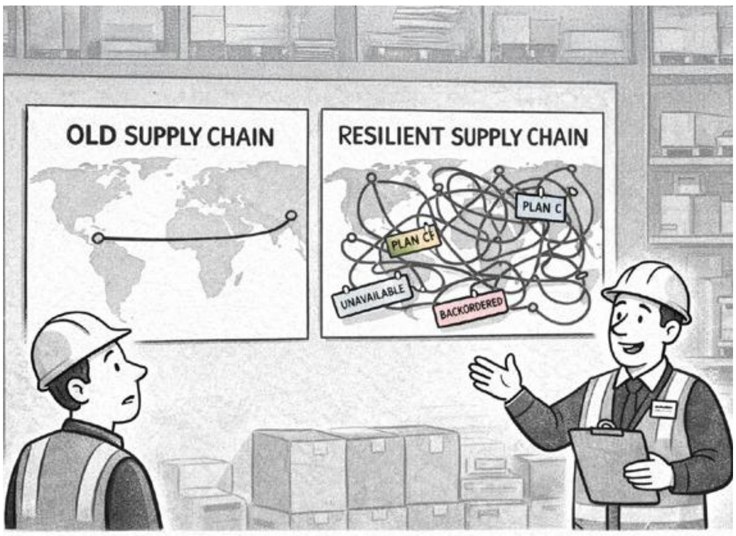
Many early-career professionals chase titles and fast promotions. What is your perspective on that approach?
Early in your career, optimising for learning is far more important than optimising for titles. Building strong foundational skills can feel slow at first, but it creates a steeper trajectory over time. When you have clarity of thought and sound judgment, opportunities tend to find you. Titles follow capability, not the other way around.

A product is born out of doing, not PowerPoint decks or job descriptions. When you are close to the problem and the customer, judgment develops naturally

With unlimited resources, what kind of product would you want to build?
Healthcare is a space that deeply motivates me. The fact that diagnostic accuracy can still be so low is concerning. If we can use data and AI to improve diagnostic confidence to near certainty, the impact on human lives would be immense. That is the kind of problem I would want to spend time solving because it sits at the intersection of technology, trust, and meaningful societal impact.

Finally, what advice would you give MBA students and aspiring product managers who want to enter this field?
Focus on mastering clear thinking and good judgment, cultivate genuine empathy for users, and practise creative problem solving. Do not become too strongly attached to tools or trends. If you understand the problem deeply and know who you are solving it for, the right solution will eventually emerge. Product management, at its core, is about making thoughtful choices under uncertainty, and that skill compounds over an entire career.

'We're not reducing headcount—we're increasing chair availability.'



'It's not broken—it's diversified.'

'We don't "track' you—we "anticipate' you."

Twisters

1 The Hindi epic *Lalita Ke Aansoo*; was published in 1978 and authored by Krant M. L. Verma. It tells the story of Lalita's husband through her voice. Lalita herself composed verse, and a few of her songs (such as "*Bhola Bhola Ratte Ratte*") were set to music by Chitragupta and sung by Lata Mangeshkar. Identify her husband.

2 In 1902, at the coronation of King Edward VII, the Maharaja of Jaipur, Sawai Madho Singh II, brought with him what were then considered the largest silver objects ever made. What were they?

3 In Hungary in 1931, this man observed that the ink used in printing presses dried almost instantly. Frustrated by the smudging of fountain pen ink, he set out to create a better writing instrument — drawing inspiration from newspaper ink. On June 15, 1938, he patented his invention, now indispensable worldwide. Identify the person and his invention.

4 A trefoil is a graphic form composed of three overlapping leaves, seen in architecture and symbolism, and in the clover genus *Trifolium*. The trefoil is famously used in the logo of X, introduced in 1972, where the three leaves are commonly interpreted as representing the brand's global presence across major markets. What company (X) does this logo belong to?

1. Lal Bahadur Shastri 2. Two massive silver urns carrying Ganges water 3. László Bíró – the ballpoint pen 4. Adidas

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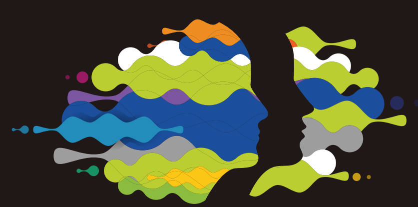

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