

# Employment

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## NDB: STAIRWAY TO SUCCESS

Human resource management is a subject that is as deep and unfathomable as a bottomless well that never dries up even in the harshest of all droughts. From this well spring up priceless and rather unexpected treasures that are to be hugged dearly to the bosom and cherished for life. Dealing with humans, their varying myriad of emotions, feelings and inherent natural qualities is indeed enough to make one a learned philosopher or a maestro of constantly vacillating human nature. Sunday Times stumbled upon quite a few gems during their visit to the National Development Bank to gain some insight into the inner workings of this bountiful spring of knowledge from a well respected connoisseur of the field, Ms Ishani Senaweera Navaratne Bandara who leads the workforce of NDB as its Vice President Human Resources. It must be mentioned that NDB Human Resources is fully ISO certified which proves to the world the height and the weight of the Human Resource techniques used within its lavish interiors.

"Call me Ishani" said a beaming Ms Navaratne Bandara as we entered her office. "I am Ishani to everybody here. We are on a first name basis at NDB and everyone refers to everyone else by their first names" she continued.

NDB is indeed one of the fastest recruiters in the country with about 500 recruitments being made each year. The reason for this is that NDB is a fast growing company which introduce new products every year as well as branch expansions occurring every so often at a rapid speed. However, the efficient HR system of NDB is constantly monitored on an HR dashboard which in turn helps in copious amounts to keep track of the constant recruitments, fluctuations and the growing needs of the company and its treasured customers.

NDB is known for its loyalty in giving the first priority of engagement to their existing staff. It is at the absence of the required skills within their own staff that NDB reaches out to the public in search of the required qualifications. Once recruited, these fortunate individuals will go through a local training session which will be conducted by NDB's very own central training unit whereas NDB specific training will be provided as a part of their foreign training plan where the employees will be sent abroad for a period of need-specific



**Ms Ishani Senaweera Navaratne Bandara Vice President Human Resources**

training. "Last year itself we sent 50 people abroad for training" said Ms Ishani when commenting upon the foreign training facilities provided by NDB.

The rather immaculate and sophisticated training procedure that is quite native and unique to NDB is definitely worth a mention. NDB possesses its very own self-sufficient training center, equipped with spacious auditoriums which are capable of accommodating sit-down, multi-lingual training programmes for 75 people at a go. It is also comprised of its very own off-site business center where case study analysis and business discussions take place, interviewing rooms, its very own dining area and equipments which are definitely capable of raising a few eyebrows in appreciation. But then again, these state of the art facilities are worth a separate article altogether which will soon see the light under this very column.

According to Ms Ishani, a positive attitude, a willingness to learn and continuous development are qualities that will guarantee an employee a prestigious position at NDB. "If a 50-year old employee would say that I still have things to learn, then that employee would be valuable to NDB" said Ms Ishani commenting upon how the willingness of an individual to learn and grow will very much be instrumental in getting to the very pinnacle of success at any walk of life.

NDB is quite particular about the core values of an individual as Ms Ishani thoroughly believes that

it is purely one's mindset that determines a person's actions and reactions. "You can give them technical skills, but you cannot give them core values" said she, also continuing to say that the inherent qualities and values that one grows up with are the very factors which determine the kind of life a person will lead. It is often assumed that if one cares for his family, he will also care for the company that he works in, and therefore, he will give his best to everyone around him, thereby instilling joy wherever he steps foot in.

Being recruited at NDB is a privilege of the highest kind indeed. Because of NDB's penchant for running it as a small, family-run business, the number of engagement activities that are conducted within the organization are very high. In doing so, NDB strives to involve not only the employees, but also their families with the institution, thereby instilling in them, the importance of the role that the employee plays in this particular company. Apart from the regular functions such as health weeks, events and celebrations, NDB also conducts various kinds of camps for children that concentrate upon enhancing various skills that one may need in life such as computer skills, English learning skills, leadership skills and etc, thereby expanding the benevolence of NDB towards not only its employees, but also the youngest members of the employees' families as well.

Extending a hand towards a row of photographs of beaming chil-

dren bearing toothy grins displayed on a cabinet, Ms Ishani revealed that those photographs were from a kids' camp conducted last year. "This particular workshop is very dear to my heart" she said, sharing with us some of the memorable moments that she shared with these little cherubs as well as several incidents which struck a chord in her heart.

One can see from the amount of training facilities and benefits that an employee of NDB is offered that the bank is indeed quite determined when it comes to the growth of its employees. "Many people don't do banking exams" said Ms Ishani speaking to us about the importance of such educational qualifications in getting ahead in one's career. "We believe in our employees" she said, revealing to us that NDB, for the first time in Sri Lanka has partnered with the Institute of Bankers in order to provide their employees with certification programmes that are equivalent to the certificate and diploma in banking of the IOB Sri Lanka. Thus, the employees can study internally while the total cost of the programme would be sponsored by the bank alone.

Also, one does not get turned away from NDB merely upon the lack of knowledge in the English language. "If the candidates have fulfilled all the other requirements of the position that they have applied for and they only lack the desired standard of English, we still give them a chance" said Ms Ishani, also stating that in this case, they will be subjected to an in-house English learning programme where they will be provided with the training and knowledge they require to work in English. Furthermore, NDB is the first of its kind in Sri Lanka which also offers Italian and Tamil language programmes for its employees and these courses are open for anybody who wishes to enrich their knowledge and indulge in a bit of global wisdom.

While joining NDB is a boon for many, according to its Vice President Human Resources, the current education system has failed to produce the kind of skills and talent that the industry calls for today. She revealed that out of the 179 candidates who went through the branch management recruitment process, not even single candidate was identified as a suitable candidate for the job role. It was further revealed that even

though the candidates meet the minimum application requirements on the CV, they are not capable of demonstrating those skills on a practical level. "Our education system is very theoretical. It is not practical at all. And we carry this habit to our workplaces as well where we are limited to our desks and we do not bother expanding our knowledge" Ms Ishani said. She also stated that NDB is trying to make a difference regarding this issue. "Everybody from managers to clerical assistants need to move desks in my office" she said stating the importance of expanding one's knowledge in gaining experience in various job roles.

NDB is a formidable believer in the fact that one must truly take the lead if one expects to make a change in the world. Therefore, as a result of their concern, NDB has introduced a practical component to be built in to the curriculum of the University of Colombo which requires the undergraduates to research in to a practical problem experienced by an institution which involves active interaction between the company and the students. This unique programme enables the undergraduates to explore the practical side of their rather theoretical subjects, thereby providing them with the working knowledge and experience which will be indispensable once they enter the job market. NDB has also initiated an entrepreneurship programme for the undergraduates at the University of Moratuwa where research is done and training is provided to the aspiring undergraduates of the future. NDB also makes it a point to participate in various university recruitment drives and workshops in order to raise awareness of what is expected of the young job seekers once they are released from the safe haven of their academic fields on to the real world.

In addition to the CSR projects conducted in the North East with the aim of educating as well as providing opportunities for low income students to get in to the banking industry, NDB also boasts of a library enhancement programme which is conducted in collaboration with the Asia Foundation. As a practice, each NDB branch offers a large number of books to schools in the area as a means of starting up or enhancing their respective libraries. "We believe in giving back" said Ms Ishani also mentioning that NDB

makes it a point to encourage such noble deeds to the best of their ability constantly.

NDB is a place where one can reach great heights within a short period of time. The best example for this according to Ms Ishani is the CEO of NDB himself who had first joined NDB as a management trainee. Ms Ishani herself has joined NDB as a management trainee and today, within a comparatively short period of 17 years, she holds the position of Vice President Human Resources of NDB, looking in to the needs and wants of more than 1300 employees spread over 62 branches island wide. However, this very unassuming character refuses to take any credit for the many achievements that the HR department of NDB has succeeded to attain and humbly turns down our request to speak a little bit about her journey up this ladder of success saying that she is quite uncomfortable speaking about herself. "One single person did not achieve all this alone. I have a brilliant team and they deserve all the credit for what has been achieved so far" the ever so humble Vice President said, emphasizing upon how efficient, talented and dedicated her team is to this institution.

"There are so many opportunities before you. Please grab them" said Ms Ishani as advice to the ambitious youngsters of today who dream of a glistening new future. "Be the architect of your future, not a prisoner of your past" she says quoting Robin Sharma who has always been one of the greatest inspirations that had fueled her passion for life. She thoroughly believes that one should take responsibility of one's immediate future and that one should have a unique plan for oneself and that one should constantly strive towards achieving it no matter what. "Learn from your past, live in the moment, hope and plan for the future" she says, also stating that one must never let that inner motivational battery that one contains inside them inside die away as it is important to not get discouraged no matter what obstacles that one encounters in their path. NDB is definitely an employer who is well capable of offering all the training, exposure and experience that one needs to get ahead in one's career if they are indeed ready to take the reins of his or her own life and ride like the wind in to the dawn of success.

## The Culture Audit: Building the Successful Company Culture

A company's culture can help ensure the success of its business objectives. However, company culture is about more than having free Coca Cola in the fridge and allowing employees to take their dogs to the office. Culture is how employees describe where they work, understand the business, and see themselves as part of the organization. Building a strong company culture will not itself guarantee business success, but culture is a key determinant in attracting talent—and it is that talent that carry a company forward.

A "culture audit" can help assess the culture that currently exists in a company. It also offers insights into the means to strengthen it. This process is more commonly referred to as an "employee survey," - it helps companies learn what reasons d'être keeps employees at the company.

An effective corporate culture audit describes the overall working environment, identifies the unwritten "norms" and rules governing employee interactions and workplace practices, determines possible



barriers to effective work practices and communication, and makes recommendations for addressing identified problems. Not only will it help retain top performers, it provides a blueprint of what attributes to look for in applicants.

Sample questions might be:

- Are you being compensated fairly?
- Are your benefits comparable to those of the company's competitors?
- Does the company value your work?
- Are you getting the training you need?
- Does open communication exist in the company?

■ Do you feel challenged?  
■ Do your values match those of the company?

You might notice that a culture audit asks questions typically asked during an exit interview! Why wait to ask these important questions after the company has already lost its investment in an employee. Audits uncover potential friction points as well as sources of synergy, and generate possibilities for internal process improvements within the organization. By uncovering trouble spots in advance, the audit encourages fun and creative ways for improving the already-existing culture.

Such creativity can be as boundless. Growth oriented companies are notorious for coming up with notably unusual ways to improve the work environment-offsite retreats, impromptu recognition programmes, and the creative use of office space are all examples of how companies implement creative ideas to build their culture. These are just a few of the ideas often generated from the insights gleaned in a culture audit.

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## Work for work's sake is not a life

WHENEVER I go to the fridge and open the door I've usually forgotten why I went there in the first place. I know I want to extract something from it but have no idea what. I'm 52. And Kevin Rudd wants me and a few million other Australians of my generation to work until we are 67. God help us.

I'm relatively fit, I don't dribble and I scrub up all right in a suit, but my days are punctuated by involuntary groans whenever I rise from my chair or sink into the settee. Where did they come from? I don't know. I hadn't expected this to happen.

And I didn't expect my body to start wearing out. The accumulation of years of sporting injuries, tumbling off ladders while doing up the house, falling up the stairs after Friday night drinks with workmates, and the dull coccyx ache from decades of being welded to an office swivel chair have taken their toll.

What state will I be in 15 years? What's the PM going to do? Dispatch the district nurse to the home of every vague-minded, bone-soxer sexagenarian to administer a few non-rebatable lines of coke to inject some much needed giddy-up before we all hobble off to work of a morning?

And I've been lucky. I've mostly worked in office jobs where the physical toll is not too great, the mental burden manageable and the work enjoyable, even fulfilling. But I come from a family of coal miners, dockworkers, labourers and factory



fodder, people who aged before their time, who got injured or killed in workplace accidents, or crawled home at night after another bout of overtime never wanting to make another plastic widget in their lives. This is not to say that working in a flour mill as my grandfather did is not satisfying at some point, but in the end it did his head and his lungs in, and it became work for work's sake, work to make ends meet.

Times may have moved on - better working conditions, for example - but there are still many people who want the daily grind to end sooner than later and not just those whose have rotten jobs - and let's face it, there are some really rotten jobs out there.

(I worked in an abattoir for a while and, curiously enough, I quite enjoyed it. But I knew it was only temporary, especially after I watched a slaughterman being

stretched out of the works after being fatally gored by a disgruntled bovine. The cow's time there proved to be temporary as well, although its early retirement was expected.)

The Federal Government's proposals to lift the formal retirement age and make people work longer before they can get access to a government pension has a whiffy arrogance about it that assumes everyone can, or wants to, work until they don't know what a refrigerator is, never mind what's in it; that everyone wants keep slogging away because they've got an HR department that hasn't downsized them yet; that they are happy to continue hacking at the coalface because they haven't yet lost heart or been defeated by hard labour, office politics or thwarted ambition.

And what jobs will we do until we're 67, waiting for the Government to grant a pension? How many 60-odd-year-olds are doing responsible, satisfying work in your office or factory?

And where is the meaningful work for the silver-haired and dodgy-kneed? Is there any such work here?

And so many local firms are outsourcing jobs that people may have to be offloaded to Manila or Mumbai. They could ring up people in the middle of their dinner and ask them irritating questions about their electricity provider.

Even so, all the evidence suggests that domestic employers still prefer the (cheaper) exuberance of

youth over the wisdom and experience of age.

People may be sustained by little pills for high blood pressure or cholesterol, kept upright by a foundry of metal pins in their shoulders, knees and hips, and rescued by heart bypasses and prostate cancer surgery done by a robot, but being kept alive does not necessarily equate with living longer.

The Government justifies its "live longer therefore work longer" plans by pointing to the demographic evidence that we are spending more time on this earth, and assumes this will continue.

But recently the medical community has been discussing the likelihood that for the next three or four decades at least our children will not live as long as their parents, as they suffer the effects of lifestyle-related health problems such as obesity, hypertension and heart disease. What will the Government do then? Lower the pension age?

There may come a point when, for some, their reservoir of energy and commitment runs dry, when they want to live a bit before it's too late. Life remains short and delaying people's access to the pension will only make it shorter.

Many folk give to the community by working and paying taxes for four decades or more. Surely, the time comes when the community should give them something back. - The Age

Graham Reilly is an Age senior writer.