



"Don't fall into the trap of the rat race..."

■ Radhika Arunkumar

Pallavi Jha is the Executive Chairman of Walchand TalentFirst, a fully owned subsidiary of the publicly listed company, Walchand PeopleFirst Ltd. Walchand TalentFirst has international partnerships with some of the world's leading firms and brands such as Dale Carnegie, USA (training), SIIRM, USA (HR Certification) and PerformanSe, France (Assessments). She has played a pioneering role in setting up India's first Finishing School focused on soft-skills training. Additionally, she has been

part of women's groups, which have encouraged first generation women entrepreneurs into taking business initiatives. Advancedge caught up with Pallavi at the 'Coffee with CEOs' event organised by EABS.

Your work experience has been in FMCG, construction, training and development, HR, consulting and business restructuring. Tell us a little about the early days of your management career and the journey that brought you here. What have been the most important insights that you gained on the way?

I have been lucky to have diversified experience across a variety of sectors and company types, which has given me a professional rigor that stands me in good stead always. I started as a Management Trainee in Proctor & Gamble (multinational, FMCG). Then I joined a consulting and research firm called Feedback Ventures as an entry-level manager (small Indian start-up then). The contrast in the work environment was most striking and an extremely enriching exposure. After a short stint, I moved on to join my family business and worked as Executive Director at Hindustan Construction Company. This catapulted me straight to the top-level of Management of an Indian family business group. Here I learnt the real

challenges of inter-personal skills and managing and inspiring the various people in the organization, especially since I was younger than most senior managers in the well-established hierarchy. Further, it opened my eyes to the travails of family businesses and, being part of the family, it felt like baptism by fire. Later on after the restructuring of the Walchand Group, I inherited a company called Walchand Capital and this is where I became a true entrepreneur. All my past experience in various sectors, environments and exposure to different business processes was what I could draw upon to build my own successful businesses. Here I dabbled with financial services and dotcom businesses before I found my calling in the area of training and HR consulting. Today we have rechristened the company as Walchand PeopleFirst and represent global leaders such as Dale Carnegie Training and PerformanSe SAS and have been setting new benchmarks in the Indian industry.

To what extent would you ascribe

your professional rise and success to the formal education in management?

I have completed my BA in Sociology and Economics from St. Xaviers College in Mumbai and then went on to do my MBA at Syracuse University, New York. Both my alma maters and the programmes I have done have been fascinating and I believe that they have made a significant contribution to where I am, not just professionally but as a human being. The management degree has been quite relevant in many ways at the workplace. Yet it's important to realize that the real education comes from experience and that the real world needs the knowledge we have learnt, but more than that we need skills to help apply that knowledge for professional results. The good news is that skills can be learnt and experience helps us to hone them everyday.

What are your fondest memories of and the greatest takeaway from your B-School experience?

The fondest memories are not

academic! The entire campus experience was wholesome. I loved the global flavor and had friends from India to Ireland, Brazil to Beijing and Vietnam to Vancouver. What I love is that I am still in touch with many of them - just yesterday, my marketing professor visited me here in Mumbai!

How do you rate the learning in classroom against that which typically happens on the job as one climbs the corporate ladder or as an entrepreneur as in your case? Would you say that there are challenges that any manager can inevitably expect to face in her first job, even if she is an MBA from a premier institute?

All good companies hire new recruits who have just completed their MBA or have similar qualifications and the first thing they do is put them back into a classroom on the induction training! This is to prepare them for the real corporate environment. From there on it is on-the-job learning. One's professional growth is a function of the learning and application that an individual continues beyond the classroom. So while classroom training will take you up to a certain point, it's your individual attitude towards learning throughout life that will determine your success.

How would you advise any MBA aspirant to develop himself during the years in B-school, so that he can be an asset and make a true impact in whatever organization he joins?

The MBA is one of the best programmes to prepare you for the corporate world. To maximize your learning there, be active - with your peers, with your faculty, with your community and with your learning. You need to build self-confidence, which will come through when you try and understand your own

personal values - what makes you tick, what makes you happy. Set your own path, don't look over your shoulder to see what others are doing - you are not them and don't fall into the trap of the rat race. To be successful in life you need to know what you want. Choose whether you want to be Chatur or you want to be Wangdu (I am sure you have seen 3 Idiots). Different companies look for different things, so one size does not fit all. However, all companies look for those people who are confident, can communicate well, have a positive attitude and have the flexibility and adaptability to continuously learn from different environments.

What are your views on business education in India, as it exists today?

Business education in India suffers from huge inconsistency in quality. We have some really good schools and then we have many that are not worth the paper they print their certificates on. The other observation (and this is not just relevant to India, but globally) is that the MBA course is still largely theoretical; schools could supplement all that learning with some business skills development too. That would add a hundred per cent to the student's employability.

What do you think would be the most important qualities of a manager who may wish to grow in your industry?

One of the most important qualities of a first-time manager is the ability to manage himself with responsibility and accountability, to produce committed results and meet expectations. It begins with an ability for flawless execution. Then it goes from managing self to managing teams and draws heavily on the ability to plan, communicate,

motivate and manage both people and projects. From there, one moves on to becoming a change agent or leader where there one needs a larger capability to envision goals and outcomes, think strategically, innovate, and of course be inspirational. As you go up the ladder you become more of a generalist and need lesser domain skills and greater inter-personal skills, communication skills, negotiation skills, leadership skills, selling skills etc.

Finally how do you perceive the social and cultural changes in India and the development of business-market strategies here?

The demographics in India point to a young population and social development offers a world of opportunities for these youngsters. With the Internet and social networking, our youth are exposed to everything in the world. It is expanding knowledge boundaries, awareness, choices, diversity and tolerance. Education is offering more choices. There are greater financial avenues and consumer choices. In short we are seeing a lot of empowerment to the individual and the consumer and the individual is emerging as a confident, assertive person. Vodafone's 'Power to You' campaign reflects this reality.

Besides, as an emerging market, India has become an attractive destination for marketers, employers and employees. Today many companies have a global workforce and diversity is very real. It has driven businesses to think globally, become globally competitive and drive themselves to set new benchmarks. Here too the competition is hot. It calls for everyone to really pull up their socks and work harder to succeed in their jobs. ■