

Best Companies to Work For  
HUL

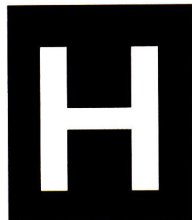
# FAST & AGILE

HUL's ability to offer early responsibility and varied exposure makes it a great place to work.

By AJITA SHASHIDHAR

Photographs by RACHIT GOSWAMI

OVERALL RANK  
7



**industan Unilever's** purchase of the Ayurvedic hair-care brand, Indulekha, has been one of its most successful acquisitions in recent times. The lead for the acquisition had come from its regional cluster team in South India. The team, which comprises 28-35-year-olds, is not just a regional sales team. It also has a say in key strategy decisions in its cluster. Apart from sales, it has marketing, finance, supply chain and planning expertise. So, if in its area, wall paintings communicate a brand's message better than advertisements on FM radio, the cluster team is empowered to change the marketing mix. In case a market is water-deficient and it makes sense to launch a detergent which consumes less water, the team is free to interact with the innovation team and work on creating a new product variant.

HUL has set up 14 such consumer cluster teams across the coun-



SCORES  
HIGHLY ON



Career  
Growth Path



Culture of  
Inclusion



Learning  
Opportunities

try as part of its “Winning in Many Indias” strategy. This has helped it break into the forte of regional brands across the country, which is reflecting in its robust revenue growth quarter after quarter. This also explains why respondents of the *Business Today*-PeopleStrong Survey on Best Companies to Work For preferred HUL for career growth and learning opportunities it offers.

The biggest thrill for employees, especially those just seven-eight years into their jobs, is an opportunity to take strategic decisions. “It’s not a top-down approach but a bottom-up approach, because all our teams come with their strategy and plan. It has allowed us to be faster in response and much more customised in what we can offer to the market. It has allowed people who work on these things to get together and take decisions,” says B.P. Bidappa, Executive Director, Human Re-

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sources, HUL. While consumer clusters are present in the regions, the HUL headquarters in Mumbai has 15 country category business teams (CCBTs). A CCBT may be for laundry, hair care or skin care, and all of them, like the regional consumer clusters, have own sales, marketing, finance, supply chain and innovation teams. These are like mini-boards led by the company's young general managers and fully empowered to deliver for their business units. “From a talent perspective, the thrill of becoming a general manager early in life has come alive. What could have taken a few more years is happening much faster. And that makes a big difference to people's capabilities and leadership abilities. Also, a lot of investment is being made on training,” says Bidappa.

This bottom-up style of doing business is a little over two years old and Bidappa claims it has given the leadership ample time to focus on bigger things such as where can disruption come from, what kind of additional capabilities and talent they need to create growth and potential acquisitions.

“My HR meetings have been cut by half. We have done a lot of trimming down. The stuff that needs to be discussed at the CCBT level does not get discussed in management committee meetings. So the architecture has changed, hence the way we run the business has changed,” says Bidappa. The business, he says, has become more agile, faster and impactful. “People feel excited, so the business does better; and if the business does better, the people feel excited. So, it becomes a wheel

**15**  
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that generates energy.”

The Lever Ayush launch, from concept to roll-out, was done in nine months. Bidappa says this wouldn't have been possible in the earlier era when the company had a single strategy for the entire country. The FMCG major has also been investing a lot in training talent to think across functions. “Cross-learning has become important, you need to know sales, marketing and other functions, too. The finance team, for instance, needs to engage in number-related conversations as well as people conversations. Earlier, what happened was that you were working in a function. In your function, you had a functional hierarchy. It was your team and you would reach out to people as needed,” says Bidappa.

HUL has emerged as a favourite employer on business school campuses, too. “People want early responsibility, variety and exposure. They also want organisations which are flexible. Earlier, say 15-20 years ago, people were more comfortable with security and certainty. That's changed. Our CCBTs are in line with this change in perspective. We also have a much more open approach to our policies. I am open to having conversations around what people would like to do and if I can help my employees do better personally and at work,” says Bidappa.

Bidappa hopes HUL will continue to be one of the most respected companies of India Inc. in years to come. “We would like to be a company which is loved by all and is, of course, a great and aspirational place to work. We will be a high-performing business because we want everyone to perform to their potential. We want to be a business which represents the diversity of India and is able to leverage the diversity of India.” **BT**

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