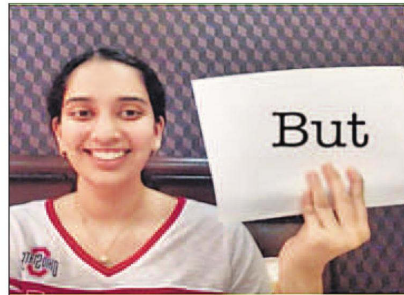


{ DISTANCE LEARNING } REMOTE CONTROL

Training for the dream job in the pandemic



Snigdha Poonam

In August 2019, Ayush Sharma, 24, a final-year student at the Indian School of Business, received the job offer of his dreams. He was to be a management trainee at Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL). He had hustled for it for months, clearing one problem-solving contest after another that the company throws at graduating students at India's top B-schools.

"Initially, one of them tested us on precision marketing for a generic brand like Dove. Later, in the semi-finals between four teams nationally, we worked on situations such as 'how do you get the youth to vote for LGBT interests'," Sharma says.

On November 20, 2019, he received a letter from the company asking him to join its legendary training programme in May. Between those two dates, the coronavirus struck. The economy reeled to its lowest growth in decades. Companies weren't only retrenching but also putting off annual hiring and cancelling job offers.

For the young men and women all set to join the white-collar workforce, this spell doom. Sharma remembers his anxiety: "Most of us were wondering: what happens to my job? Every day, we were hearing of top companies rescinding job offers. So many students had taken [study] loans that they were supposed to start paying off."

Sharma's worries were short-lived. "We are in this for the long term," says HUL's chief human resource officer, Anuradha Razdan. "In April, 101 interns and in May 50

management trainees were scheduled to join the company. We were determined there was no way we wanted to cancel that. We knew students across the country were worried. We began by writing to campuses and parents to say the training programme would proceed as scheduled. For 60 years we have followed the same process."

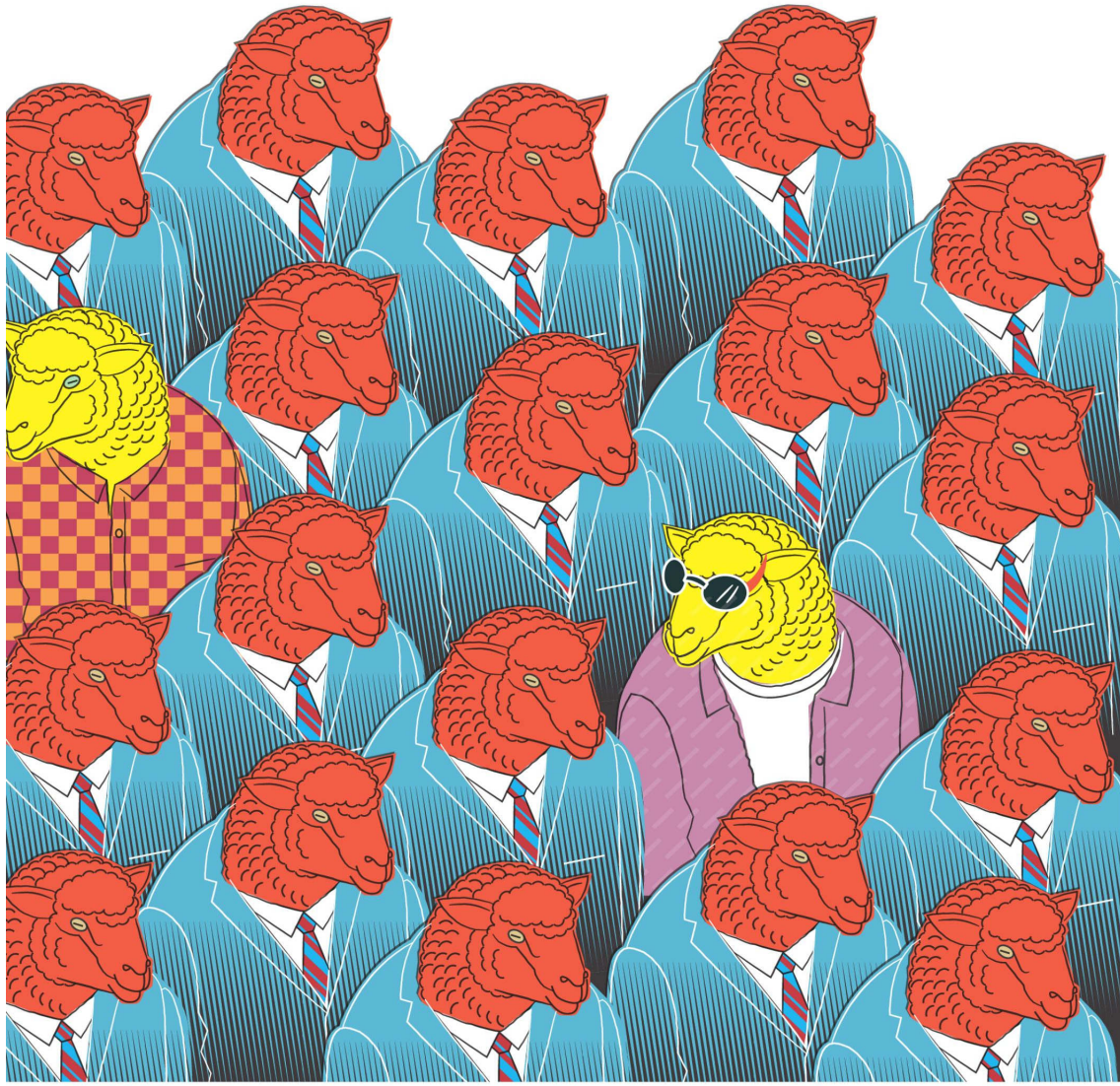
HUL HISTORY

The company itself is much older than that. Lever Brothers was set up in 1885 by two British brothers, William Hesketh Lever and James Lever. They are credited with manufacturing the world's first branded soap, Sunlight. In 1930, Lever Brothers, which had grown into a soap-making empire, merged with the Dutch margarine company Margarine Unie, which was equally reliant on animal fats, to create Unilever.

The company became a prolific manufacturer of domestic goods, from tea to toilet cleaner. Over the latter half of the 20th century, Unilever opened many foreign branches to further the phenomenon of fast moving consumer goods (FMCG).

In 1931, the company launched its first subsidiary, Hindustan Vanaspati Manufacturing Company, in colonial India, and two years later, another one called Lever Brothers India Limited. In 1956, Unilever's three local subsidiaries merged to form Hindustan Lever, which became a household name as it catered to a newly free people's needs, ranging from shampoo to ice-cream.

In 2007, the company took on the name



Around the world

- 18** The number of earned leave days per year accorded to Indian employees under the Factories Act of 1948. It's accrued as one day of earned leave for every 20 working days. This does not include weekends and public holidays, which vary by state.
- 53** The total number of annual days off in Iran, perhaps the highest in the world. Iranians get one month's paid leave (including Fridays off), plus 26 religious holidays, which most employers offer as paid time off. Plus Labour Day.
- 28** The number of mandated leave days for workers in the European Union. Add in the paid public holidays and some get up to 38 days of paid leave a year.
- 30** Some countries have a cap on the numbers of paid leave days. No more than 30 a year are allowed in Brazil, Djibouti, France, Kuwait, Libya and others.
- 0** American employers are not legally required to give paid leave, an unusual practice in developed nations. About 77% of employers offer 10 days of PL a year.

Know your rights

- 05** India's score on the 2020 International Trade Union Confederation Global Rights Index. The 1-5 scale measures the degree of respect for workers' rights on 97 indicators. India's brutal repression of strikes, mass dismissals and regressive laws puts it among the worst countries. Other countries that scored 5 include Bangladesh, The Philippines, Brazil, Kazakhstan and Egypt. The nations with the best score were Norway, Italy, Denmark and Germany.

Still at work?

- 53-54** The average number of hours urban Indians work per week. Men work longer than the average (but work far fewer hours in the home). Even rural India works about 46 hours a week.

- 68** The number of hours in the average South Korean work week, until 2018. Decline in population led the government to revise the maximum weekly work hours to 52.

37.2

Denmark's average work week. The French put in close to 39 hours a week. The Americans, 41.5. And the Colombians close to 50.

- 72** The revised work hours allowed per week by six Indian states – Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, MP, Punjab and HP – during the pandemic, to boost production.

A baby on the way

- 85** The weeks of paid maternity leave available in Estonia, the highest in the world. Hungary offers 72 weeks.

- 0** There is no mandated maternity or paternity leave in the US. The employer decides. On average, women get five to six weeks.

- 26** The number of weeks of paid maternity leave mandated in India, under the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017, which raised it from 12 weeks. India offers some of the longest maternity leave in the world.

- 0** The number of weeks of mandated paternity leave in India's private sector. State and central government employees are allowed 15 days of paternity leave.

than corporate benevolence.

GLOBAL TREND

In May, Andree Yang, an entrepreneur and American Presidential candidate, tweeted his support of three-day weekends. "Studies show that we would be just as productive. It would create jobs at the margins and improve mental health," his post said.

In Japan, where long work hours have driven workers to depression and suicide, Microsoft gave its 2,300 Monday-Friday workers five Fridays off in a row last year without trimming pay. Productivity reportedly rose 40%.

The Swedish public-health sector attempted a 6-hour workday in 2015. Some 18 months into the trial, nurses ended up organising 85% more activities for their patients, and offering improved care. Internationally, Virgin and Netflix offer what many workers consider the ultimate perk: no cap on paid vacation days.

French recruitment start-up Welcome to the Jungle found scaling back to a four-day week (and trusting employees to manage their workload) to be so productive, they've gone a step further. They now help other start-ups to adopt the method, and even made a documentary about it. But arbitrary isn't the answer, because for one thing it can be unsustainable.

The Swedish six-hour workday was abandoned because its costs outweighed its benefits. Other similar trims have been found to increase work-team stress as employees scramble to meet the same deadlines in fewer hours. Often, companies don't give new changes enough time to take hold. And studies show that while scaling back from 60 hours to 40 works well, cutting 40 hours to even 30 hurts business.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Ranjana Kumari, director of the Delhi-based advocacy group Centre for Social Research, believes that while Covid-19 will change the nature and structure of work, it will take more than a pandemic to trigger industry-wide reforms.

"Because these changes are varied and unregulated, the different work patterns that emerge will cause chaos," Kumari says.

"Work systems will not match home-life systems. It's going to get more stressful."

Mothers, she predicts, will have it even tougher, as with virtual-school responsibilities add to work and domestic duties. "Single parents will go crazy."

Crucially, she adds, these are company-level policies, not laws. "Governments everywhere have left these policies to the employer, which is dangerous. There's no one negotiating on behalf of the worker," Kumari says.

At Zomato, those generous period and paternity leaves are not supported by temp

workers. "Others in the teams fill in to make this possible without letting work get impacted," says Daminee Sawhney, the firm's vice-president of human resources. "This way every employee understands and upholds the underlying belief and value system and it, in turn, reflects in their day to day actions."

Microsoft India's Work Trend Index, which measures productivity trends, surveyed 6,000 workers in eight countries including India during the pandemic and confirms that working at home made things worse. "Over 41% of Indians polled cited the lack of separation between work and personal life as a cause of increased stress levels," says Samik Roy, who heads the firm's Modern Work division. No commute means no boundaries for when the workday begins and ends. "We may not miss that hour of traffic bookending our days, but the reflection we do during that time can increase productivity by 12 to 15%," Roy adds.

Still, Indians in particular are likely to delight at the fledgling new developments. We typically work much longer than the Indian Factories Act's stipulated 48 hours a week. Indians use among the lowest quotas of leave. Stress management — break, multitasking, meditation — is seen as an individual and not team or company responsibility.

And now, in this culture that equates busyness with productivity, change is finally afoot. CleverTap's Parashar believes that Indian companies are coming around to the idea that "free time is more valuable to a worker than a freebie". And that trusting your team is cheaper and better all around than monitoring them.

You can also just tune in to your team. Long before the pandemic, OML switched their company health insurance provider to one that also covered mental health. Since March, they've also partnered with an app- and phone-based counselling service that staff can avail of privately. "The idea is to ask people what works best for them, and know they share the same goals and culture as the company," Arya says. "The future of work is trust."

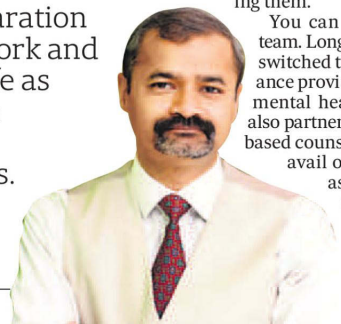
When someone takes 26-week paternity leave, others in the team fill in without letting work get impacted.

DAMINEE SAWHNEY, vice-president of human resources at Zomato



Over 41% of us cite the lack of separation between work and personal life as resulting in increased stress levels.

SAMIK ROY, head of the modern work division at Microsoft India



by which it continues to be known. Many Indians still regard HUL as a 'box-wallah' company. The term dates to the colonial era when European salesmen travelled with boxes full of items to sell.

By the time of independence, a boxwallah could mean any European company operating in India. Indians companies too aspired to the box-wallah corporate culture — synonymous with Ambassador cars, club memberships and company quarters. Joining a box-wallah company was considered the perfect start to a career, and only a handful made the cut every year.

OLD-TIMERS

"In 1980, when I applied for jobs fresh out of college, the top companies were of foreign origin — ITC, Lever, Nestle, Brooke Bond, Lipton, Lakme and Ponds... At that time the only attractive Indian company was Asian Paints. In the '80s, India had a tiny economy. If someone was offering you a princely Rs 1200 plus a house, you didn't turn it down," says Subroto Chattopadhyay, 62, a veteran box-wallah who has worked with companies such as PepsiCo and ITC in a 40-year corporate career.

Getting in wasn't easy. "These companies would send printed application forms to the principals of top colleges, who used their own choices." At Calcutta's St Xavier's College, which he attended, only two forms came from Brooke Bond, running over six pages each. Typically, he said, "you had to write an essay, provide scholarship record,

enumerate interests, show leadership skills."

That was followed by three or four rounds of interviews. "You were in your 20s and the interviewers in their 50s, three of them current company directors. They took this very seriously. The questions were wide-ranging. I was asked, 'how many litres does a barrel of petrol have'. Finally, the chairman himself interviewed you. These companies sent 15 or 20 forms out every year and took in two or three people. For that year, ITC hired four."

The initiations were grand. Chattopadhyay describes his own at ITC, his second job: "You were given accommodation that came with a cook and a bearer." But you didn't live there straightaway. "The boss and wife came to receive you at the airport or train station along with your team and took you out for a fancy dinner. For two weeks, they hosted you at their house, the

For the 101 new interns who have started training with HUL, the pandemic has meant a change but not a stop. Sessions are now virtual, as interns get a sense of rural marketing and supply-chain strategies through games and virtual sessions.



boss's wife standing in for a mother figure. He'd take you to the office in his car."

Then the grind began. In his 2019 book on HUL, The CEO Factory, company insider Sudhir Sitapati writes, "If there is one differentiator between HUL and every other company in India, it is the totality of business exposure of the management training stint. The underlying principle of the yearlong... stint is to allow trainees to live the life of the lowest-ranking company functionary in every large department."

Instituted in 1955, the process has continued. Sitapati's own training started in central Madhya Pradesh in 1999, in sales. "We would clean the grimy Dalda packs in the shelf with a piece of cloth we had brought along and put up a poster of the new Rs 2 jam sachet outside the shop," he writes. Raised in Mumbai, Sitapati terms his management training stint at HUL "the most formative year in my life".

THEN AND NOW

Today, HUL takes in up to 50 management trainees every year. The training regimen remains the same. "We look for the same standards of leadership, problem-solving and commercial acumen," says Razdan. For 15 or 16 months, the trainees then circle the "nuts and bolts of the organisation". For at least six months, they live in villages.

"Then there are sales stints, factory stints, stints in the accounting department. They get a tutor and a coach," Razdan says. The pandemic didn't disrupt the process, at least

not fully. "They still have to learn what a day is like in the life of an area sales manager or a brand manager. Projects remained the same. Training started with office-based work which they could do from home. The sales and factory stints are supposed to take place virtually or after the pandemic."

The assignments on which they will be tested are closely linked to ongoing developments in the FMCG industry. "As the largest procurer of raw materials, we are having to come up with a new strategy post India's tensions with China. Our trainees have had to come up with local supply chain options," Razdan says.

Vamika Singh, 22, had heard a lot about the HUL training programme before the company came to the Indian Institute of Management (Ahmedabad) campus in October 2019 to select interns for 2020.

On April 1, she was among 101 interns from across the country who joined the programme virtually. Only a few of them would be asked to join the company the following year. One of Singh's first tasks was to market HUL's detergent brand, Wheel. "I had to get the feel of Tier-2 towns and villages virtually." Singh was added to a WhatsApp group consisting of 50 rural women in Gujarat and a translator. "I had to figure out what the brand meant to them, the advertising options beyond television spots, and distribution networks other than mom-and-pop stores. It was a humbling experience," she says. Singh made it in. "I received a formal offer asking me to join the company in June 2021." She can hardly wait.