

# What Job Titles Don't Tell You

By Avdesh Mittal and Sinosh Panicker

You're at India Telecom and have just exchanged name-cards with Abheer, Sunil and Ganesh. You assume it's just another bunch of business cards you've collected until you notice their job titles. Abheer is Chief Executive Officer of Finance, Sunil is Leader of Marketing and Ganesh is First Principal Director of Talent Strategy.

Could this be just an outlandish dream? We wish we could pinch ourselves and wake up, but title inflation amongst Indian telecom operators and service providers is already an industry norm, the result of market exuberance.

Title inflation will make it increasingly difficult to get a grip on a name-card holder's true depth of experience and responsibility. Will the standardization of designations across the telecom industry help all the players calibrate their recruiting better?

In order to delve into this issue, Heidrick & Struggles interviewed senior executives representing companies across the value-chain of the industry; from passive infrastructure and equipment providers to telecom operators.

Our findings showed that most companies have developed internal mechanisms to deal with title inflation and that in fact, another trend in titles may be on the horizon.

## For And Against Flexibility In Designations

"With such a competitive climate for experienced and competent business leaders, companies exercise flexibility and innovation in the area of job titles. Industry will

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certainly be better off with some standardization and more role appropriate titles. Inflated job titles used only as means to attract and motivate people, do not augur well for business in the long run," commented Girish Johar, Vice President – HR and Operations at Ericsson India.

Indus Towers' Chief Human Resources Officer, Pankaj Mittal, is of the opinion that runaway title inflation only leads to an erosion of the real purchasing power or hiring power of telecom companies. "As we move up the hierarchy, titles may not make a big difference. I always advise our internal hiring managers to be watchful of fancy titles and get deeper into the actual role, width and depth of experience and further see if there is an 'organization fit' for us. Title inflation can render job titles meaningless and turn out to be counter productive," he explained.

## Inflationary Pressures

Inflated titles are symptomatic of three broader trends across all of India's services industries: globalization, intense

market competition and demand for senior executive talent that outstrips supply by far.

Not only are India's telecom players rushing to unleash the pent-up potential of rural markets, they are also enthusiastically enlarging their footprints beyond the country's borders to places like Africa, the United States and the Middle East. On top of that, they are enhancing their GPRS, mobile commerce and service portability capabilities and investing in content delivery for televisions, computers and mobile handsets. In the midst of this, the industry witnessed merger and acquisition (M&A) deals worth US\$23 billion during the third quarter of 2010 alone.

It is commonly understood that it takes a significant amount of time and effort to groom the successors to any existing senior leadership bench. Yet over the last five years, telecom companies have exploded multiple times in size and organization charts have begun to look more and more like the London Underground map. Infusions of leadership talent are badly needed and this has left wide gaping holes in numerous organizations across functions, products and markets that must be urgently filled.

Changes in the market have also meant that demand for executives with entrepreneurial mindsets – all the rage five years ago – has been replaced by demand for executives who can manage complexity and scale.

Hiring strategies are also changing.

## A Soft Landing

Increasingly, candidates will be evaluated on their soft-skills over and above their technical or functional competencies.

Vinay Razdan, Chief Human Resources Officer of Idea Cellular Ltd., one of the leading Indian telecom players with high employee retention, says, “While hiring from outside, we give particular emphasis to how well a candidate will blend into the Idea culture. This is to ensure that once the person is hired into Idea, he/she understands and adapts easily to our culture and is a right fit in the

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ecosystem. We have also found that people from FMCG sector, besides Telecom, find it relatively easier to adjust to high pace and volatility of this sector. In order to leverage the “soft power” fully, we lay great emphasis in proactive career planning owing to which we are able to fill most of our key positions internally. This way we ensure that not only do people stay fresh and engaged by regular change in their assignments/locations but also helps in strengthening the cultural fabric at Idea.”

Ashok Ramchandran, Director, Human Resources for Vodafone Essar agreed, “For us, the key criteria for positions higher up in the organization is whether our new hires will be a good fit into our organization's vision, goals and culture. I have found throughout my career that this is an opportunity to work on for any recruiting manager.”

Our observation is that telecom leaders are increasingly being sought for the following “soft” skills.

**Innovation** – Innovation has become a management catchphrase. Many telecom players are looking for their own “Steve Jobs” to inject that X factor into their companies' ability to charm and keep the market enamored with new products and services.

**Passion and drive** – To succeed in an industry that is as unrelenting as India's telecom sector, one needs passion and a sense of urgency to continually drive programs and people to the highest standards. It is not uncommon that new organization initiatives need to be rolled out across

10 centres in six weeks, new business partners need to be integrated into the internal systems and new teams need to be hired in Pune, Kolkata and Surat – all at the same time. Managing against constant change is a grueling process and it is the “fire in the belly” that will keep business leaders from burning out.

Through their behavior and words, passionate leaders are also able to inspire their people and lead teams to greater heights and will help model organizational behaviors.

**Strategic thinking** – How does one deal with shrinking margins, improve profitability and come out ahead of the competition? Great strategic thinkers will have some ideas on how to address that. They typically have clear insights into their markets, customers and technology and are constantly seeking new information on emerging realities to develop significant points of view of the future.

It is such leadership that will differentiate one telecom player from the other in the way it interprets its strategic challenges and critical success factors, prepares for risks and opportunities, and builds a sustainable business model.

**Ability to manage ambiguity** – Industry M&As, new regulations, recent market entrants mean that goal posts are moving all the time. Telecom business leaders have to work beyond typical structures and personal

comfort zones. The ability to manage within ambiguity is increasingly a key leadership prerequisite.

**Cultural fit** – As everything in the industry converges and product or service lines become increasingly blurred, it is the business culture that will differentiate one telecom player from another. It is also the company culture that glues an organization together. The ability to strive in and pass on the company’s cultural DNA to next generation leaders is key.

With the increasing focus on soft skills, it won’t be surprising to see a new generation of telecom business titles crop up in the new future. One day you could be meeting someone with the title of “Innovation Leader” or “People Glue”.

“Titles demonstrate upward mobility when you flash your card in a social setting. Professionally, it helps you get the attention of a sales prospect or your peer group during an industry forum,” said Ronald D’souza, Vice President of Human Resources at Alcatel-Lucent India.

Whether titles start to evolve to depict one’s softer skills rather than one’s functional role is yet to be seen. There is one thing that is definite though – title inflation is here to stay.

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