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Focusing on imparting skills

Centum Learning is a global skill development company. It operates in about 20 countries in the Indian and African subcontinents. Imparting skills has been its focus area of operations, within which it targets private enterprises and government sectors. Besides, it has joined hands with government and multilateral agencies to impart skills to the underprivileged. Its focus extends from schools and colleges to established enterprises and governments. **Sanjeev Duggal**, CEO & MD, Centum Learning, spoke to FC on the need for skills and what it means to empower the country's economic growth as well as on ensuring livelihood to individuals.

■ **What is 'Centum Learning' all about? As a key partner to the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC), what were the key advantages that the latter offered?**

Fundamentally, we are a global skill development company. We work in about 20 countries in the African subcontinent as well as in the Indian subcontinent. We have four business verticals on which we are focused. These are - i) skills upgrade - this is targeted at those who are already employed and working professionals, largely in the private sector and also in the government sector. These include sales and service personnel, retail and other technical staff and so on. We assess their skills and also understand the challenges that the enterprises are facing, train them and upgrade their skills. ii) livelihood skills - in this our targeted segment will be enterprises and their CSR objectives, government schemes of both central and state governments and also the multilateral agencies like UNICEF and UNDP, which fund development schemes.

We target the underprivileged youth and provide them skills to either become entrepreneurs or to find jobs. iii) skills at schools and colleges in the case of school students, mostly from the government schools and also the CBSE-affiliated schools, we target those in the 9-12 standards and provide vocational skills. This way, as they finish their schooling, they are also equipped with vocational skills in any of the following including IT/ITES, retail, hospitality and tourism sectors. iv) skills assessment -

very often people have to be assessed for skills and we do that both for enterprises and governments since our focus is either B2B or B2G. This is our business and we deliver it in 24 languages across the Indian and African geographies. Having started in 2009 as Centum Learning, we are a key partner to the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC). In fact, we have been their No. 1 partner over the last two years and have trained over 6.5 lakh people. As you know, NSDC plays a pivotal role in creating the skills ecosystem landscape through capacity building, advocacy and also in creating linkages with the governments and the industry. It is important for us to work together as our objectives are same.

■ **How important is the skill India initiative and how fruitful it will be filling the skill needs in the country?**

It is vital. One of the key transformational instances for India in the next 10 years will be the skills initiative. Why? We have a very, very large young population and one of the youngest in the world in terms of age group. But when it comes to skills, we are one of the lowest in the world. There is a very large population, which needs to join employment. But they cannot without skills and this in turn adds pressure on their families and their livelihood. It impacts the health of all in the households as they cannot afford the needs. Lack of skills for such a large population even at times leads to law and order problems and all other issues. In fact, all such initiatives like skill India, make in India, digital India and women empower-



ment - need skilled people to participate in this. Skill is the catalyst for achieving the objectives of the nation and empowering its economic growth. At the same time, India has taken a lot of significant steps at the right time in terms of focus, funds and visibility with the right communication all around from the prime minister to having a separate ministry and institutions like NSDC among others. From a bootstrapping point of view, India is ahead of most other countries. Generally, in the last few years, the challenges in providing skills were underestimated. The government is now making a conscious attempt to understand this issue better. In the last few years, the gap between the goal and what was achieved has been huge. Set targets were not achieved. Hence, the government is now listening to organisations on the ground and trying to address the issues in a more focused manner. The change is happening. But, still it is work in progress. For instance, one element of the eco-system is the supply chain and funds and on the other is the dignity of labour. We have high levels of educated unemployed. In fact, most of them are not em-

ployable due to lack of skills. There is a very, very deep type of a problem about what we want our children to do and what they can do. A societal change is needed. It is happening, but is taking time. As this happens more and more, societal acceptance of skills will grow. It is a journey and it takes time. In fact, a lot of time. We believe in it and we are participating in it.

■ **Can you elaborate on Centum's corporate training and vocation education offerings?**

Large companies and enterprises - whatever they mean to achieve anything - for that people are very important. The skills of people to get things done are foremost. We are hired to train them and improve the productivity. We basically look at the front-end, especially those who interact with the customers. These include those from sales, service, retail, technical staff, call centre employees and we also train managers who run large customer support centres.

In the case of vocation education, the employment and employability are the main focus areas. We provide skills in trades, which

will create employment. We work on various trades and for this we work with governments and not enterprises, especially in manufacturing and service trades. For instance in construction, we train people to become masons and electricians, sewing machine operators for textiles, metal fabrication, hospitality, retail and healthcare, IT/ITES and green jobs to be employment in the solar energy sector. While in the case of enterprises, our focus is more customer oriented, with governments, it is multiple trades.

■ **Can you throw some light on your 'skills for global employability' vertical?**

It is not a separate vertical as yet. We believe that as we start producing more skilled people in India and as the prime minister has said - India will become the skill capital - we will have vast skilled resource. We hope to place many of them abroad to work in global environment. India services a large part of the West Asian market, besides several others. We are working on a project to understand what skills can be placed abroad and in which markets.

■ **How important is it to offer better skills at the school and college level, especially considering the fact that hardly one-fourth of the graduates are equipped to be readily employable?**

It is very, very critical. The national skills qualification framework (NSQF) by the government is a great initiative. Skills should be taught from a young age. Our education system is not focused on skills at all. If one does not have skills, one will not get employed anymore, unlike

in the past when a degree is what mattered to get employed. One may at the most get married now. Of course, that was due to the British framework that we followed, when enterprises were not so vibrant as they are now. Hence, it came from that background. It was good on one front, but we missed on skills. Under NSQF, vocational skills are offered to students from ninth class onwards and the objective is to enable a student to gather at least one skill of his choice. The same will be done in colleges too. These could include IT/ITES, sound engineering, automobiles, retail and hospitality. India is a country, where almost everyone goes to college. But, not all of them are employed, because they are not employable.

■ **What are the key learnings from Centum's global operations? What are the key takeaways from India?**

Our exposure in India made it easy for us in other countries. With India being multi-cultural and multi-lingual, it became easy, when we were to start operations in a new country. If we have done it in India, we can do it in other countries as well. For instance, Africa too is multicultural and multilingual and many of those countries are developing economies with a large population and with a colonial background like India. They also need enterprises and hence the focus is on skills. But, India is far ahead on several fronts. India moves very fast, while it takes longer for things to happen in the African markets.