

Proceedings of the West Bengal Forum meeting with the Vice Chancellor, West Bengal University of Technology

on April 27, 2005 at University Campus, Salt Lake, Kolkata

Background

The West Bengal Forum on Business Partnerships for Sustainable Development had as part of its Information & Communication Technology (ICT) Initiative, identified education as a key area for work in West Bengal. The Forum, through its Initiative, seeks to spur the private sector to play an active role in dealing with social responsibility issues that link directly with responsible entrepreneurship and ethical business in the ICT sector. At the opening brainstorming session of the ICT Initiative on October 16, 2004 in Kolkata, human resource issues were identified as the key area that needed attention in this sector. Simply put, the technical institutions in West Bengal were mainly focusing on technical education while readying the students for industry. The non-technical issues that are not generally taught but are essential for business – good communication skills with both clients and office superiors, sense of focus in the workplace and such other allied issues – are often regarded by institutes as non-priority. Most important, technical students are generally unaware about the importance of ethics in business, or the fact that a stable work environment is important for their own professional progress. Hence, these students mostly lack a holistic education, which is so important at a professional level as well as a broader social level.

The brainstorming meeting, organised by the Centre for Social Markets (CSM) as the initiator and secretariat of the Forum, was attended by the Principal Secretary of the Department of IT, Govt of West Bengal, CEOs and senior management from leading IT companies. This was succeeded by a 27 November 2005 meeting at the headquarters of SkyTECH Solutions Pvt Ltd, Kolkata. Both these meetings voted for an active involvement of the academia in the ICT Initiative, if human resource needs were to be addressed. A strong effort needed to be made to communicate the present inadequacies in the potential IT professionals. **A better orientation of these professionals towards ethical issues in business was the need of the hour - this could be achieved through a stronger academic-industry linkage, it was felt.** As a result, a meeting with the Vice Chancellor of the West Bengal University of Technology was in order, to seek his guidance and the collaboration of the University with the Forum and the private sector on how best to administer social responsibility education in the present learning environment.

Networking

CSM as initiator of the Forum met Prof Ashok Ranjan Thakur, Vice Chancellor, West Bengal University of Technology, to apprise him of the ICT Initiative and the helpful role that he, as the highest administrator of the institution could play in taking forward the educational initiative through his own University. Prof Thakur listened keenly and it was agreed that there would be a next meeting. CSM subsequently met Dr Subir Roy, State Informatics Officer, West Bengal State Unit of the National Informatics Centre, a distinguished and active member of the Forum who suggested a workshop format for interaction between the students and the corporate sector on practical issues affecting their professional activities. Here, WBUT could provide guidance precisely whom to address, and CSM would be the facilitator of the whole exercise. So a meeting was held on April 27, 2005 to take this issue forward by a discussion meeting between the Vice Chancellor and the members of the Forum.

Meeting

A meeting was held at the office of the Vice Chancellor, West Bengal University of Technology on April 27, 2005. Dr Gyan Gautama, Principal Secy, Dept of IT, Govt of West Bengal, was scheduled to attend, but could not do so due to emergency last minute meetings. He expressed his full support for the Forum's activity. The meeting was held with participation of the following:

Prof Ashok Ranjan Thakur, Vice Chancellor, West Bengal University of Technology

Dr Subir Roy, State Informatics Officer, West Bengal State Unit, NIC

Mr D K Chaudhuri, CEO, SkyTECH Solutions Pvt Ltd

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Ms Indu Khattar, General Manager, Kolkata Development Centre, Wipro Technologies
Mr Randiv Mehra, CSM
Dr Tapati Ghosh, CSM
Ms Dhruba Das Gupta, CSM

Proceedings

Forum proposal: Dr Subir Roy of National Informatics Centre (NIC) put forward the Forum's proposal that there be a series of workshops promoting an active interface between industry and students, where CSM as initiator of the Forum would be a facilitator. The workshops would focus on social responsibility issues that affect both industry and students.

Industry viewpoint: Ms Indu Khattar of Wipro articulated the industry viewpoint about the need for a more professional workforce that was not only technically sound, but also more attuned to the professional culture – not just trained in soft skills, but disciplined, well-spoken, sensitised to values like loyalty to the organisation - so that they do genuinely contribute to a cordial work atmosphere, balancing their ambitions with their duty to the organisation that they work in.

Attrition is a serious problem in the ICT industry today – for example, companies that invest in building students up professionally, see new recruits walk out after two months of joining work, thus putting paid to all the efforts to build up a consistent work environment. To counter this, a strong sense of professional ethics needs to be inculcated in the students right from the first semester of their technical training. Also, it was important to interact with the heads of institutions to impart this kind of training. The Forum expressed that reaching out to the colleges outside Kolkata was also a step that could be considered.

Academia viewpoint: As an academician and administrator, Dr Ashok Thakur stressed that the most effective way to reach the students was through the syllabus. Moves were now afoot to evolve a consensus syllabus that incorporated current developments in the ICT sector under the aegis of the IT Academic Council, and a good representation from industry was needed in that corporate representatives had to be actively involved in syllabus making. The involvement of industry needed to be stepped up, and the Forum could help in this.

In terms of soft skills, with the EDUSAT in place, training programmes had been devised with the involvement of the Computer Society of India (CSI) and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) – student counselling was done from the 3rd year onwards, for a select group of 50. Of course, this was inadequate. The University experience with soft skill training is that not all students have benefit from paid classroom courses that they have been taught so far. Doing this through an online system may be more beneficial for them.

To the industry observation that training was needed from the first year onwards and the core point here would not be soft skills but a more clear focus on how ethics was a fundamentally important aspect of their professional training, Dr Thakur pointed out three things.

(1) An academic discussion had been generated on how to devise a course called Science, Technology and Society, which dealt with broader issues of technology professionals contributing to society. This could be worked upon further, if the Forum so chose.

(2) Heads/ owners of private engineering colleges did have business interests in mind, and for training in real-life social responsibility issues, teachers in these colleges had to be addressed. These orientation courses could become part of the syllabus, which teachers had to compulsorily take. This kind of effort could be spread out, extending beyond Kolkata and roping in greater number of teachers. The University performance appraisal forms for colleges were being sent out – this time, this could include a column on how many industry representatives have visited the colleges, indicating that this was of a mandatory nature.

(3) Starting these orientation courses will involve a certain amount of finances, and this issue needs to be deliberated on.

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Consensus

The meeting reached a consensus that sitting with heads of institutions and with teachers were ideas that could be taken forward. This had to be worked on in close collaboration with and cooperation of the University, the Industry and the Forum, and further future meetings were necessary in this regard.

Way forward

CSM, as initiator of the Forum, has regular internal debates about the proceedings of the Forum. Our own internal consensus is that aiming orientation courses at teachers will be the most effective way of targeting students. Teachers are the most important tools available with us to remedy the present lack of professional as well as extra-professional orientation of the students. Therefore, the challenge now is two-fold:

- (1) To collaborate to develop practically-oriented course content to address teachers. Industry has to play an active role in this, together with participation from the Govt of West Bengal where possible, and involvement of experts in bodies like the NIC.
- (2) To target teachers outside Kolkata first, as it is they who are left out of the benefits of such practical training courses that are devised precisely to help all students across the board.
- (3) The courses have to be developed with a concrete timeline in mind.

Post meeting follow-up

There was a meeting on April 28 between CSM and Soumyajit Sanyal of the Best Group of Companies, who could help arrange teachers conclaves in North Bengal – specifically Malda and Siliguri – where the Forum could start its orientation courses. Mr Sanyal suggested that the Forum approach the Vice Chancellor to issue a circular notifying the initiation of such orientation courses, and a timeline for this needed to be drawn up and a plan of action put in place. This proposal will have to be approved by Forum members before it can go forward.

Also important will be the issue of how finances will be generated for these courses, and how much educational material will be involved.

Please send your comments on this report to:

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On the West Bengal Forum

The **West Bengal Forum on Business Partnerships for Sustainable Development** was initiated by the Centre for Social Markets – a U.K. and Kolkata based non-profit organization, in 2002. The Forum emerged from a Roundtable organized by CSM in April 2002 to promote networking and co-ordination among business, government agencies, civil society groups in West Bengal on issues related to corporate social responsibility and sustainable development.

The need for the Forum was evident. Many local businesses are already engaged in a variety of community development programmes and seek to perform to high standards of performance and corporate ethics. However, their work is not always known outside the workplace. Similarly, there are numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who are making a positive contribution to the life of West Bengal and its people. Many of the activities of these groups can be more effective in partnership with local business and government agencies. The Roundtable - which itself was a direct outcome of CSM's **1st Annual Conference on Corporate Citizenship** (Dec 2001, Kolkata) - was acknowledged as the first step in bringing these important actors into contact with one another and encourage partnerships for greater impact.

The West Bengal Forum's three-fold goals are to:

- Raise awareness of current initiatives regarding business and sustainable development;
- Promote information exchange, networking and mutual learning for greater impact;
- Provide a lasting forum for co-ordination, partnership development and promotion of best practice in West Bengal.

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