



The Toppers

A perfect workplace is a mirage alright. But some firms have people practices that are spot-on, mostly. BY RAHUL SACHITANAND, KUSHAN MITRA and T.V. MAHALINGAM

You can't be a seasonal best employer," says Pratik Kumar, Wipro's global HR Head. *Business Today's* study of *Best Companies to Work For* certainly reflects this. Seven of our top 10 companies from the 2010 listing have made it to the list of top ten for the second time since we overhauled the methodology of the survey last year. Not just the flavour of one season, some of these companies are winning over employees with their people practices.

There is, however, no such thing as a perfect workplace. All the companies — barring Microsoft that declined to be interviewed for this story — that have made a re-appearance in our ranking talk candidly about the challenges they face. But each has a unique chemistry at work that makes it a remarkable workplace for large numbers of employees.

Shooting straight to the top for the second consecutive year is Infosys Technologies despite the rollout of a contentious skill enhancement tool (it features for the seventh time in the ten surveys we have done since 2001). Says T.V. Mohandas Pai, the man who runs HR at the Bangalore-

based company, "We promoted over 8,000 people, the largest number in Infosys's history, but we also lost some 2,000 people because we did not effectively communicate our plans."

Infosys started the year poorly with its iRace competency development tool getting panned — and, according to several people, almost scrapped — because it increased the number of years between promotions. Among the most contentious moves that coincided with iRace was a mandatory clocking in of 9.5 hours a day in office and counting as leave the day an employee did not. The powers of reporting managers to waive such terms were also curtailed.

In fact, the company saw employee angst at the worst immediately after the 2009 *Best Companies to Work For* list was published.

Messages on the company's intranet sharply complained about the ranking taking little cognisance of the fact that the exercise was a perception-based survey of workers across India. Even today, Infosys is still going through the pain from a year ago: in the three months to

With the job market showing signs of only heating up further, the top decks at companies are busy ensuring that people, not business alone, get their attention

Infosys

No. of employees	127,779
Avg increment last year	14%
Rate of attrition	17.5%
Male, Female employee ratio	70:30

December, its attrition rate was 17.5 per cent, almost six percentage points more than the number of people the company lost in the year-ago quarter.

Pai says the problem was with the initial concept and the rollout a year later has been much smoother than expected. "We are getting much more adherence from employees and both this plan and our internal job postings are growing in popularity," he says. "Human resource is serious business ...not fun and games."

Pai's thoughts may not find an echo at Google's India offices. Nooglers, short for New Googlers, here are introduced to other Googlers at a local TGIF (Thank Google It's Friday) restaurant at an employee all-hands meeting held every Friday afternoon. Heads of various businesses welcome the newbies. The search giant's culture is unlike any corporate worldwide, and it is because of a highly communicative environment that fosters productivity and camaraderie. "We have nurtured a company spirit where it is all right — and even encouraged — to be quirky and a little irreverent," says a spokeswoman for its India operations.

The India office is a great place to see Google's "Forty Languages Initiative" at work, which is about the Internet company's ability to deliver all its products in 40 languages. The company actively encourages diversity, and well before consensual sex between members of the same sex was ruled legal in India, Google India had the "Gayglers" (reaching out to gay employees) initiative up and running. Google India follows the company's global policy.

Global is also the path for the employees of the company that has pipped Google to the second place in the ranking this year. Tata Consultancy Services, India's No. 1 software exporter and largest private sector employer, has not had it easy last year. Says Ajoy Mukherjee, its

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Global Head of HR: "The recession was far more severe than the dotcom bust... there were no increments, promotions and we started looking at performance metrics a lot more seriously."

To retain employees in these lean times and keep them motivated was a tough task for all employers, especially those in the competitive software business. Open and frequent communication and honouring offers made to freshers in colleges were key strategies. With companies such as TCS hiring some 50,000 people annually, this was a key differentiator, says Mukherjee.

The confidence posed in its young managers helped, too. When TCS wanted to replicate its feted work processes in Latin America, it turned to 35-year-old Latesh Sewani, a chartered accountant. A senior consultant and part of CEO N. Chandrasekaran's team, Sewani manages a 25-person group and has worked on large accounts such as ABN AMRO.

In his 11 years at TCS, Sewani has gone from being a fresh recruit to working in the CEO's office — something possible only at TCS, according to him. His years in Latin America exposed him to an all-new work culture, where decisions were openly questioned. "It was the most challenging assignment in my career," says Sewani. "People questioned processes that are standard practice in the rest of TCS."

IT All the Way

Expectedly, seven of the top 10 in this year's listing come from the information technology business and few are

surprised. Infosys' combative HR chief Pai contends that this is because the industry rewards its people well, provides transparent assessment of their skills and allows employees to often chart their own career paths. "The IT industry is people-focused and not feudal... it gives umpteen growth opportunities," he says.

The focus on training shows in fourth-ranked IBM's flexibility of employment. It allowed Anita Guha to take time off (after being recommended) for a Chevening scholarship and even return to her employer in a different role. She was the diversity leader at IBM India and transitioned to a train-the-trainer's role. "Flexibility of employment is a must in today's environment," says Guha. IBM, in fact, has select business leaders double up as people managers to handle the diverse people needs of its employees — numbering over 100,000 in India at last count. But HR managers at IBM India are firm they will not exceed their brief. "We have taken a firm call between caring and pampering our employees ... 2009 taught us some tough lessons," admits Chandrasekhar Sripada, the Head of HR for IBM India and South Asia, stationed in Bangalore.

Cross-town Indian rival, Wipro, which makes 75 per cent of its revenues from IT services, too, has innovative policies that keep employees on their toes. The company throws promising young leaders into the deep end and expects them to learn on the job. "Nine out of 10 times they will deliver," says Kumar, its glo-

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Google

No. of employees (approx.) : 2,000

No of people hired in 2009 (approx) : 300

Training in hrs per employee in a year : 60

Airtel

Number of employees (Approx as on Sep. 30, 2010)	15,000
No. of people hired (approx.)	2,500
Rate of attrition (As on Sep. 30, 2010)	12%
Training in hrs per employee in a year	35

Neha Idnani, a commerce graduate and an MBA in Finance, has spent the last four years at Bharti Airtel — first in Bangalore, then Delhi and then Colombo



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bal HR head, pointing to leaders such as Anurag Behar and T.K. Kurien, heading the Azim Premji Foundation and Wipro EcoEnergy respectively,) as examples of employees who have been given opportunities early in their careers at Wipro and prospered.

That doesn't mean old economy firms are falling off the charts. On this listing, infrastructure giant Larsen & Toubro, India's largest private sector lender ICICI Bank, and mobile phone services leader Bharti Airtel are all preferred employers. The phone company's executive director of HR, Krish Shankar, fairly relaxed in his new office, says employees are a happy lot and he has several requests from former employees who want to return.

In the middle of a conversation with *Business Today*, he waves out to Neha Idnani, Strategic Business Advisor, in the company's Sri Lankan unit. Idnani typifies the young, geographically mobile manager. A commerce graduate and an MBA in Finance, she has spent the last four years at Bharti Airtel — first in Bangalore, then Delhi and then Colombo.

"We make sure that all our employees do not just rotate from circle to circle but also from function to function. A person managing sales in Chennai should after some time manage marketing in Kolkata," Shankar says. "This is a deliberate policy not just to make our employees cross-functional but also aware about practices across India."

Idnani says she has loved the past four months spent at Colombo. "This is a country where Airtel is a start-up, we are taking the lessons we have learnt from our start-up rivals in India," she says. "This was an opportunity for me to develop my management and soft skills."

Much of the challenge for HR heads today is dealing with workers like Idnani: young, impatient and outwardly ambitious workforce. At Infosys, for example, the average age is 27 and employees are constantly on the lookout for new opportunities and — in a sign of the times — are willing to look beyond Infosys for this.

Simultaneously, the availability of more employment options only makes the job harder. For Bharti Airtel's Shankar, the biggest challenge is at the lowest rungs of the ladder, where attrition is high, particularly with 14 telecom operators feeding off the same talent pool. The likes of Facebook and Google top the list among new draws in IT making life harder for software firms. And, with the job market showing signs of only heating up further as business expands, the top decks at India's Best Companies to Work For are busy ensuring that their people, and not business alone, get their attention. After all, in the long war for talent, you cannot be a best employer for just one season. ♦

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