

Innovative hiring pays off

Says chief human resources officer of FMCG giant Unilever

SOHEL PARVEZ

EVERY year Unilever gets 1.8 million job applications from across the world, some 7,000 of them coming from one of the 190 countries the company has operations in, Bangladesh. The leading fast moving consumer goods company calls very few of the jobseekers for interviews. Prior to the one-to-one conversations, the company analyses the applicants' performance by engaging them in different games.

Each gets a chance to play 8-10 games. The two-minute games can be played anytime based on the convenience of the applicants.

"Based on that, using predictive analytics and some algorithms, we do first level of screening of who fits Unilever and who does not," said Leena Nair, chief human resources officer of Unilever.

"We look for qualities like resilience, ability to learn and change things. And it is all possible through games," she told The Daily Star in an interview in Dhaka.

Nair—the first female, the first Asian and the youngest ever chief HR officer of the company—came to Dhaka early July as part of her regular visits to countries where Unilever sells its products.

She is responsible for human capital of Unilever, having more than 160,000 employees across the world.

She discussed the hiring procedure, challenges of women, importance of continuous learning and re-skilling to keep pace with the ongoing

technological advancements.

Unilever has digitised its recruitment process to assess the skills of the entry level jobseekers, Nair said.

Following the gaming session, every applicant is encouraged to record a 30-minute video of oneself answering questions coming from a computer generated figure and upload it, she said.

Facial expressions of the applicants on the videos are analysed using advanced computing systems such as machine learning, she said.

"Based on analysis, we finalise who will go for the interviews."

The beauty is every single person is provided with a two-page report which depicts what qualities s/he has and what qualities they need to develop, she said.

Unilever's digital recruitment process has won 50 awards and was dubbed as "the best innovation in the world" on many forums.

Nair began her career as a management trainee with Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) in 1992.

She has many firsts to her credit, from being one of the first women managers to becoming the first woman on HUL's management committee and its youngest executive director.

She has also served Unilever as the global senior vice president for leadership and organisational development and global head of diversity and inclusion.

"Women should dream, dream big," said Nair, opining that in most cases, especially



Leena Nair

those involving women growing up in many parts of Asia, social conditioning blocks thoughts of being very ambitious.

Secondly, having confidence and the courage to handle difficult projects is also necessary, she said, citing that her first three assignments were in three factories. "And it was hard. It was not easy."

The grassroots jobs are very difficult and "that is how you learn about the business", Nair said.

She also stressed the need for having mentors and networking to navigate careers.

Shedding light on patriarchal

societies which bar women from working outside their homes, Nair said her journey to the current position had not been that smooth.

There was no school for girls in Kolhapur, a small town in the southern part of India where Nair grew up.

She was in the first batch in the first school that came up in the town famous for Kolhapuri Chappal, a type of hand-crafted sandal.

"I have also faced the same age-old challenges. My mother used to say, why are you studying so much? Who will marry you? Do not study so much," Nair focussed on getting

educated at first, she said. "I never discussed career." She suggested women should focus first on education.

"Once you have education, you will have some ways to find a career."

She also recommended people be "very careful" in deciding when the time is right to choose a partner for life.

"It is important to find a supportive life partner even if it takes some time and effort. This is another practical advice I would like to give people from our region, from our South Asian countries."

"And last but not the least have a little bit of a thick skin."

You know what happens, because we are trailblazer, people will say things. There will be people asking reasons behind your working. Does your husband not have a job?"

"There will be people saying you are women. Why are you working in a factory? So, be less sensitive about these comments and focus on the aim only," she said.

But once a person becomes successful, everybody becomes happy, she said.

"My mother is so proud now that she cannot stop telling the whole world. Many people discourage you because they do not know it is possible. But once you can show them it is possible, they will be encouraged."

She said female representation was 46 percent in Unilever and the goal was to reach a ratio of 50:50.

She said Unilever has taken various initiatives to reduce gender inequality.

At the same time, the company also works on the culture. Unilever has an initiative called un-stereotype where it educates all its employees internally and externally through educational workshops to help them come out of prejudices and assumptions about people.

"It lets people to think about what are the assumptions they hold about women and their careers, about how men should behave. So, we run this because people have unconscious biases."

She said Unilever has created a lot of flexible options so that women can work half time, part time or on projects.

The company has a facility called job sharing where two

women or two men can share jobs such as working half of the week.

"Paternity leave is also as important as maternity leave. So, we have announced a global paternity policy where everybody at Unilever gets three weeks off if they have a child."

She also wanted other employers in Bangladesh to go for innovative practices to ensure women come back to the workplace after having children.

"We cannot say women are problems, as they have children."

It is important for every industry to see how the jobs are going to change and see how they can re-skill people to do the new jobs, Nair said.

Citing expansion of e-commerce and online sales and marketing in European countries, she said companies in Bangladesh and India should train their front line sales people to understand what it takes to sell on the internet.

She recommended that the government and the private sector should work together to create maps to re-skill the workforce.

Nair was also upbeat about Bangladeshi youths. She said she had met many talented young minds who participated in Unilever's global programmes like Future Leaders League, a competition of teams from different countries.

"I have always been impressed by the teams that come from Bangladesh. I think you are really fortunate. You have good human capital, talented, bright who want to make a difference."

China's trade surplus with US swells in June



REUTERS/FILE

A general view of a container port in Shanghai.

AFP, Beijing

CHINA'S surplus with the United States hit a record last month, data showed Friday, adding to brewing tensions between the economic superpowers as they stand on the brink of an all-out trade war that Beijing warned would have a "negative impact" globally.

The figures come after the two sides exchanged tit-for-tat tariffs on billions of dollars worth of goods and US President Donald Trump threatened to up the ante with measures on a further \$200 billion of Chinese imports.

Beijing said China's surplus with the US hit an all-time high \$28.97 billion last month, while exports to the country hit a record \$42.62 billion.

Over the first six months of the year the surplus climbed to \$133.8 billion, up 13.8 percent from last year, as total two-way trade continued to expand despite the face-off. The imbalance is at the heart of Trump's anger at what he describes as Beijing's unfair trade practices that are hurting American companies and destroying jobs.

But in a statement from its commerce ministry Thursday, China blamed those problems on the US, saying the imbalance was "overestimated" and caused by America's own "domestic structural problems".

China's overall surplus continued to shrink, falling 24.5 percent on-year for the first six months, the data showed, with customs saying it has shrunk for the past eight quarters.

Last Friday, Trump rolled out 25 percent tariffs on \$34 billion of Chinese goods, prompting Beijing to accuse Washington of launching the "largest trade war" in the economic history and immediately match

the US tariffs dollar for dollar.

"This trade dispute will definitely have an impact on China-US trade and will have a very negative impact on global trade," said customs administration spokesman Huang Songping at a briefing Friday.

China's commerce ministry has said the two sides are not discussing restarting trade negotiations, and renewed its pledge to "strike back" against Washington's latest threat to slap \$200 billion of Chinese imports with new 10 percent taxes.

The threat hammered global markets, especially as fears mount that Trump's decision to pick fights with other key allies such as Canada and the European Union could fuel an all-out global trade war.

The spiralling battle with Beijing shows no signs of cooling down, and observers warn the impact will begin to hurt soon as China's economy struggles with slowing growth -- and just as leaders try to battle a worryingly large debt mountain.

"Looking ahead, export growth will cool in the coming months as US tariffs start to bite alongside a broader softening in global demand," said Julian Evans-Pritchard of Capital Economics.

Beijing will back away from its war on debt and roll out policy easing measures, predicted China economist at Nomura investment bank Ting Lu, as it faces potential trade war fallout and a domestic slowdown proving to be worse than expected.

"We expect (economic) growth to slow noticeably" in the second half of the year, he said in a research note.

China's total exports rose 11.3 percent year-on-year in June, beating a Bloomberg News forecast of 9.5 percent, while imports increased 14.1 percent, below the forecast 21.3 percent.

US banks see mixed profits, little trade war hit so far

AFP, New York

CLIENTS of giant US banks are increasingly nervous about growing trade tensions, but are not yet significantly curtailing business activity due to the uncertainty, banks said Friday after reporting mixed earnings.

JPMorgan Chase chief executive Jamie Dimon cautioned that "There are unpredictable outcomes when you start skirmishes like this with multiple countries."

"It's a worry," he told reporters in a conference call, but "I don't know if I'd use the word 'major' yet."

Citigroup chief financial officer John Gerspach agreed with his counterparts that the concerns are not yet driving business decisions.

"When you get into this kind of rhetoric, it does impact sentiment," he said. "It's going to slow down decision making in some cases, but that hasn't translated yet into anything we've seen."

The comments came as the two major US banks reported earnings that easily topped analyst expectations, in contrast to slumping Wells Fargo which badly underperformed forecasts.

The banks are among the first major companies to report results in what is expected to be a strong

second-quarter earnings season thanks to US tax cuts and a humming American economy.

However, a series of trade battles launched by US President Donald Trump against key trading partners, including China and the European Union, have clouded the overall business outlook.

Another worry particular to bank stocks is whether the benefits from higher Federal Reserve interest rates are ebbing. Higher interest rates boost bank profits by allowing them to charge more for loans. However, as rates continue to rise, banks also must pay more to depositors.

A note from S&P Global credit analyst Brendan Browne this week warned that the gains for banks from higher interest rates "are likely to diminish, because we expect deposit rates to rise more materially over the next year."

Banks will need to sweeten the incentives for depositors to compete with improved rates for certificates of deposit and money market mutual funds, Browne said in an interview.

JPMorgan, the biggest US bank by assets, reported an 18.3 percent surge in net income compared to the year-ago period to \$8.3 billion. Revenues came in at \$28.4 billion, up 6.5 percent.



REUTERS/FILE

A Citibank branch logo is seen in the financial district of San Francisco, California.

Highlights included increases in net interest income following two Fed rate hikes this year, and a rise in overall loans compared with the year-ago period, a sign of strengthening economic conditions.

Citigroup profits jumped 16 percent in the second quarter to \$4.5 billion due to overall loan growth and lower tax payments. Both main divisions, global consumer banking and institutional client services, had higher profits.

Revenues came in at \$18.5 billion, up two percent.

Gerspach said Citigroup has seen an uptick in activity within Asia that could pick up further if the US-China clash worsens.

"If it does emerge that there is some slowdown in trade between China and the US, what we are seeing is that there is growth in trade flows elsewhere in the world," he said. "In particular, we're seeing a lot of growth in trade flows just in the Asia corridor."

Citigroup has hired additional staff for China desks in India and South Korea, Gerspach said.

US lifts ban on suppliers selling to China's ZTE

REUTERS

THE US Department of Commerce on Friday lifted a ban on US companies selling goods to ZTE Corp, allowing China's second-largest telecommunications equipment maker to resume business.

The Commerce Department removed the ban shortly after ZTE deposited \$400 million in a US bank escrow account as part of a settlement reached last month. The settlement also included a \$1 billion penalty that ZTE paid to the US Treasury in June.

"The department will remain vigilant as we closely monitor ZTE's actions to ensure compliance with all US laws and regulations," Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said in a statement that described the terms of the deal as the strictest ever imposed in such a case.

The terms will allow the department to protect US national security, Ross said.

The administration has clashed with lawmakers from its own party over issues related to China, and this was no different. On Friday, Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican, criticized the lifting of the ban. "ZTE should be put out of business. There is no 'deal' with a state-directed company that the Chinese government and Communist Party uses to spy and steal from us where Americans come out winning," Rubio said in a statement.

A photograph circulating among employees around midnight showed ZTE's new chief executive and 10 other managers each giving a thumbs-up to the news, which was flashed on a screen at the company, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The reprieve follows threats by the Trump

administration this week to impose 10 percent tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese goods in a trade war. ZTE did not respond to requests for comment. ZTE, which relies on US components for its smart phones and networking gear, ceased major operations after the ban was ordered in April.

US President Donald Trump tweeted in May that he closed down ZTE and let it reopen, although no agreement had been reached. White House trade adviser Peter Navarro said last month Trump agreed to lift the ban as a goodwill gesture to Chinese President Xi Jinping. The company had made false statements about disciplining 35 employees involved with illegally shipping US-origin goods to Iran and North Korea, Commerce Department officials said. ZTE pleaded guilty last year over the sanctions violations.