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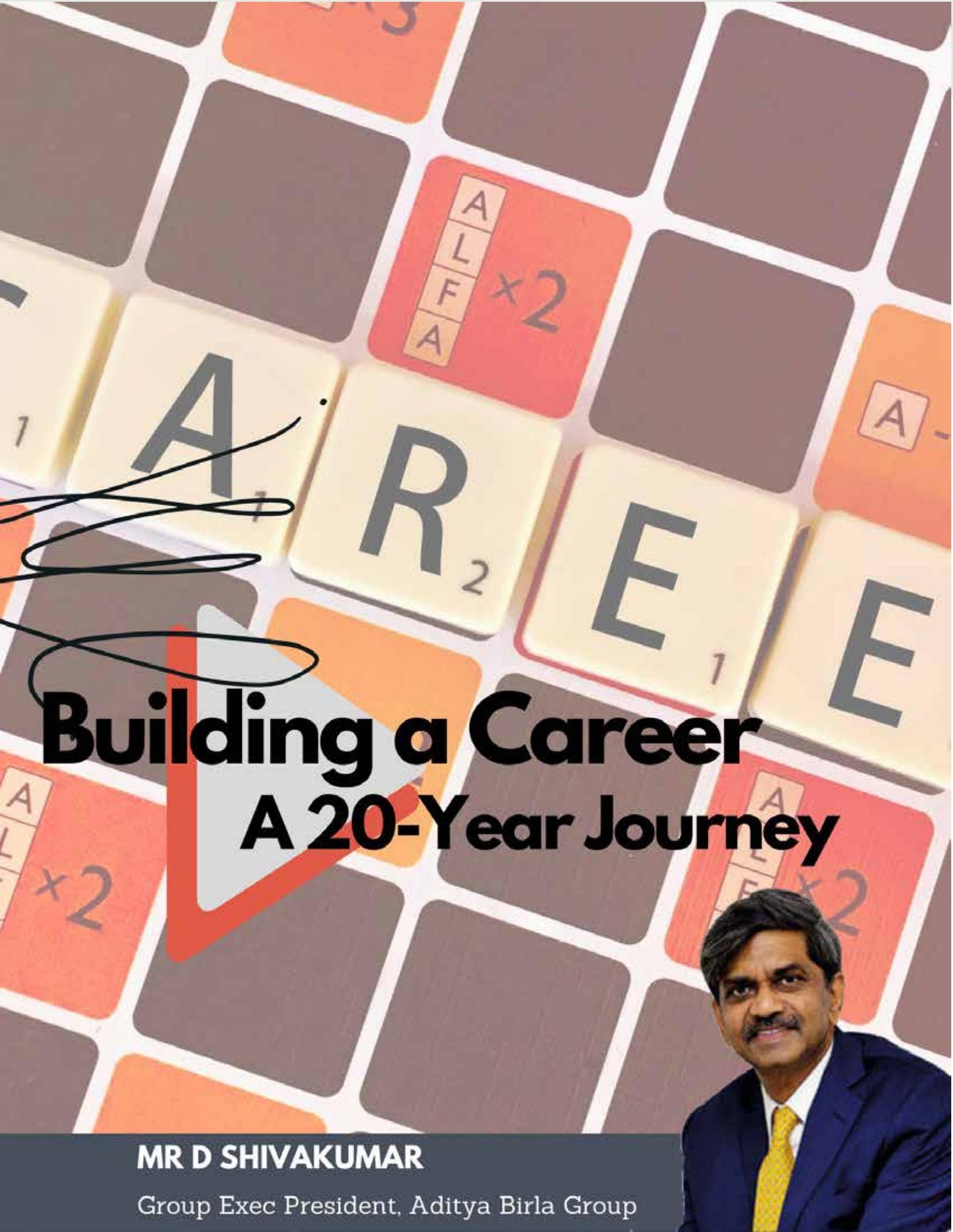
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Of Career, Empathy & Inclusion...

International panellists bring to light the dynamics at play in today's workplaces

*Wishing you a happy,
healthy 2021!*

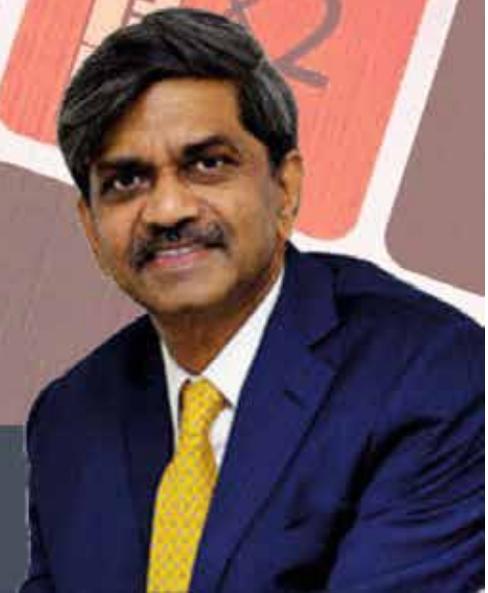
FOUNTAINHEAD OF EXCELLENCE



Building a Career
A 20-Year Journey

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In Brief

A career is not built overnight.

Mr D Shivakumar, Group Exec President, Aditya Birla Group, shares his insights on laying the foundation for a successful career, building on it, and managing it. Here's the transcript of his talk at the **19th MMA All-India Management Student Convention 2020**.

A career or work is very different from college. When you are in college, you have a theoretical base or conceptual knowledge. When you get to work, you have to be extremely practical. You have to forget what college life is and start work life as soon as soon as you get there. When you are in college, you can choose your subject, class, or topic that you want to study and the friends you want to hang out with. That's not true at work where you have to land up at 9:00 in the morning and finish at 5:30 in the evening. You must have respect for your colleagues and work closely with everyone.

In college, you have a lot of energy. You can bring the same energy to the

workplace, but it has to be subdued in the interest of the company. In college, you can stay late, do whatever you want and the next morning get up blurry eyed and do what you want. At workplace, that will not work. You must have a regular rhythm, do exercise and get good sleep so that you are absolutely fresh every morning when you come to work. When somebody takes you on board to work for them, you have to be an asset.

The Six Variables in a Job

When you want to join a company, the first decision you're going to make is the type of company that you choose. Invariably there are a few variables and I shall list six of them:

- 1) Salary the company is going to pay you.
- 2) Location of the workplace.
- 3) Designation the company is giving you.
- 4) Culture of the company.
- 5) The learning opportunity in the company. You may read about the company in digital media or through Glassdoor ratings.
- 6) Brand value of the company.

The most important things that you must always consider are the culture of the company, learning opportunities and brand value of the company.

Culture

You will never know from outside what the culture of a company is. It is extremely important for you to talk to



You have to ask yourself: What type of a company person am I? A large company person who likes structure, process and resources to deliver; or a small company person where I can try out and do many things and make an impact.

people who have worked in that company before and get from them a good analysis of the pros and cons. This is true at every level. When I joined Nokia as Managing Director, I spoke to at least 200 people in that ecosystem to figure out what Nokia does well and did not do well and about the capability of their people. I did the same exercise when I joined PepsiCo. So talk to as many people as possible and get a rough idea about the culture of the company and how it behaves.

Learning

Find out if the company is known for a learning environment. Will its managers and policies allow you to learn as much as you can? Since you come from a theoretical framework, when you start

work, your learning curve has to be very steep. You have to ask yourself, “If I work in this company for two years, can I get 10 years’ worth of experience from its managers and will it make me a rich-in-learning individual?”

Brand Value

The next thing is the brand value of the company. Combining this with the brand value of your Institute, you will start establishing your own brand value over a period of time, say 15 years or so.

There are small, medium and large companies. A lot of people ask me if they would get lost if they join a large company. Think about the resources in that company, the learning opportunities and culture of the company. A small company will stretch you but it may not have the same kind of resources that a large company can give you. You have to ask yourself: What type of a company person am I? A large company person who likes structure, process and resources to deliver; or a small company person where I can try out and do many things and make an impact. Make a choice depending on what suits you and then fit the company accordingly. Whatever is your favourite function, you must always join the company which is best known for that discipline. If you do that, you’ll have a fantastic fit.

Marketing was my passion when I started and then I moved to general

management. I went to Hindustan Lever in order to learn from the best practitioners of marketing in that company. As a first-time manager, there’ll be many things going on in your mind in terms of how you approach your work.

No Substitute for Hard Work

My first mantra is, ‘work hard.’ As many people have said, hard work never killed anyone but laziness killed a number of people. If you work hard, only bad luck can stop you, yet you learn a lot. When I was a management trainee in Hubli, my eco system consisted of my distributor which was Supreme Trading Company. Hari and Babu who were the owners of the company, after seeing me for a month, decided to invest in my learning because I worked hard; they went out of the way to teach me as much as they could about the market, retail outlets and product range.

When you work hard, you learn faster than anybody else. You also establish yourself as a professional. As you come with an MBA degree, people have certain expectations of you and they believe you will be significantly more professional. You should not benchmark based on the work ethic of other people around you but based on your very best level. You have to live up to your MBA degree and be an ambassador of your Institute.

Reputation is very fragile. Whatever



you do either adds to or subtracts from your reputation. A reputation built over ten years can go away in ten minutes. That's the tough life we lead today. If you work hard, you will earn a reputation of being a safe pair of hands, as somebody who can be trusted and delegated a task. Never let anybody tell you that you are intellectually or even physically lazy. The last thing about working hard is that you will get the right breaks. If you work hard, then which company will not want you? Which leader will not want you in his/her team? Everybody wants a conscientious professional. Right through your career, be it 25 or 40 years, there is no substitute for hard work.

How Do I Learn?

The second question many young people ask me is: Who will teach me? How will I learn? First, you need to teach yourself before you ask your boss or others to teach you. You must teach yourself by learning about your product, service, category, company and industry. Even before you join a company, go to the net and check everything about the company and the industry. That body of knowledge, even if you spend a week on that, will last you for more than two to three years.

When you start, it is quite likely that you will work with a bunch of people in your ecosystem. If you start in sales, you will work with customers and

retailers. If you start in finance, you will work with your suppliers. You can learn a lot by just talking to your ecosystem partners. You can understand how your industry and company work and that's a very good source of knowledge for you to build.

Be curious. Don't accept what's given to you. Learn to question in your own mind. Why does this happen in this company or industry? That's a question I have asked myself every day. Two years ago, Mr Birla asked me to run one part of the cement business. One of the things I noticed in the cement business was that they were different prices in different markets. I asked myself: Why can't the cement industry have one MRP

like how it is there in every other industry? We figured out a way and put the 'one-MRP' concept. They say curiosity killed the cat. It won't kill you but will actually get you kudos and make you intellectually richer.

Your peer group is a very good reference to learn from. Each of us has different skills and strengths. Go and seek out your peers and tell them what you like, your hobbies and interests and ask them what they are interested in.

Learn from your boss. The biggest advantage of having a boss is that he has experience. People have the highest energy when they are 25 and the maximum wisdom when they are 60. They have the right combination of energy and wisdom when they are about 42 and that's why, most CEOs tend to get their breaks around the 40-year age mark.

I got my career break as a CEO around that age. You must strive to condense the experience of your boss into the one or two years that you will work for him. Constantly, pepper him with questions. I asked one of my early bosses: What is a wholesale pack, what is a retail pack? Why do they exist? Why a store is called a general store or a fancy store? Why somebody is called a wholesaler? By just asking such questions out of curiosity, I could tap into the knowledge of my boss who had

more than 25 years' experience then.

How Long in a Company?

Most people ask me how long they should stay in a company. I have seen that 50% of MBAs from a batch tend to change their job in the first year. I have asked myself this deep question as to why this happens, having been on the board of IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Udaipur and XLRI. One of the reasons is that campus placement turns out to be a lottery. In placement, you're allowed two options. Your dream company might not come or even if your best company comes, may be you're out of form on that day and you don't get selected. It is like a T20 match. You've got 15 balls to score 30 or 40 runs. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it doesn't. That is why many MBAs tend to switch jobs in the first 12 months after picking something.

Assuming that you've got the right offer and you are in the right company, I would advocate a minimum of two to five years for you to stay in that company, as long as you're learning, the culture is good and the company has a reasonable brand value. When we start, each of us is nobody. It is the company's brand name on our shoulder that pulls us through.

Despite all the challenges you face, you must commit yourself to the company. If you commit, I promise you that what you lose on the curve, you will

more than make up on the straight. So don't be in a hurry to leave a company. Do a balance sheet exercise. What is this company good at? What is it offering me? What are the problems in this company, which I see as problems but might not really be problems? Do that analysis and just don't go by emotional things like not liking your title or office space. There may be a hundred reasons why you would want to leave a company but there are few good reasons as to why you must stay there.

When I was an area sales manager with Hindustan Lever, we had a tough year and all of us were on a cost-cutting spree. I was based in Chennai. I used to travel by bus to Vijayawada, a 420 km, back-breaking overnight journey. We did it because we loved the company. A lot of my classmates would be flying business class to Dubai or America, but that's their careers. I felt I had to contribute to the company through its tough times. When you commit to a company for a period of two to five years, you will definitely benefit a lot.

I'm sure you have a lot of dilemmas. I have finished writing a book titled, '**The Right Choice,**' which will be released in January. It is about '*managing 10 career dilemmas on the journey from being a Management Trainee to Managing Director.*' I will be absolutely happy to hear from you about how you felt after reading my book. ■

IN A DISRUPTIVE ENVIRONMENT AS WE HAVE NOW, HOW CAN WE PLAN OUR CAREER FOR A 10 YEAR SPAN OR MORE?

Individuals get disrupted faster than companies do. We have a concept of studying for 25 years, working for 25 years and retiring for 25 years. That was true in a world which was steady but is not valid any more. The average age of a company is now less than 20 years. The pace of change is dramatic and digital is leading that. We have a new management concept every 12 to 14 months. If we are not updated with the new knowledge, it is unlikely that we can ride the wave. So keep on learning and develop new skill sets. Today, access to knowledge is not a problem but attitude to knowledge is the problem.

WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT—DREAMING BIG OR TAKING ONE SMALL STEP AT A TIME?

There is nothing wrong in dreaming, but staying at the dream level will not help us. We have to do something about it. The long term is a series of short terms. Don't plan your career, rather prepare for it. What I mean by this is that some of us set artificial deadlines. One of my bosses said that he wanted to become Vice President by the time he turned 40. To chase that, he joined a small company. It was taken over by another company and he switched jobs. By the time he was 46, being in the small company circuit, no one picked him and he became a consultant. So don't set such artificial deadlines.

When I did MBA, I enjoyed Marketing and as a student, wrote to all the marketing professors like Philip Kotler and Peter Drucker and they would send me their articles. You have to prepare for being good at something. If you want to be a CEO, list out the skills needed for that position, rate your current skills, find out the gaps and work systematically on bridging the gaps. So prepare; don't just plan.

THEY SAY HARD WORK IS PASSÉ AND ONLY SMART WORK IS NEEDED. IS THIS A HEALTHY TREND?

Hard work is very important. Be sincere in whatever work you do. Taking short cuts may help you 20% of the time but if you stick to sincerity and hard work, it will help you 95% of the time. I have always been proud of working hard. The pride of working hard comes when you are committed to the company and its cause. So, find a place where you can be committed.

IS CAREER-MINDEDNESS AN INBORN QUALITY OR ACQUIRED OVER TIME?

Career-mindedness may have different meanings to different people. For some, it may be reaching the top position. For some, it may mean a decent salary that takes care of their needs and desires. For some, it may be a decent title, in a good company and being respected in the society. A major part of your career is contribution. A good career should include in its parts contribution to the company, society and institutions like MMA. Then you can have a holistic experience and people will look up to you as a thought leader.

When you face a rough patch, fall back on your emotional anchors...

WHAT MINDSET SHOULD WE DEVELOP TO OVERCOME HARDSHIPS IN CAREER?

No career can be a smooth journey. I have had many bumps including six or seven very bad years and many good years too in my career. If we take the analogy of journey by an aircraft, on the way, you will experience headwinds, tailwinds, crosswinds, air pockets and turbulence. Just because there is turbulence, we don't open the windows and jump out. In career too, not everything will go your way, despite you doing very well. As long as you are convinced that you have done the best possible in the circumstances, you should be fine. You have to find out from where you get the headwind. The best bosses give you tailwinds and encourage you to do more.

When you face a rough patch, fall back on your emotional anchors—it could be your parents, wife, friends, teachers and in some cases, your boss. Talk to them. They will give you a broader perspective and relieve your tension.

Develop confidence and resilience. Every storm passes. I once interviewed Ricky Ponting for CNBC when he toured India as the vice-captain of Australian team. He had a string of poor scores on the tour. I asked him how he coped with his failure. He replied that he spent the maximum time on the tour with two players who made the maximum scores for Australia—Adam Gilchrist and Mathew Hayden— as he could learn from them or their luck could rub-off on him. Even the best people, in any field, go through challenges. It is the choice of what they do when faced with challenges, which is more important.