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balancing engagement and innovation at bharat petroleum

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On January 9, 2015, in Mumbai, Kappagantula Padmakar welcomed hundreds of employees to an awards ceremony of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL). Padmakar was the general manager of human resources (HR) at BPCL—a global Fortune 500 company engaged in the refining and marketing of petroleum products. The awards function was the culmination of an internal competition called IDEAS—a competition that sought innovative ideas from employees.

In his welcome address, Padmakar stated that the purpose of the IDEAS competition was to “nurture, promote, and recognize ideas” within the company. He observed that over the years the number of participants had increased (see Exhibit 1), that cost-savings estimated by participants were significant (see Exhibit 2), and that BPCL had benefitted from an influx of new thinking and cross-functional collaboration.

Although Padmakar acknowledged the successes, he was aware of the challenges facing the competition. Participation seemed to be stagnating, quality of ideas was a concern, and enthusiasm was waning. Additionally, many people thought that winning ideas were not being adequately replicated across the company. This meant that BPCL was not reaping the full benefit that was being demonstrated in the competition. Padmakar wondered what might be done to revitalize IDEAS as a platform for innovation.

**BACKGROUND**

BPCL was founded in 1976 by the Indian government after it acquired Burmah Shell Refineries Ltd. in India. In those years, the Indian economy was heavily regulated, with several restrictions on private enterprise. The Indian petroleum industry, in particular, was dominated by three state-owned companies including BPCL. Then, in the early 1990s, the Indian government began to liberalize its economy. To ensure that the company sustained its competitive advantage, BPCL’s then chairman, Uppiliappan Sundararajan, initiated an organizational restructuring exercise. In order to encourage employee involvement in the restructuring, he introduced a process called visionary leadership and planning (VLP).

The VLP process involved workshops wherein employees, across levels, participated in creating the vision statement and business plans for BPCL. “The beauty of this process,” explained Sundararajan, “was that each one felt as if it were his or her own vision statement.” There was palpable excitement in the organization as employees, across levels, debated, brainstormed, and found ways to make things happen. For example, in 1998, the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh experienced a severe shortage of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Workers and management from a plant at Cherlapalli took the initiative to solve the problem. They located a piece of machinery that lay idle at another plant in Tuticorin, in the state of Tamil Nadu. They moved the machinery, repaired it, and started working an additional shift to increase production and supplies of LPG. The following year, BPCL achieved 27 per cent sales growth in the area, and the Cherlapalli plant became the company’s lowest-cost LPG bottling plant.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This new momentum clearly transformed BPCL into a powerhouse of ideas. But then, the leadership team faced a dilemma: how could the company store, disseminate, and replicate these ideas across the organization? BPCL’s information technology (IT) department provided a solution wherein a database was created and employees were encouraged to post and access information. In addition, an electronic newsletter was published to acknowledge and recognize innovative employee ideas. However, these attempts seemed inadequate to recognize and reward employees for their contributions. Separately, the HR team had initiated a suggestion-box scheme. Employees were encouraged to anonymously suggest improvements for the organization. However, this scheme did not ensure the implementation of ideas, and rewards for suggestions were not seen to be motivating enough.

Thus, the VLP process, the knowledge management technology, and the suggestion scheme generated a flood of ideas. The company then needed to channel those ideas while overcoming limitations of earlier efforts. BPCL’s leaders decided to initiate the IDEAS platform as an internal competition with wide-ranging expectations.

Sundararajan wanted IDEAS to foster intrinsic motivation, provide the freedom to think, enable cross-functional interaction, generate and implement ideas, and ensure adequate rewards for employees. Sumita Bose[[2]](#footnote-2) expected that IDEAS would increase dynamism in the organization and in turn help improve efficiencies and profits. She said, “We felt that we need to do something that would shake the company . . . to make an impact . . . [to] add to the bottom line of the company . . . so, we thought of IDEAS.”

According to George Paul,[[3]](#footnote-3) IDEAS helped align BPCL’s brand promise, business strategy, and organizational culture. BPCL’s brand promise was about “innovation, reliability, and caring.” Paul believed that IDEAS had the potential to generate “innovative products, services, business processes, and business models” and help BPCL achieve its strategy of differentiation. This view could be supported by an organizational culture where employees not only believed in the brand promise but also practiced it. Paul said, “How do you make the beliefs into a habit and the habit into a culture [?] . . . so that [was] the genesis of creating a platform like IDEAS.”

For this reason, in 2000, BPCL introduced IDEAS with the objective of nurturing, promoting, and recognizing ideas within the company.

**THE IDEAS COMPETITION** AND PROCESS

Being the brainchild of the company’s chairman, IDEAS found easy acceptability within the organization. The HR team was given the responsibility of designing and implementing the IDEAS competition. Emails were crafted and sent to employees, details were uploaded on the company’s intranet, and posters were displayed in company offices and plants. All these methods of communication were intended to institutionalize IDEAS as a contest, and convey its purpose, criteria, and award information to employees (see Exhibit 3).

One of the guiding principles of the competition was that ideas had no meaning unless they were implemented. Therefore, the following criteria were laid down for participation:

* Ideas should have been implemented during the previous financial year.
* Ideas should be about the development of new or better products, processes, or services. They could also be about doing things in a more environmentally friendly manner.
* Ideas should demonstrate financial benefits, improvement in processes, and reduction in cycle time or waste.

In order to maintain consistency across the organization, the HR department outlined a process through which entries were received, evaluated, and rewarded. The process involved the following three stages:

*Stage 1*: Participant submissions had to highlight the significance of the idea, the details of the process employed, and the financial benefits accrued. The entry could be submitted in English or any of the following Indian languages: Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Telugu, or Oriya. The purpose of allowing entries in regional languages was to encourage employees in BPCL’s non-management cadre who were not so well-versed in English to participate in the competition.

*Stage 2*: Submissions were screened by an internal jury of senior leaders (general managers and executive directors). Evaluations were based on parameters such as degree of creativity, feasibility of implementation, benefits accrued (financial and non-financial), potential for replicability, and overall impact. This screening served as a filter by which ideas would be shortlisted for the final presentation and evaluation.

*Stage 3*: The final round was held in Mumbai and attended by shortlisted employees from all over the country. Participants had to present their ideas before a panel of jury members comprising subject-matter experts, academicians, and senior leaders. The final round would culminate in the awards celebration, which had the glitz and glamour of a mega-event that employees aspired to be part of.

Typically, 10 awards would be presented at the annual IDEAS awards celebration. The best idea of the year, submitted by a team or individual, would receive the chairman’s trophy. In addition, some deserving ideas would receive a token of appreciation. Also, a special booklet would be printed that would showcase all the award-winning ideas and would be circulated across the company.

**Early Outcomes and Improvements**

Several entries from the first version of the IDEAS competition received external recognition. Participants won awards for “excellence in creativity and innovation” at India’s national petroleum management program.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Internally, BPCL’s HR department studied the outcomes of IDEAS 2000. That department found that an overwhelming number of entries—especially award-winning entries—were about technical innovations. For example, 11 of 12 awards were flagged as technical entries. The jury seemed to favour submissions that demonstrated tangible benefits. In order to increase participation from support functions and to ensure a greater focus on measurable outcomes, the following categories were introduced for IDEAS 2001: technical, process and system improvement, marketing and sales initiatives, and HR.

IDEAS 2000 demonstrated that substantial financial savings might be achieved by the organization. Consequently, cash awards were introduced to increase employee participation and derive more value from the competition. In 2001, the chairman’s award carried a prize of US$1,100[[5]](#footnote-5) plus a trophy. The first, second, and third prize winners were awarded about $400, $300, and $200, respectively. Over time, BPCL increased the prize monies to reflect the importance accorded to the competition. However, the increases were nominal, and when the prize was shared between members of a winning team, the monies per individual were not substantial.

With an 86 per cent increase in the number of entries (from 88 in 2000 to 164 in 2001), the HR department found it difficult to administer the competition in a centralized manner. Further, they expected that the number of submissions would continue to rise; consequently, shortlisting entries at an early stage seemed like a good idea. To address this need, regional rounds were introduced in 2002, making the competition more of a tournament.

Entries within each of BPCL’s four regions would be evaluated within the region itself. Each regional adjudication panel consisted of one internal and one external subject-matter expert. These regional rounds resulted in about 30 per cent of local submissions being shortlisted for the final round and enhanced the visibility of IDEAS at local levels. However, decentralizing the process increased logistical requirements and raised questions about whether regional panels were applying evaluation criteria uniformly. Consequently, BPCL eventually gave up the idea of a multi-stage tournament and reverted to the traditional format of a centralized competition.

Due to sustained review and experimentation, IDEAS continued to evolve and develop. In 2003, an online portal was introduced to manage greater numbers of entries and serve as an online repository of knowledge. Employees could use the portal to register new ideas, view and comment on other entries, and access information to replicate past ideas. Thus, the IDEAS portal served as a medium for spreading ideas and building a culture of innovation.

**New Version of IDEAS**

In many ways, IDEAS appeared to be a huge success; however, a degree of sluggishness seemed to have set in. Informal conversations and data from past competitions indicated three trends. First, some old ideas were being re-submitted, by the same or other participants, with minor changes in title or technical specifications. Second, support functions such as legal, finance, HR, and marketing had increasing difficulty coming up with radically new ideas year after year. Third, most submissions were being received just a few days before the deadline, indicating, perhaps, that innovation was topical and had not been sufficiently embedded in the organizational culture.

Therefore, the HR team wondered if the competition continued to serve its original purpose of nurturing, promoting, and recognizing new ideas. In particular, was the goal of nurturing new ideas being compromised by the criterion that ideas had to be implemented before they could be submitted? As Jayesh Shah[[6]](#footnote-6) remarked, “The condition was [that] unless you implement an idea, you can’t participate, even if you have a great idea . . . then, we thought of introducing three new categories.”

In 2008, BPCL’s HR team introduced a new version of IDEAS wherein entries could be submitted in three categories:

* *Creative Stroke*: This category was for ideas that had been implemented during the year. Entries in this category should have resulted in cost reduction or process improvement.
* *Mind’s Eye*: This category was for ideas that had not been implemented but had high potential for adding value to the organization.
* *Echo*: This category was created for successful ideas (from past competitions) that were replicated in a location other than that of their origin.[[7]](#footnote-7) Echo was meant to encourage the diffusion of innovative thinking that had already gone through the cycle of trial and experimentation.

The objective of introducing these categories was to make the IDEAS platform more vibrant while maximizing participation. The new categories seemed to yield dramatic results for BPCL. Employees began to collaborate across departmental boundaries in their efforts at innovation. For example, the following noteworthy entry surfaced in the Creative Stroke category.

It had so happened that the Indian army had constructed a strategic advance landing ground (ALG) for helicopter operations in the Khirmu hills of Arunachal Pradesh. This ALG required a safe and reliable refueling system. Given extreme weather and a difficult terrain, this was a daunting task. However, BPCL’s employees from the engineering and aviation teams worked together to design and construct a pioneering solution.

Another example was an entry in the Mind’s Eye category from the Piyala LPG plant located in Uttar Pradesh. The plant had a manual system of painting LPG cylinders. Typically, two workers applied primer and paint to the cylinders through a pneumatic, hand-operated spray gun. The working conditions were not particularly favourable. Because the workers had to operate in enclosed spaces for an extended period of time, they ran the risk of inhaling toxic fumes, leading to respiratory illnesses. The idea to solve this problem was to mount paint spray guns on the existing machinery and make minor technical adjustments that created a semi-automatic system at a reasonable cost.

Examples such as these indicated that participation in IDEAS resulted in employees feeling increasingly motivated and engaged in the company. One participant remarked: “I started contributing [to IDEAS] from 2008 onwards. . . . What attracts me more than awards is . . . it’s a place where we can showcase our talent and get an opportunity to rub shoulders with top management.”

**IDEAS SINCE 2010**

In 2010, IDEAS completed 10 years of its existence. By then, its value as an employee-engagement tool was fairly well established in the minds of the company’s leaders and employees. Dipti Sanzgiri, BPCL’s then executive director of HR, remarked, “IDEAS is a unique initiative saluting the innovative spirit of our people, of our organization. I’m sure that each year, together, we will take it to new heights.” However, in 2010, participation in IDEAS dropped by about 40 per cent. By this time, the members of the HR team that coordinated IDEAS had changed, and Sanzgiri and her team considered a range of new questions. Were employees viewing IDEAS as being owned, managed, and executed by the HR department alone? Were line managers taking enough responsibility to create an environment to nurture and implement ideas? Was participation in IDEAS being seen as just another item on the to-do list? Was the competition genuinely inspiring employees at the grassroots level, where innovation really mattered?

Exploring the questions above led Sanzgiri and her team to conceptualize and implement what was called the IDEAS station. This station was a physical space accessible to employees in each of BPCL’s locations. The station would have colour-coded sheets on which employees could write their ideas. Colleagues could build and support the ideas. One manager at each location was appointed as a liaison and was asked to facilitate the process at that location. The model of a traffic light was used to track ideas from generation to implementation. Upon successful implementation, an idea would be featured on the green sheet. Those that needed further work would appear on the amber sheet, and any ideas that did not seem promising would be moved to the red sheet.

The IDEAS station was expected to result in three main benefits. First, being a physical space in local offices, it was more likely that employees would associate IDEAS with being a local, everyday feature of working at BPCL. Second, the station might make IDEAS an ongoing process, rather than a once-a-year event. Third, because the station was accessible to all, it was hoped that employees would build on each other’s ideas; this, in turn, would enhance cross-functional collaboration.

Though the IDEAS station was launched with much fanfare and promise, the expected momentum did not happen. People were hesitant to post ideas publicly, and employees seemed concerned about losing credit for an idea that they thought was original to them. Some were reluctant to join teams involving others’ ideas. It was unclear who would be responsible for implementation. Others lost interest as they felt that the manager responsible had pre-judged the ideas as not having sufficient financial benefit. Sanzgiri was disappointed that the IDEAS station had not been successful. She remarked, “I should have realized that it involved a big change management process.” Shah added, “Things like this should be driven by top management. Secondly, communication did not happen adequately; people could not appreciate the value of the whole process, or maybe enough effort was not made to make them understand.”

Over the years, BPCL continued its efforts to improve IDEAS and celebrate its successes. In 2011, the award-winning ideas of former seasons were chronicled in a coffee-table book. The following year, IDEAS was expanded to include joint venture partners and a subsidiary company of BPCL. Branding was also recognized as an important pillar of communication and a logo was created for IDEAS. In 2013, a mascot named “Idee” was introduced to give a face and personality to the competition.

Yet, IDEAS participants, judges, and BPCL’s leadership raised some concerns. First, judges had observed that a few entries of former years were being repeated—either by the same teams after having made minor improvements, or by other teams who did not know of earlier submissions. Second, judges were somewhat skeptical about the savings claimed by participants. BPCL’s leaders felt that despite the Echo category, award-winning ideas were not being adequately diffused in the organization; as a result, the full potential of innovation was not being realized. Finally, there were questions about the scope of ideas submitted. Were those innovations that were carried out as part of an employee’s routine responsibilities—for which that employee was paid a salary and had a periodical performance appraisal—to be considered valid entries for IDEAS? Should those submissions that were beyond the scope of the employee’s duties not be accorded additional importance?

Amid the concerns and efforts to improve the competition, IDEAS also yielded unexpected positive outcomes. For example, IDEAS participants scored about 5 per cent higher than non-participants during BPCL’s 360-degree feedback (talent management) process in 2012 and 2014. Thus, not only had IDEAS survived for 15 years, it seemed to impact matters beyond employee engagement and innovation.

**WHAT NEXT?**

In July 2014, Padmakar was appointed as head of the HR department at BPCL. The awards night on January 9, 2015, was an opportunity for him to reflect on the future of IDEAS in the context of the broader issues facing the petroleum industry.

Three dramatic changes had been occurring in the global petroleum industry. First, the international price of crude oil had declined 50 per cent since October 2014. By January 2015, crude was available at about $50 per barrel. Second, the Indian government had stopped controlling the price of retail fuels. Third, the above two situations had resulted in the Indian fuels market becoming attractive to competition. Now, state-owned petroleum companies such as BPCL faced the prospect of losing market share to private companies such as Reliance Petroleum, Essar Oil, and Shell.

In this context, the need for innovation at BPCL was stronger than ever before. Yet in 2014, IDEAS participation fell by about 20 per cent. That year, some roles and members of the HR team also changed. As he took stock of the situation, Padmakar was aware that IDEAS was much appreciated in the organization. Winners, in particular, had been inspired and spoke highly of the impact of the competition. The leader of the team that received the IDEAS Echo award for 2013 had remarked, “Those who have gone and experienced IDEAS are now self-propelled, and this in turn has a rub-off effect on others. Now people don’t accept the status quo and [instead] try new ways.” One employee who had twice won the chairman’s award was of the view, “In research and development, each one of us is busy doing our own jobs. Some of our great works go unnoticed. But [due to] this platform, one gets recognition, and our hard work gets noticed by everyone. It motivates us to think differently and encourages us to put in extra efforts at work.”

However, BPCL’s leaders looked beyond apparent successes and asked deeper questions. Sanzgiri said, “It is a strong engine for reward and recognition, but a weaker engine for innovation . . . . it can become stronger if some other alchemy happens in the organization.” Padmakar wondered what that alchemy might be. He wanted hard data to determine the changes that could be made. Earlier, he had asked his team to analyze IDEAS’ historical data from a range of perspectives. They had sent him a summary of their findings (see Exhibits 4 to 8). Among other things, Padmakar was heartened to observe that, by 2014, participation in IDEAS was inversely correlated with employee attrition (see Exhibit 4). Padmakar saw two distinct possibilities to take IDEAS to the next level—focus on the competitive spirit of IDEAS such that employees wanted to participate, win, and gain recognition, or focus on reinforcing a culture of creativity such that employees collaborated, shared knowledge, and innovated without the expectation of awards.

EXHIBIT 1: NUMBER OF employees and participants

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Total number of employees | Number of IDEAS participants |
| 2008 | 14,040 | 132 |
| 2009 | 14,026 | 246 |
| 2010 | 13,983 | 141 |
| 2011 | 13,848 | 241 |
| 2012 | 13,365 | 450 |
| 2013 | 13,207 | 538 |
| 2014 | 13,213 | 423 |

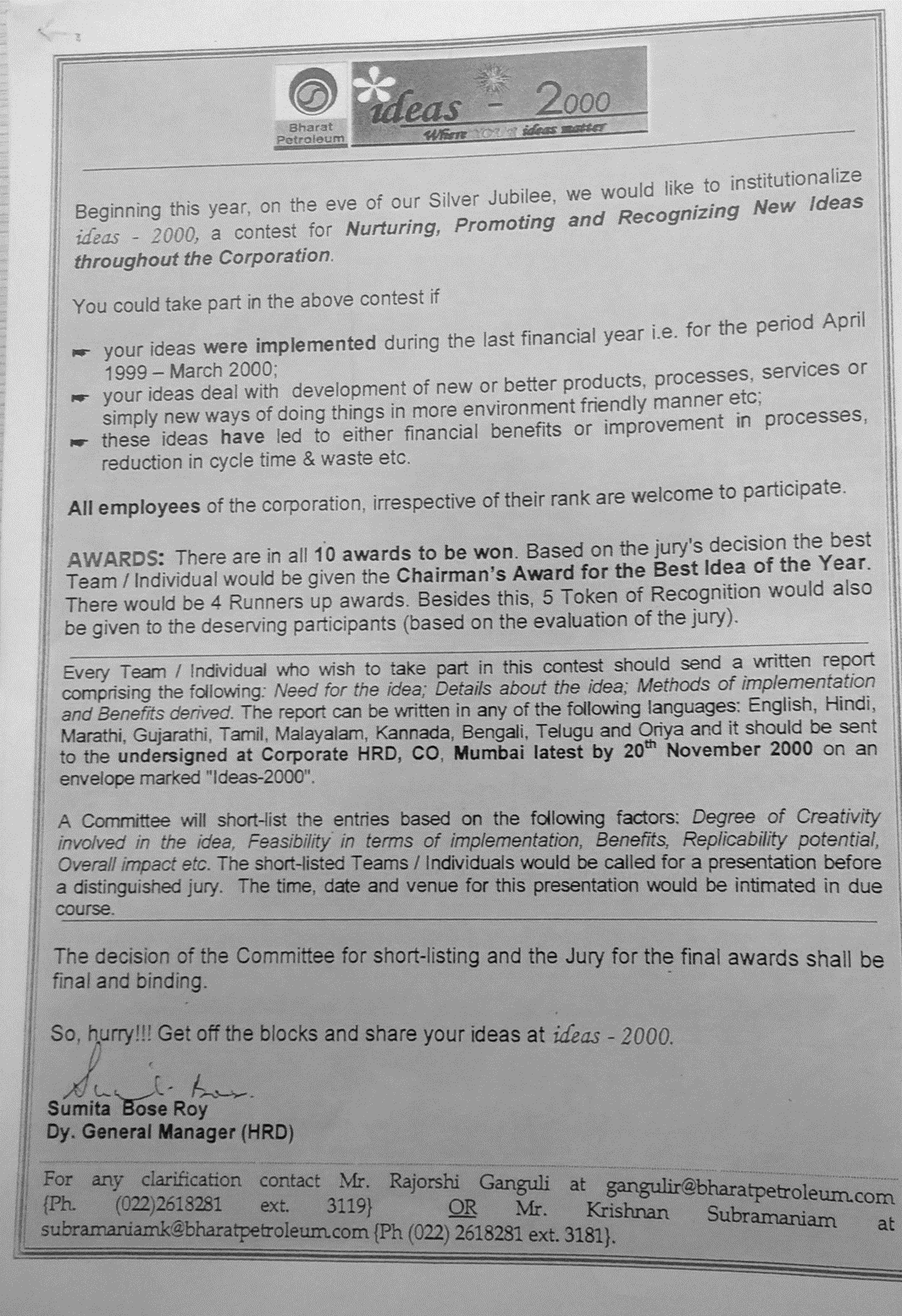
Source: Company information. The authors were unable to ascertain the accuracy and completeness of data for the years 2000–2007; therefore, those years have been excluded.

EXHIBIT 2: potential SAVINGS AS per IDEAS’s submissions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Year | **Amount (US$ millions)** | **Year-on-year increase (%)** |
| 2005 | 1.71 | Data not available |
| 2006 | 1.19 | −30 |
| 2007 | 7.14 | 500 |
| 2008 | 3.49 | −51 |
| 2009 | 12.05 | 245 |
| 2010 | 2.81 | −77 |
| 2011 | 33.46 | 1,088 |
| 2012 | 11.41 | −66 |
| 2013 | 19.04 | 67 |
| 2014 | 2.45 | −87 |
| Total | 94.75 |  |

Source: Company information.

EXHIBIT 3: FIRST communication about the LAUNCH OF IDEAS



Source: Internal company document.

EXHIBIT 4: EMPLOYEE ATTRITION (%)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Category | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Participants | 6.12 | 6.43 | 4.17 | 4.01 | 2.23 | 0.47 |
| Non-participants | 0.87 | 1.06 | 1.05 | 1.08 | 1.13 | 1.18 |

Source: Company information.

EXHIBIT 5: PARTICIPATION AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL EMPLOYEES by AGE GROUP

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age group | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| 21–25 | 1.68 | 3.76 | 1.61 | 5.55 | 11.83 | 12.23 | 7.92 |
| 26–30 | 2.65 | 3.87 | 2.82 | 3.52 | 7.26 | 9.10 | 7.50 |
| 31–35 | 1.45 | 2.61 | 1.60 | 3.54 | 7.45 | 7.93 | 7.21 |
| 36–40 | 1.69 | 2.81 | 1.82 | 3.29 | 4.87 | 6.89 | 4.72 |
| 41–45 | 1.09 | 1.29 | 1.01 | 2.00 | 3.57 | 4.59 | 3.44 |
| 46–50 | 0.31 | 1.53 | 0.73 | 1.07 | 2.07 | 2.44 | 2.33 |
| 51–55 | 0.34 | 0.88 | 0.27 | 0.42 | 1.34 | 1.77 | 1.35 |
| 56–60 | 0.00 | 0.22 | 0.36 | 0.56 | 0.59 | 1.11 | 0.68 |

Source: Company information.

EXHIBIT 6: PARTICIPATION AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL EMPLOYEES BY GENDER

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Gender | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Male | 0.99 | 1.81 | 1.07 | 1.79 | 3.48 | 4.13 | 3.24 |
| Female | 0.34 | 1.19 | 0.34 | 1.25 | 2.14 | 3.49 | 2.85 |

Source: Company information.

EXHIBIT 7: CADRE-WISE participaTION AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Cadre | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Clerical (staff) | 3.79 | 0.41 | 2.84 | 1.66 | 2.44 | 3.72 | 2.84 |
| Labour (workers) | 11.36 | 5.28 | 9.93 | 11.20 | 4.44 | 5.58 | 4.96 |
| Management | 84.85 | 94.31 | 87.23 | 87.14 | 93.11 | 90.71 | 92.20 |

Source: Company information.

EXHIBIT 8: PARTICIPATION AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL empoyees in business units

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Business unit | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Aviation | 0.74 | 0.00 | 1.11 | 2.58 | 3.69 | 8.49 | 4.80 |
| Support functions | 2.84 | 1.39 | 0.93 | 1.56 | 2.09 | 2.90 | 2.95 |
| Industrial & commercial | 3.54 | 2.02 | 0.51 | 3.03 | 0.00 | 4.55 | 0.00 |
| Refinery A | 2.14 | 1.83 | 1.25 | 1.88 | 2.92 | 3.91 | 3.34 |
| Liquefied petroleum gas | 6.17 | 4.42 | 1.86 | 4.06 | 8.03 | 8.98 | 4.82 |
| Lubricants | 2.76 | 1.92 | 0.24 | 0.84 | 2.28 | 2.76 | 3.12 |
| Refinery B | 1.55 | 1.20 | 1.02 | 1.38 | 2.26 | 2.72 | 1.91 |
| Retail | 2.32 | 0.93 | 0.64 | 0.93 | 2.88 | 3.60 | 3.46 |
| **Company (average)** | **2.76** | **1.71** | **0.95** | **1.78** | **3.36** | **4.24** | **3.20** |

Source: Company information.

1. This incident was narrated by P. K. Raghunathan, who was BPCL’s territory manager at Cherlapalli in 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sumita Bose was the general manager of BPCL’s HR department in 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2000, George Paul was chief manager of the LPG business of BPCL. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The national petroleum management program was a pan-India learning network for addressing the strategic needs of the petroleum industry. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. All currency amounts are in US$ unless otherwise specified. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In 2015, Jayesh Shah was the general manager of HR for BPCL’s retail business. He had been a key decision maker for IDEAS in earlier years. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These submissions would be evaluated only at regional levels and would not be presented at the finals in the corporate office. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)