

A Bright Chapter

India has made remarkable strides in the e-learning space by catering to economies across the world including the US, the UK, Europe, and Australia. Pegged at US\$ 2 billion and expected to reach US\$ 5.7 billion by 2020, the sector's growth has been triggered by the country's IT prowess.

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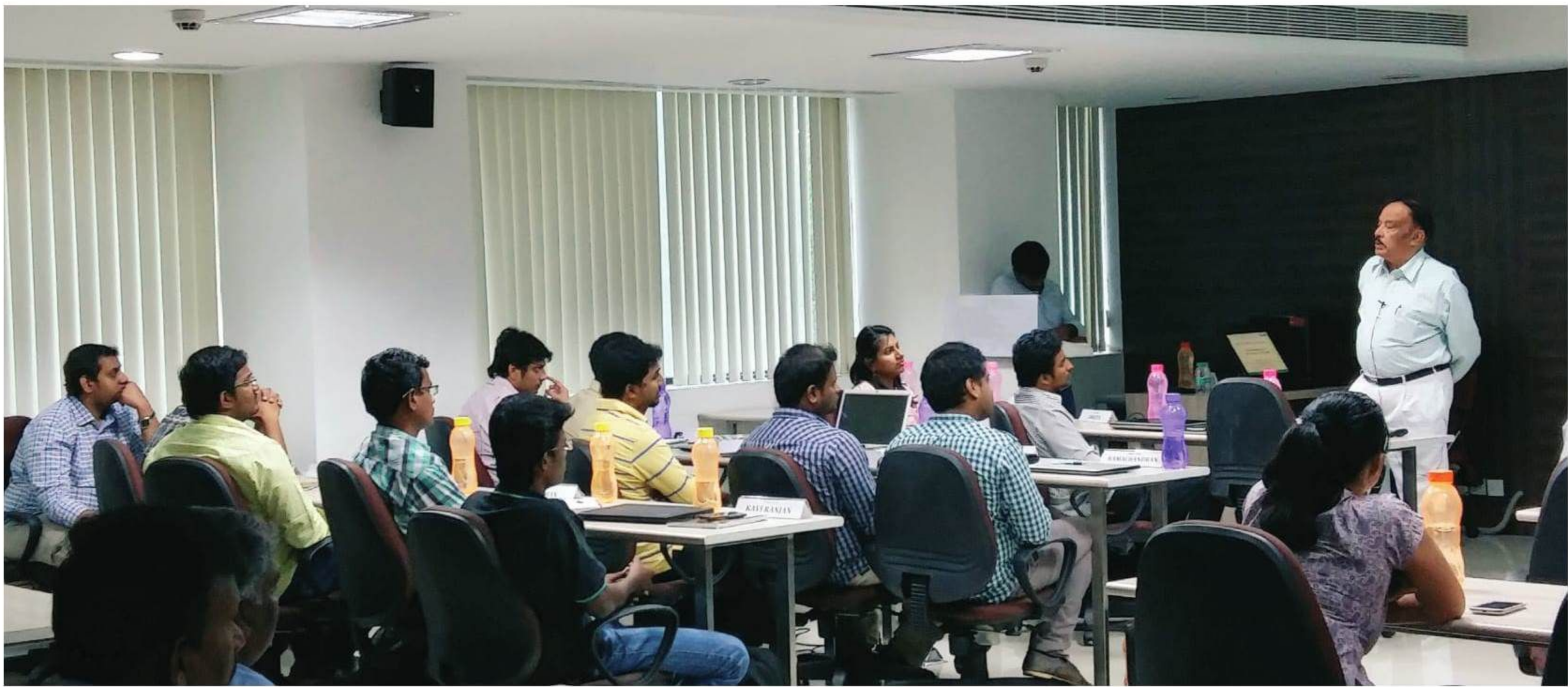
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India is a land of opportunities. Cliché? I know. But this is an excellent way to begin an article that highlights the bright future that India has at least for the next ten years, ahead of its competition and as a strategic player in the new world order!

Let me put this in context. India is not a capital-intensive country—it has traditionally been labour intensive. When I say labour, I mean that we as a people are hard-working, conscientious, loyal, resourceful, and enterprising. We are also a highly intellectual lot who have, through generations, been taught that to have the knowledge is to be at the top of the food chain, so to speak. I like to call this a case in point of constrained optimisation. Back in the day, when money was scarce, this rule of thumb is what guided parents to make economic decisions keeping in mind the education of their wards as the highest priority. To be erudite and to excel in academics was always the goal. The reason was that they believed that education and knowledge were supreme and the key to success in the days to come. The education system too, by extension, crammed all manner of information into the spongy, curious, and sizeable brains of the school going population. The early grounding that the students received in subjects like Maths and Statistics remains unparalleled in the world even to this day, and it is because of this that Indians have been able to prove their superiority in the world of IT which, as you know, deals with ones and zeros, logic, analytical thinking, algebra, data interpretation, etc. So much so that the term 'Indian techie' is synonymous with the best in the business, not unlike Swiss chocolate or German engineering.

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Fast forward to circa 1995. With the advent of the internet, 'Indian techies' found themselves in even more demand than ever before. The big five IT companies in India made their millions by providing IT solutions to companies all over the world (they continue to do so even today). IT has truly awakened the beast in business—it has changed the very fabric of the way the industry functions and has significantly impacted global trade and economy. So, it should not come as a surprise to know that the education industry is in the throes of a revolution spearheaded by IT. E-learning, as it is called today, is the ability of technology to enable people from any part of the world to access educational resources in any discipline and learn from any professor in the world. The millennials are good at getting bored very quickly and running off in search of adventure. To this specific demographic, one set of tools and skills is not enough. They do not want to work for the same company (or even stay in the same industry) for more than four years. Their quest for 'doing the new' is as thrilling as it is demanding. They are quite happy to even take a break from work, to pursue their studies in other areas of interest, and are driven to excel in their chosen tasks. Free market economics and customer-centricity dictate that we give the market what it needs and today, what the higher



education sector needs is scalable and affordable education that can be offered as blended modules or even entirely over the air/internet.

This is precisely where India's opportunity lies—our commitment to learning and education coupled with our prowess in IT provides us with the pioneering advantage in the field. Do not get me wrong here—it is not going to be a piece of cake to get to the top of this industry and stay there—the Chinese are every bit as adept and fundamentally strong as we are—the only thing that works here in our favour, presently, is their lack of English language expertise. This is a gap that will soon be narrowed. Vietnam, Ireland, and Israel will also prove worthy opponents. Predicting the next competitor will be tricky—newer apps, technologies, and ideas will burgeon. We operate in a world where the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) variables are maximum.

But where is the fun, without the competition? Gen Z who will enter the work force shortly is even smarter than millennials. Design thinking, innovation, and disruptive thinking are happening faster than ever before and continuous learning, retooling, and engaging in a continuing relationship with colleges, at least once every five years, is now the norm in order to stay relevant. Therefore, this is a need that is actively being fulfilled by MOOC (massive online open courses) that aims at unlimited and open enrolment of students from anywhere in the world seeking to gain knowledge/expertise in any area. Leaders like MIT have already

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endorsed this by making available their course material and lectures online. Stanford and Yale have gone the same way through Coursera where online content created by them is available free of cost, for anyone looking to scale-up their skillset. Great Lakes Institute of Management in India has also started implemented blended programmes with their proprietary CHOOCE option (Customized, Hybrid, Open Online Courses with Evaluation). Going forward, prestigious schools all over the world will also include an evaluation module with their online education offerings that will allow students to take tests and secure valid, authentic certifications from them without having attended even a single contact session.

Bricks and mortar colleges will still continue to have their place in the overall education landscape for the simple reason that contact instruction and

providing placement opportunities are still important variables in play. Further, the traditional mode of education will always be in demand as the way to hone the fundamental understanding of subject matter and cultivate interpersonal competencies. However, the numbers are likely to be very less since companies are keen to hire talent and not 'certificates' vetted by prestigious regulators. As it is, in India, we have been witnessing widespread consolidation in the education space with a reduction in the number of engineering and management colleges. It falls to the individual institutes therefore to assess their offerings, tinker with them, upgrade their faculty pool, design and deliver new programmes in response to the growing demand, offer specialised courses, experiment with duration, certification, and mode of delivery, include cultural variables and attempt to internalise value-based education, etc. As far as regulations and government control are concerned, e-learning is still in its early stages. There is much that is unknown about how it will evolve and the regulators will have to keep an eye on the progress and design policies and procedures to standardise the segment across the board without killing the spirit of the method.

Overall, a peek into the future shows that there is much to await—unmanned cargo planes, convergence of mobility, IoT, 3D printing, driverless cabs, artificial

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intelligence, square pumpkins, and so much more. I am tempted to quote my favorite example of the Indian *jugaad*, where the fisherman and his young son set out one starry night on a fishing expedition. The motor is a second-hand one, once a part of an automobile and tinkered to suit the catamaran they own. The son uses his smartphone and gathers information about the weather, currents, and the best shoal of fish. They haul their catch off to the best market on the coast—which they navigate with the help of GPS (which also allows them to avoid international boundaries and troubled waters) and by morning, they return home—the fisherman with his pocket full of cash and his son heads to school as he would on any normal day.

The world is a veritable treasure trove of possibilities and from where I am looking, India is squarely in the driver's seat. The core competencies are already there; the marketing has been done with the brand of the Indian techie at an all-time high; the price is right; and therefore, the time is 'now'. ■

