

When asked how, as an engineer by training and profession, he approaches the complex task of managing people, motivating them, retaining them and getting good work out of them, Ruchir Godura replies: "The way you've put it makes it sound like a grind and a bore but it's not. I love that part of the job. I realised a long time ago that I prefer working with people than with machines or tools. So it's not a chore for me at all."

He says there is nothing recherche about his approach to people management. It's simple. "It's my job to get good people on board, help them be productive, give them the tools they need and help them build their careers."

Like many managers, he has realised that money is not the primary motivating force in human beings. It is recognition. As well as being paid well, people need to have their hard work and achievements recognised and appreciated in such a way that they can move on to even greater things. Do UTStarcom bosses in New Jersey appreciate the work of their country manager in India? "Well, I'm still here, aren't I?" he laughs.

Godura came back to India in 2001 to set up operations for the US-based UTStarcom, which provides telecom network equipment. He had joined the company in 1996 in the New Jersey office where he was head of their global customer support division before coming to set up shop in Gurgaon and tackle the Indian market. UTStarcom's arrival was rather late as compared with its competitors — Ericsson, Lucent, Alcatel — but in retrospect, Godura believes the timing was good. "There was a global recession on and the big telecom equipment companies were struggling a bit. The Indian market was good and we offered a good value proposition and innovative products that met our customers' needs."

In just four years, Godura has established UTStarcom as a major supplier of telecom network infrastructure to companies such as BSNL, MTNL and private basic service operators in India. It is a leading provider of fixed line and broadband infrastructure and has a staff of 200. Godura was also instrumental in setting up UTStarcom's global R&D centre in Gurgaon in early 2002. The centre focuses on the customisation and localisation of products for the Indian market.

The initial period, though, was not so easy. Someone less confident and aggressive than Godura could easily have been daunted by the task of arriving in a country where the big boys had been long established. "At first, we had to go around introducing ourselves. We were an

unknown brand. But we made an effort to get operators to try out our products. It helped that our competitors and their products were expensive. Once we'd got our first couple of orders — the first was from Hughes Telecom — we began to establish our reputation. Then we got a big order from BSNL in 1999 and there's been no looking back," he says..

It also helped that UTStarcom had plenty of experience of working in emerging markets such as China where it was used to building products from the "ground up" and tailoring them to customers' specific needs. Godura has learnt that with emerging markets such as China and India, the pace of change is so fast that changes in technology are happening even as networks are being rolled out.

Now, of course, the challenges are different. "We no longer have to prove ourselves. If we can offer our customers the right product at the right price, we can sell them. What we're focusing on now is growing our relationships. Our customers want innovative products and end-to-end solutions and so the size of our portfolio is growing as are the expectations of our customers. So we're looking at growth now."

Returning to India was not an easy decision. His wife Anna — they met at Delaware University — had never lived here and they were happily settled with their young daughter Annika in New Jersey. But the professional opportunity being offered to him was too good and exciting to miss. It was a chance to build a business from scratch.

Nor has the decision proved to be a mistake. The family — enlarged by the birth of a son, Ashwin — are happy in Gurgaon. Anna enjoys the abundant domestic help available in India and for Godura too, things such as commuting are so much easier. The office is a mere five-minute drive from home. The shrinking of distances has been a great boon to their social lives. "In New Jersey, most of our friends lived at least an hour's drive away. Here, nearly all our friends are a short walk or drive away and that's great. It means we can socialise a lot with family and friends."

Godura was born in the small steel town of Durgapur in West Bengal where his father worked as an engineer at the local steel plant — the biggest employer. It was a classic, small-town, middle-class, upbringing with a frugal lifestyle and a heavy emphasis on hard work and values. He went to the local school — St Xavier's — and then to St Xavier's boarding school in Kolkata when he was 16.

Durgapur provided a perfect environment for a young child; it was stable, safe, and secure. He still has friends dating back to when he was two years old. It was also a harmonious and cohesive society.

Most people knew one another, most lived similar lives and earned similar incomes. "There were no distractions — no drugs or alcohol — and no television either for a large part of my childhood. So we had great fun playing games, reading or going to the local club for sports," says Godura.

By the age of 16, however, a small town can become claustrophobic for a young man and so when it was time to leave for Kolkata, he welcomed the move. Since the family was full of engineers, his parents were keen for him to become a doctor. However, since he showed no aptitude for the subjects he needed for medicine, he decided on engineering. "If you're not going to become a doctor, you'd better get into a good engineering college!" his parents urged him.

He became a local hero — the subject of much excited talk in Durgapur — when he won a place at IIT, Delhi in 1988 where he read computer science and engineering. "The first time I took Anna to Durgapur, some of the people we met still remembered that I had done well enough to get into IIT, Delhi," he says.

After finishing his B.Tech. degree, he managed to get financial aid from the University of Delaware for a Ph.D. Two years through the Ph.D., he realised it was not for him. He was itching to work and earn. The two years were enough to get him an MS degree and then he joined AT&T in New Jersey as an assistant engineer, designing software systems.

In 1996, he joined UTStarcom as a systems engineer but soon moved into product management and later to customer support. Although the company's biggest market outside the US was China, Godura was put in charge of Global Customer Support for all the company's customers outside China. That meant a massive amount of travelling — "I'm still using up the air miles I accumulated then." After a while, it became tiring and undesirable, particularly after Annika arrived on the scene, and he wanted to spend more time with her.

From travelling the world to living in Gurgaon, it's been quite a dramatic lifestyle change for him but one that he has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy. He has been particularly surprised at how India has changed while he was away. The red tape is still there, the roads are full of potholes, the infrastructure is poor and decision-making in state-run companies and in government departments is still slow. But the work culture has undoubtedly changed for the better.

"It's very professional now. In terms of quality of people, I could be anywhere in the world. I see this as the major change of the past 10 years. People here now benchmark themselves, in terms of quality and productivity, against international standards. The whole mindset has changed," he says.

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