One of Tejinder Kalra's defining traits is the compulsion to throw himself outside his comfort zone. That's one reason why he left Nokia in 2016 to join Indus Towers after 13 deeply satisfying and enriching years of learning and growing as a professional.

He was very happy at Nokia. He was handling Bharti's global account in India and Africa. He had scaled up the account and had a good team. But the chance to push himself to learn about a totally different aspect of the industry was irresistible.

As Indus Towers' chief operating officer (COO), his earlier experience on the active side of the networks has helped him understand how a tower company needs to evolve its solutions and embrace innovations to meet the needs of operators.

After two years, there is still a lot for him to learn and keep evolving. "What has changed in the past two years is the market environment. There has been too much turbulence with this consolidation – we started with 12 operators and are down to four now – and that too in a tearing hurry. Network demand has grown multi-fold, the technology is moving from voice to data, and the speed of all this change has thrown up enough challenges and opportunities alike," he says.

The exciting thing for Kalra is that these challenges are also throwing up a lot of opportunities. Companies like Indus Towers have to scale up to support operators to transform their networks; infrastructure is playing a big role in what the operators are trying to do; and he needs to stay ahead of the curve, particularly in terms of new site solutions, fiberising the sites and small cells, etc.

The need for more innovative tower designs with a smaller footprint is the need of the hour as real estate is becoming expensive, especially in key cities. Luckily, technology and material have allowed us to be more innovative with tower structures.

Talking about aesthetics, another new trend is of towers being camouflaged so that they merge with the landscape or the city's architecture. The idea is to make the poles as unobtrusive as possible, tucked away as part of bus shelters or as part of a city's "street furniture".

“Sometimes, it is a classic dilemma for us. Everyone wants good service. Everyone complains about dropped calls. But no one wants towers. So we have to be innovative, either camouflage them or, as we have done for the smart city project at Vadodara, erect a gazebo around them so that people can come and use it as a Wi-Fi hotspot,” he says.

Moreover, one of Indus’ key goals is to become zero diesel by 2021. The company is reducing its dependence on diesel generators as the primary power source and has significantly brought down carbon emissions. Diesel consumption has been slashed by 50 per cent in the last five years. Solar and storage solutions are being used as long-term power solutions.

Kalra is a communications engineer from the Thapar Institute of Engineering & Technology. He also has an executive diploma in international business from the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade. His 26 years in the telecom and telecom services industry began after graduating, when he joined an EPABX manufacturing company in Mohali.

Very soon, he realised that he was not cut out for a factory environment. He wanted to be out selling. After working in system testing for a company in Chandigarh for two years, he moved to Delhi to work with telecom company Sprint RPG. Here, his job was selling mainly to enterprise customers.

After a spell with Sify and Reliance Communications, he moved to the vendor side. “I wanted to know how you make deals, sell equipment. So I joined Siemens (later Nokia) in 2003, where I found the work culture fantastic, with lots of freedom but allied to accountability. This was a critical learning period for me. I developed two to three big new customers for them, I set up networks, I created a team from scratch and built it into a business worth half a billion Euros and honed my management skills.”

One of the things he learnt early as a manager was that his job was to hire people better than himself. “I have never had a problem with that. If I am to move on in my career, my team has to be so good, so competent and capable that it makes me redundant in a few years. That way, the company’s business does not suffer because of my departure,” he says.

His last job at Nokia was as global head for Bharti’s business. He was a pivotal part of Nokia’s growth story and managed the end-to-end profit and loss ownership for Nokia’s business with

Airtel globally. At Nokia, Kalra gained vast experience in strategy development, implementation and service delivery across geographies.

Perhaps his most extraordinary assignment was his posting in Nairobi after Airtel acquired Zain's Africa business for $10.7 billion in 2010. The business was spread across 17 countries. It was his job to go to Nairobi and get the ball rolling in terms of setting up Nokia's Airtel operations in Africa initially as account director and eventually as the sub-region head for central, eastern and western Africa. "I went because it had become too much like 'business as usual' in Delhi. I knew it would be a challenge," he says.

That is putting it mildly. Handling 17 countries meant virtually living on planes. The telecom networks were much smaller there. He had to manage the commercial and economic risks.

But the beauty of Nairobi, the temperate climate and the friendliness of its people enchanted him. So did the immensely multicultural environment provided by the city, both for himself, his wife Reena and their son and daughter. "The city has about 80 different nationalities because there are a lot of UN offices and international aid NGOs. My children had great exposure, and turned out to be open-minded and cosmopolitan," he says.

"It was a definitive assignment for me on many levels. It's where I grew as a professional and as an individual. My confidence soared because if you can work effectively in Africa, you can handle anything."

After four years in Nairobi, he returned to Delhi and started handling the Bharti global account.

Ever eager to add more arrows in his quiver, he recently completed a course in executive coaching from a Canadian university, albeit conducted in New Delhi.

Kalra describes himself as a family man and a private person. Reena, he says, has been a rock and he owes her a lot for holding the family together while he pursued his career. When at home, he tries not to be distracted by work.

As to the future contours of his career, he said he has no idea where it will go. He has not even thought about it. “I am happy here. I have a lot to learn still and there are so many new initiatives and opportunities like the Smart Cities Mission and Digital India, for which I have to gear up the company.”

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