

HR insights podcast

Series 9 | Episode 6

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Talent, culture and leadership, getting India right

Stuart Elliott (00:23)

Hi everyone, my name's Stuart Elliott and I will be your host today on HR Insights. Today we want to talk about all things India, particularly I suppose the cultural differences and how that can shape how we work, communication differences that we see culturally and how we lead down in India. Globally, I'd say that it's become a very important location, not only for us as a business bank, but think increasingly for global organisations. And it's one that we get more and more questions on.

So today we are joined by Keith Pritchard, a chief people officer with more than 20 years experience who has lived, worked and breathed in India. Welcome to the show.

Keith Pritchard (01:00)

Thanks, Stuart. Thanks for having me. Yeah, I'm looking forward to talking about India again.

Stuart Elliott (01:05)

Me too, but before we do, like, do want to give our audience a little intro into you and your background?

Keith Pritchard (01:10)

Yeah, as you said, I've probably got 20 years plus, which probably equates to the reason why there's gray hair. We've all got that now. So I've spent probably within those 20, 25 years, a real mix. I've spent time leading in people function in a variety of companies from financial services to big data, to consulting services, to more recently to an engineering tech background.

But within those 20 years and more recently in the last, I would say the last 10 years, I've spent a combination of roles in my most recent employer as a corporate strategy leader, but also a chief of staff and chief of staff role was relocating and living in India with my family. We'll talk about that in more detail. yeah, within the roles I have spent a variety across different countries, different cultures, different natures of the business. And we'll talk about the uniqueness of India, think. But outside of work, I have a family. We were talking about our dogs. I live vicariously through my daughter. She's an athlete. She's a horse runner. And she's the one that I'm living now through. Outside of that, I like to travel. And that was the real beauty of living in India. had the ability to travel to sort of adjacent countries.

Keith Pritchard (02:36)

also like to box. So I do a bit of boxing. Very cool. so that was a COVID thing. Okay. So COVID, wake up call to, to realise that, you know, as much as we were all wearing masks, I also should have probably got myself. But I've always loved the sport and, you know, a group of us play Monday night football. So it's really about living through that midlife crisis now. So, so that's the thing. So,

Stuart Elliott (02:41)

Has that always been a thing or is that more...

Keith Pritchard (03:03)

But that's really about me.

Stuart Elliott (03:06)

Very nice. You do well to keep playing football. I found after a little while that my hamstrings just couldn't handle it anymore. It was a bit too much on the hamstrings.

Keith Pritchard (03:17)

The tactic is to stay still and try not to move too much.

Stuart Elliott (03:21)

Very cool. Obviously we're here to talk about all things India. Do you want to give us, I suppose, an overview of who you were working for and how the move to India sort of happened for you?

Keith Pritchard (03:32)

Yeah. And so for the last 10 years, I was working for a company called Cyient, very household name, probably in India, quite a reputable name and company. The organisation in a nutshell is an engineering and technology company. So if you've ever flown in the aeroplane, we pretty much designed the aerospace engineer for it. Everything from the engines through to the cabin infrastructure.

We're also involved in fiber technology. So Wi-Fi connectivity and as such around the UK and the US marketplace. But they also have a presence of doing semi-conducting and design led manufacturing. a through and through engineering tech company, working with some of the largest Fortune 500 companies in the world. And in that time, I spent 10 years with that organisation. They're headquartered in Hyderabad, India. They had about 18,000 people around the world, probably about 10,000 in India.

Across five or six different locations across India, which we'll talk about. But really a company that's been very acquisitive over the years and kind of grown in organically a large proportion of their time. It's a real changing environment, really interesting company. you know, it was the first Indian company I'd ever worked for. It was actually the reason why I joined them. Because I'd never worked for an Indian headquarter company before. I'd worked for Japanese, worked for American, I worked for European, UK. It was a real opportunity to see things from a different lens.

Stuart Elliott (05:02)

Yeah, and increasingly I think that's something that's going to happen more and more? I think as India grows, we're going to see more and more companies from India that are going to be located globally. But how did that move come up? it is a slightly unusual one. I don't see too many people saying, putting their hand up from London and going, put me in India for a couple of years.

Keith Pritchard (05:15)

Yeah, I realised that after about two days of moving to India, when people used to say to me, what are you doing here? Why are you here? Why have you come to India? Why aren't you going to the US? Why aren't you going to Singapore? I had to explain to them that India was, you know, the center of growth. You know, the reality, if you look at India, both from a populist perspective, you know, it's 1.4 billion people. It was the largest and most populated country in the world.

You know, that... that in itself coming from the UK was just mind blowing. And if you've ever travelled to India, you can see that in action. But it was also an opportunity, quite honestly, off the back of being a corporate strategy leader. I had the phone call that said, would you consider moving to India?

You know, and that for some, like, I'm not sure about that. But for me, India was the most stamped place on my passport. In fact, I had to get another passport just because it'd been stamped so many times at Hyderabad airport, you know? And, so I said, well, look, yeah, I'm up for that. So it was an opportunity in my view, twofold. Really one was to take on a, I believe a sort of enterprise wide leadership role. Yeah. That was outside of what I was doing in the past, both in terms of a people or strategy role, but also the second one was an opportunity for my family to see, a different side of the world, different set of cultures, different value systems, different ways of thinking.

Um, and so that was a big decision, you know, it was moving myself, my family, my wife, my daughter, about two dogs. Yeah. So it was a full, complete move and it was working as a chief of staff to the executive vice chairman and the managing director in a lot of Western companies that would be a CEO of that organisation. And this was a business that been around for best part of 33 years. No one, I was the first Westerner to ever move that way.

Stuart Elliott (07:15)

I was going to say, it's interesting to hear that because as I said, I don't see that move very often.

Keith Pritchard (07:20)

No, because I think people have an increasingly different view of India. And I would say that India is a shock to the system for some. It's a cultural kind of explosion in your face. In my view, it's the sort of beauty that hides behind the chaos, right? The reality is we've talked about the airport visits and things like that. Once you see what it really has to offer, it's a very unique and beautiful country. The people are... phenomenal, know, the service, the, I guess the humbleness of some of these people are just unbelievable. You know, I was drawn to that.

You know, I loved India for my business travel, but I would say, you know, quarterly business trips just don't equate to living and working in a house. But it was a challenge. I'd always loved the challenge in my career. I'd always gone to companies that were going through transformation and quite honestly, you know, getting the opportunity to work with that executive team. You know, that could have been a job of chief of staff or being a very administrative role.

People could have said, well, you're just going to manage the diary of this person. And I was very clear. I said, well, look, you know, this is the role it's going to look like. They didn't call it a chief of staff at the start. I said, it needs to be called the chief of staff. You have to have a position and a place, but also the impact. So these are the things that we're going to work on. It was a real opportunity to help.

And you see it from a different lens. That was the real thing for me. It was the opportunity to see it from an investor lens, from a kind of customer lens, but also organisationally, how do we operate? How can we influence from the most senior level in the organisation to drive change, drive a new culture, and bring real value to the company that not everybody is feeling today?

That was a real opportunity and I was very grateful for that. I'm hoping I'm not the last, I'm sure I won't be.

Stuart Elliott (09:19)

Yeah, I'm sure it will happen. How did your family take it? When you sort of said this is what we're going to do?

Keith Pritchard (09:24)

How did that go down? So, yeah, it's an interesting one. So, mean, my wife and my daughter were very up for it, which was really good. You know, so they were open to the opportunity of going out there. I told my parents, you know, I'm old enough now, my parents, they said, great, go and do it. Then we

got, my wife's family together and told them that we going to India. And I think they misheard what I said. I said, no, we're going to India. And there was just deathly silence. Right.

I think you underestimate the impact of taking somebody out of a family kind of ecosystem and moving them to the other side of the world. And the reality was that some of them are not going to visit all the time. So you're going to be away so that you are walking away from a family circle in the hope that something will be more beneficial, but you'll always stay in contact. And my family came and visited and things, but it's a big decision. but people would say, well, what about your daughter?

You know, how is she going to survive out in India? The only thing you have to worry about children, if you're thinking of relocating, I think the reality is as long as the, organisation is, is open to doing certain things. think, you know, my daughter just went to an international school and it was, you know, wasn't a sort of Americanised school. It was an Indian school. was, you know, uh, she was the only Westerner there. if I thought I was at my comfort zone, was 30,000 other students who look

Stuart Elliott (10:49)

Yeah

Keith Pritchard (10:51)

You know, she came from a different place and she just adapted. it's been, honestly, it's been the best thing ever. The ability to come back to the UK, be far more resilient, be aware of cultural norms, be aware of the sensitivities, be, I would think, gracious, more caring, you know, because it's a country that is a very poor country in reality, you know, but if you're, know, get to that level where a child eight years old can see the real beauty of the country, I think is an amazing thing. it was really twofold. For me, from a career perspective, it was an opportunity to work with people that I'd worked before, but in a different capacity and hopefully gain a lot of different experience. But for family, it was just enriching.

Stuart Elliott (11:40)

Yeah, that's amazing. Like I said, a lot of people don't do that. you were based in Hyderabad. I suppose for our audience a little bit, because Hyderabad is a newer location, shall we say, in terms of the fact that it's, the way it's been built, it's newer than say Bangalore or Delhi or Mumbai, shall we say. Is that the headquarters? Is that where they're based?

Keith Pritchard (12:04)

There's a founding family who set the company up a few years ago around a sort of dinner table. And it's always been there, but it's operated now in multiple locations, Mumbai, Bangalore, Pune, Delhi, other places. So it's operated across those and expanded across those regions. But Hyderabad is the sort of South Central of India. The population is about 14 to 15 million people. You compare that to Mumbai and Delhi, it's relatively small.

Infrastructure wise, know, I joined the company back in 2016. It was just, the city was just full of rocks. It's renowned for being quite a rocky city, but those rocks are now gone. You know, this is a, it's really a competition now between Hyderabad and Bangalore, probably for tech talent. I would say that Hyderabad will win that battle because it has the ability to expand. It has a, an infrastructure that I think would be, better proposition, you know, from, if you're a child in India, the traffic in Bangalore is, it's a law unto himself. Hyderabad is a bit more fluid in terms of how it moves and, but there's some major companies there. Major companies. Yes. And that's that, that can only benefit the city to some extent, I would say in terms of growing talent and building capability.

Stuart Elliott (13:23)

Yeah. And I have to say, that's one thing when I go there, I do, when I talk to people, a lot of them will say to me, a lot of cities now are being built around infrastructure. And that's what they, that's the advantage a lot of them have now against a sort of Pune or Bangalore. Cause the one thing I have to say, Bangalore has all the sexy names of companies, shall we say? Like, so we talk about the Googles of the world and the Goldman's of the world are down there. But the one thing everyone says to me about Bangalore is the traffic. And the traffic is awful. Just getting around can take hours if it rains one day.

Keith Pritchard (13:57)

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And I think that's the, again, sort of beauty of India. I think everybody knows that that's a challenge, but people will live with that challenge, right? And I think the reality for India is to sustain that now, sustain that presence with those larger multinational companies, the touch of the Googles of this world and others. And the reality is, you know, until competition comes from other parts of the world, and that infrastructure can be adopted in other parts of the world. India has that competitive advantage. I would say historically renowned for being a real cost arbitrage place. Probably not so much now. We've talked about it, but it's more about capability arbitrage. would say that India is now building capability for companies to move there. It's not always going to be a cosplay. I don't think it is because we'll probably come onto it, but the reality is...

Salaries are increasingly going up in India. are. And that would always be a competition, but I think the value and the skill sets of people in India have only, I've seen a huge uplift in that. In the 10 years that I had been working for an Indian company, the reality of having multinational companies coming there, setting up, putting those principles in together, the standard or the capability of people has increasingly gone up to match those emerging markets probably.

So, I think it is a unique place that companies will really look at from a capability as opposed to a cost. Yeah. Because I think that that's got to be the play, you know, we'll probably come onto the evolution of these GCCs or the global capability centers. think that in itself is just another.

Stuart Elliott (15:43)

On the world isn't it? Do Western companies understand the pace of change in India? If they look at that, are they sort of relating very heavily to that or are they sort of still unaware of how quickly India is changing?

Keith Pritchard (15:59)

Yeah, I think there's still a naivety in that respect. think people potentially see India through a yesterday's lens, you know, being this place where there's so many people, so much talent available. It must be easy to set up there. It must be, you know, straightforward to do it. you, why, would you struggle when you've got that talent availability there? I think the reality is that India moves at such a pace.

For me personally, I found it far more advanced than the UK in many respects, you whether that was the use of WhatsApp. You can't do anything without WhatsApp. You add banking, everything, everything. And so if you don't have a WhatsApp account, you might as well just stay in your house, you know. But the healthcare system, incredible. Educational system, incredible. The pace of change, I think, is really reflective of the fact that India is now seeing itself as this competitive advantage. are, you know, they, both the governments, the businesses out there are pushing the capability piece that we talked about.

So I think, yeah, Western companies have historically seen it as a, an opportunity to, to base themselves, maybe expand in scale there, use local talent, but it's, it's no longer, as we've talked

about a cosplay, it's really about where do they build the future skilling because the future skilling out there moves at a faster pace, both at an academic level to a commercial level. To me, the stark differences I see of companies that work out there is that we're very collegiate in a Western environment. We're very collaborative to coming to a decision, whether I, you know, having worked with boards, there's a sense that we'll all collectively take a decision and maybe the most senior person will take the decision. And my time and having only worked...

In one Indian national company, but work with a variety of other companies as part of my Chief of staff role. The reality is decisions get done quicker in India. Like the decision to execute, there's no tolerance for just waiting around, let's go, let's go. And we've talked about everybody has got an ability to sell or be very entrepreneurial. The pace of change is that we can't wait another week for this to happen. It really has to move quick. And I think that comes with the culture of really pushing forward for change and wanting to have a level of betterment, I would say. I would say Western companies are becoming increasingly reliant on India. Will they ever truly understand it? I don't know. Maybe they will. Maybe they won't. But that's the unique thing. I don't think that has to be understood. think

Stuart Elliott (18:42)

I agree with that. would say India now reminds me of China 25 years ago. There's a real similarity between the two and you're starting to see the maturity of the market come through a little bit. You talked about salaries earlier on. You're starting to see a little bit of that where at the upper echelons of salaries, they're high. They're not as cheap as they used to be. But there is still an abundance of people, which is probably where you do get that cost saving as it were.

What do most global, what do most globalizations, I suppose, misunderstand the most about the Indian Tali Market?

Keith Pritchard (19:19)

Yeah, think there's, I think the biggest misunderstanding I would say is that talent is readily available. If you look at talent, yes, there is talent. Of course there is, you know, there's something approximately 8 million people graduate every year in India. Less than 10 % of them end up in the job that they studied for.

If you look at that 10%, you know, how many are going to actually travel internationally to gain a different experience, know, social, classing and everything will prohibit that to some extent and the affordability. But I think companies need to understand that some of the academic institutions and those educational environments in India are now becoming even more world-class. know, India has an ability now to build its talent.

To me, the reality is India has done a very smart thing of building the future AI tech engineers. They're not waiting for someone to go into a company and learn that skill. They're actually practically working into the educational system. They're building that next wave of talent. They prioritise that group of people. So they'll be readily available talent, whereas maybe in a Western environment, they'll go and study that, learn it, come back. The real gap is not so much.

The misunderstanding is that there's loads of people to hire. Yes, there is a very junior end, I would say that sort of entry position level. The gap and the challenge I see is really at that leadership gap. Okay. Um, because, you know, from what I've seen and what I witnessed, think the people have grown up in companies and are staying by long times in companies and they're, they're seeing that as an opportunity to grow themselves. But the reality is they haven't gained international experience.

They haven't really moved around. Yeah. Unlike, you know, the, I would say the, Gen Z environment in, India, will be fluid in terms of their career. They're not going to have a defined career path anymore.

That doesn't exist in, in parts of that world. It's really about moving. So I think the gap is really how do they build that next wave of leaders? And you see some of the best leaders in the world coming from India and now running some of the major companies around the world. It's because they've gone and done something different. They've gone out there and actually some of them are coming back to grow.

Yeah. So I think that's the risk for India. Yeah. They export a lot of talent. Now it's really about, you know, they got to really build their own talent, I would say, to secure that.

Stuart Elliott (21:54)

And that makes sense. When it comes to, I suppose, culture clashes between, I suppose, Western colleagues and I suppose Indian nationals, did you see much of that? Were there any sort of trends that maybe happened in terms of maybe misunderstandings in that sense?

Keith Pritchard (22:08)

I think culture, to me, it depends on, think. So I think sometimes there's a perception that hierarchy in companies creates a particular culture. Structuring companies will always just create a natural tension above anything. I think more acutely in India, because the seniority and the sort of focus on that. Culture, didn't really see. If you look at anybody who travels to India,

Their first impression when they got off of the plane and they're looking around and the noises and everything. Most people are overawed by the whole sensitisation of it, right? We used to do a great thing of it was your first visit to the country. We would take you around. wouldn't spend, you'd probably spend maybe of the week, you'd probably spend three days in the office. The rest of it, we'd be, you know, assimilating into the local culture. We'd talk about it because I think you never come back. least you'll remember the visit. Culture, didn't really see.

Too much of a challenge. was more, you know, the reality that sometimes silence isn't agreement. So I think in India, you'll find that decisions are taken in a room. Yeah, you can look around as as a, as a Western sitting in the room. Yep. I could distinctly see this, you know, the reaction that a decision was being made. Yeah. You could see no one really bought into this. So it wasn't the norm to then ask the group.

So people would collectively just be seen to be perceiving to accept this was going to be the decision. And, uh, I was advised when I went there, do not let this happen. Right. You need to interject now, because if we keep people going and nodding and saying, yes, it's all going to do. I think India has this, you know, if you've ever visited, yes, yes, we can do this. Yes. Yes. And there's a lot of this that goes on. The reality is in India, they can absolutely do everything. Everything will be better.

It might take longer, but it will be better. You'll order a drink. You're thinking, where's the drink come? The drink will come and it will just be beautifully designed, developed. You're thinking, wow, this is amazing. Through to products, service, everything goes over and above. Sometimes it's just lost. People are trying too hard. So I just said, well, look, when we take a decision, we're going to go around and make sure we're comfortable now and let's make sure. Because if someone's saying, no, this is going to be the wrong thing.

We can't afford to go down the path and then rework it. Yeah. Cause I think that is also a tendency in, um, I would say Asian to Indian cultures that decisions would be taken by the most senior person in the room. you just know the minute we walk out of the room, everybody's saying, oh, this is a terrible decision. Why is this? Oh, this is terrible. Fine. We sometimes can swallow that if it gets us to the place it to, but if we all know it's not going to get us there. I was very clear with my boss. was very much like,

No, let's take a decision and make sure we're all, when we leave this room, are we clear? And that was quite unusual for them. You know, I had licensed to do that in that role. You know, we're talking about the CEOs, the CTOs, the CMOs not being allowed really to leave the room until we really agreed this is the thing. So that was very uncomfortable, I think for them, but it got us to a place where we really formulated and executed at pace as opposed to just, you know, sitting around waiting for something to happen and hope this person over here has made the right call. That was really a real change for me in terms of the culture.

Stuart Elliott (25:38)

Yeah, I can definitely relate to that. And I think you mentioned Asian Indian heritage. think that is an Asian thing. I've seen that in Asia where people will wait for the most senior person to make the decision. Um, and one of the things that I have seen, especially as that phrase, isn't it fail fast, learn quick. And I think you do see that a little bit where the decision making because it's what resting on one person is quicker, but then they'll pivot as soon as they know it's not working.

So you do, do see that, think a little bit, whereas in Western culture is a much more consensus driven environment. Everyone around the table needs to almost agree that that's the process that we're going to sort of adhere to. there's definitely that. Do you still see sort of the old fashioned sort of cultures as well in terms of male hierarchy in India? Does that still exist to a degree?

Keith Pritchard (26:18)

Yeah, yeah, does. but, and having an eight year old daughter at the time, and, as my wife would say, a girl dad, you know, for me, it was very important. I'd come from an organisation in Cyient that had, you know, just one sort of a diversity award at the European awards in there. And then I was moving to India where it's evident that, women have a significant disadvantage in, in sort of, would say corporate hierarchy.

What I was really comforted and encouraged by is the fact that if you look at the sort of female middle class of India, it's the fastest, most rapidly growing entrepreneurial group of business leaders in the world. You know, I think as a company, we recognize that our profile was heavily weighted towards men. You know, as an industry of engineers and technologists, were we really building? We made a lot of effort, I would think, in terms of

Wishing for greater diversity, but it was never about just placing people for the sake of their gender. was more about how do we build and have the people who could not only do this job today, but tomorrow, how can we make sure that we're doing that? I think the reality is, I think there's a greater acceptance now. The, how do put it nicely? The reality is the family centers around the mother, the grandmother. Yeah. Right.

But the reality is the mother and the grandmother are also running very successful businesses, yet balancing everything. I would say that women in India have a real opportunity to get out of that. I think there's a real opportunity for companies to open their eyes to the opportunities to invest. And 50 % of the population is female, right? And the reality is some of the best leaders that we had, female.

Yeah, right. I don't think it's, I just think getting out of that is the bravery of that. And I think increasingly India is getting out of there, but I think it's, you you only have to switch on the TV. It's typically male politicians, business leaders, but as they become more entrepreneurial, they don't need somebody like that to be their boss. They will run their own recruitment companies. They will run their own companies themselves. So I think that is something that I'm seeing.

And we invested in a lot of companies that were backed by female entrepreneurs deliberately because not only were they great at what they do, but they had great products, great ideas. And yeah, it was just a pleasure.

Stuart Elliott (29:12)

And it's really, really nice to hear. I was just before we touch on it, cause I want to come and talk about GCCs at some point, but before we touch on that, we did our fair, we spoke about everyone in India being a salesman. I think you referenced it slightly earlier on as well. And that would be the one thing culturally that is, it can be hard to sort of deal with. And we find it when we will reject a candidate, there's almost an ongoing battle about the rejection.

It's, well, I can do it. You say you can't, they didn't, you didn't display these, these sort of traits. they'll say, but I do have them. And then you'll end up in this sort of back and forth the next 10 minutes. And that's quite challenging to deal with. And I feel like sometimes people there tell you what you want to hear rather than what they know or do, if that makes sense.

Keith Pritchard (30:03)

Yeah. Yeah. think, directness really works. think if you spend too much time explaining why something hasn't worked out, you'll just talk yourself into a, and inevitably a counter cell will come. heard you, but this is what it is. And that's a good trait probably to have, but when you're rejecting somebody, you're trying to put them down gently and they're trying to argue the case. It's always a tough one. I think it's a real, real great quality of being quite confident and probably more so I would have thought, know, in male candidates, I've seen that quite a lot, you know, try and oversell themselves. I think that's the thing. the, the reality is that despite being probably a very capable candidate for the role inevitably there'll always be someone who's naturally going to be better or better fit for the role. And it's not always about the skills. And I think of it, and that's the argument here is that,

India has really been built on skills or, you know, educational standards. So I am qualified to do this job because I've got this, I've got that, I've got this. But then it comes to the sort of behavioural, the cultural fit to a company. Fine. That was your entry into the company, but these are the reasons why we don't believe that you're ready now for this job, for example. And I think if you say you are not ready now for the job, it's easier to let somebody down. I think that whole rejection thing is quite a tough, in a highly competitive market, you know, really pushing and selling themselves increasingly. think you build yourself up in a momentum up that you, you're not wanting to hear no. So I think hearing no is also a challenge.

Stuart Elliott (31:45)

Yeah, that's fair. And I think the other thing I've seen a little bit of is a real positivity about the Indian people. And one of the things I do find is they sometimes will struggle to either tell you that they're not happy or that they are, something bad has happened. So sometimes that openness, that honesty doesn't come through quite as maybe as much as it would in a, again, in a Western organisation.

Keith Pritchard (32:09)

Yeah, absolutely. think the raising the head above the parapet to do that is sometimes, I think that's also about the culture you're creating or the environment that you want to create. think from what I saw and perceived in there is that those working in India, they absolutely loved working for someone who was from the other side of the world. Because they'll probably talk to you in a way that

Stuart Elliott (32:32)

I've seen that, yeah, I agree with that.

Keith Pritchard (32:39)

They'll never talk to anybody else. Yeah. Hopefully in the sense that if you ask the most junior person in the room a question, you can almost feel the room thinking that doesn't look right. Why is he asking her for this? Why is this happening? Or this person, know, and I think early, early start to it is really engaging and breaking down those sort of cultural norm barriers of, you, you know, why I used to have, I used to go to India and someone would walk me around the facility.

And was almost like a royal visit, you know? And I'd be walking past going, what's in that room? And if he's going, don't worry about that, keep walking. And I'm like, no, no, no, but I would like to go in here and talk to these people. okay. So I think there's a tendency to almost say everything is okay. And I think that's just, and that bodes, that goes very deep. That goes outside of work actually, that happens. And that's why we made a big play to make sure that we were looking after the wellbeing because

I think there's a tendency that people bottle up ideas or bottle up their fears, their concerns, and they don't have an outlet for it. Or there isn't an ability to sort of articulate that in the company that won't be perceived.

Stuart Elliott (33:51)

As well though isn't it, that's a real pride.

Keith Pritchard (33:52)

Yeah. The true essence is whether it's in India, it's the UK, wherever it is in the world, as long as you create a psychologically safe environment, you know, if you are a leader who is very dictatorial, drives messages down, you're not, you're not going to accept the message coming back up. So that's the reality is as an organisation, how do you create outlets for people to come and talk?

So I think India is becoming, in my opinion, very good at that. They've, you know, they're creating technology, they're creating, you know, they're talking more than they probably ever were before about their feelings, concerns and wellbeing. And they're also doing that through down to the sort of most junior level, you know, whether it was my daughter to school, talking about that, because there's a lot of pressure in Indian society. You know, there's more pressure than people ever appreciate, right? And sometimes it's fine. Sometimes you want to put a bit pressure, but not to the point where people are falling over and, you know, not growing. It's a real shame.

So, I think the tendency is to limit the over-promising under the living, keeping the psychological safety at the forefront. And I would say that, you you'll always have that tendency that people will always try and want to do something, but not raise something. So spot that opportunity, spot the quiet people in the room, you know, take them, go somewhere. You could create listening strategies to focus on that, but

As somebody who went to a different country, there's nothing more fun than talking about someone, what they do, what they like, you know, because we're both going to enjoy the conversation because it's different. So yeah, I think just spend that time with the people, but it's hard. It's really great.

Stuart Elliott (35:38)

Yeah, it's a tough one, I think you learn a lot by understanding the family, understanding where someone comes from. And I feel that that gives you credibility in India as well.

Keith Pritchard (35:51)

No one, like if we were here, we might say, how you have dogs or you have dogs. Okay. But in India, they were like, so how is your daughter getting on at school? Is there anything I can do? Do. And so

honestly, when I first went there, I traveled to this country about, I think on estimate was about 42 times. Right. So I'd gone back and forth every quarter to India, my roles in HR and strategy. And when I got there, I had no idea how to order food. I didn't speak the local language.

But one of my colleagues who was now the chief operating officer and was the CFO at time, he had food. He would share his food with me. So he was like, you're going to eat this food here. We're going to eat together. That would net that we would have gone to Pret or something if we were here, right? There was home cooked food. Sit down. I want you to sit with me. Try this, taste this. This is what this is. I was thinking, I'm sitting here learning about this food. It looks great. I'm tasting it. And he's like, what do you taste? What do you feel?

Is when I bring it in tomorrow, what would you like me to change about this food? That wouldn't happen anywhere else.

Stuart Elliott (36:54)

I found that very weird, actually, the way everyone said, you're coming for lunch now. exactly to your point, I was like, hang on, this is weird. I want to get some stuff done. And this is culturally very different.

Keith Pritchard (37:08)

Lunches are non-negotiable. used to get messages saying, this is lunch. You have to change this meeting. Lunch is just like a completely different thing. So I always went to the canteen, always went to the cafeteria eat the local food. And I really liked Indian food anyway. But when I first went there, I'd order the food and then I'd sit down and then I looked up and there was about, I don't know.

3000 people looking at me. They're going, you're going to eat this food now. And the plate was huge. Rice biryani, which is local delicacy of Hyderabad. Beautiful. For most it's hot. It's hot. It's, know, if you don't like hot food, it's, you know, it's a fact. So I couldn't finish it all, but like people were clapping going, you know, was thinking, this isn't unreal. You know, people are just watching me. And so I always at the local food, always, you know, there was, to me it was never about, I never wanted to give a feeling that hierarchy was something as much as I was working for the most senior person in the company. for me it felt uncomfortable, you know, it's fine. It has this place for certain things, but in the cafeteria, there was no need for I it.

Stuart Elliott (38:25)

I want to talk about GCCs or global capability centres across India. In terms of locations, why do think India has become so important for GCCs?

Keith Pritchard (38:39)

Yeah, I think if you look at the GCC kind of evolution, know, it started in certain markets, but India, to the sales point, I think India is a great seller of, we can do this for you. Yeah. And I think initially it was probably a cost arbitrage place. was definitely a, we're going to fill this place up for you and we're going to, you know, we're going to do it for cheaper. The reality is now it's a distinction between

It's an innovative kind of place. know, India is highly innovative. It's, it loves everything to do with AI. It doesn't really fully understand it like most, but it will do it. And it's become a hub for what almost 2 million engineers and technologists working in these places across the lingas like 2000 GCC. That, that journey is just outgrown any expectation. think it will, it will come to a plateau at some point.

Stuart Elliott (39:26)

Yep.

Keith Pritchard (39:35)

You know, think the reality of the evolution of these data centers and things like that will be there. But as long as cybersecurity, product design, know, AI, creating, you know, innovative kind of new ways and process, India, India has got a depth of really strong engineering. You know, there's no doubt engineering and, know, it's a hub for India and it is built.

And the reality is alongside that, they've built an ecosystem now alongside these GCCs that most probably don't appreciate is that from an academic standpoint, they're building, you know, schools to develop and people to feed these systems. They're creating educational standards that are higher than most Western worlds now in terms of business schools. And so they're creating that before it would be go out, you've you've set up a center in Manila. Okay. You've done it in Manila. You can do it in Bangalore. Okay. Fine.

There's still a tendency that they'll try and bring people from GCC, but it's now about scaling at pace. It's really building that depth of capability. think India just has a resilience that others won't. I think they believe they can do everything. They will do everything. They're pretty confident they will. The reality is that GCC kind of environment will be ultra competitive now. Yeah.

And then the problem will become, it'll become too distorted like it has over the years. will still become an issue. But no one grows people faster. I haven't seen it much in other markets and they invest quite heavily to build that. But it's still a place where you can lift and drop and it will happen. And it's controlled now and it's all processed. It's all automated. They're leveraging AI for value.

It's just, it's a no brainer really to not go there and do something. Yeah, unless you could find it, unless it's in closer proximity to a customer, it's really, it's a real pliner.

Stuart Elliott (41:41)

Yeah, I think it's definitely a play. I think it's a big play for most organisations to have a GCC down there. and I think historically a lot of companies tested it with say one part of the business where they could sort of outsource something and then gradually that's mushroomed into sort of from finance, potentially into HR, into sort of other areas. but I do think now people are then, there's still this

You mentioned the cost of arbitrage. That still exists to a point. But what I would say to most organisations thinking about it is don't scrimp on the people offering the strategic input at the top. So go and find the people that, yeah, they're going to cost you a little bit, but that's not where the cost saving comes. The cost saving comes from the volume of people lower down the food chain.

Keith Pritchard (42:22)

Yeah.

The challenge will become inevitably that they have to continuously build up this leadership and management capability because inevitably people are starting to spin out and go to other GCCs. As they become more competent in scaling and adopting new clients into different things, they'll become that talent market. It's a market in itself. there's 2 million engineers in this world of doing GCCs, GCCs, then the reality is you're going to have to build a real distinction between what is good at the leadership level for this.

And inevitably if they're good, they'll go to other markets. And that is one of the other beauties of India. Indians love to travel. They are super resilient, adoptive, adaptive to every environment. So it won't really be a struggle to bring the superstars of India to other markets to grow and scale in those markets. will be, yeah, I mean, I might have been the first Westerner to go there, but I won't be the last. But the reality is, you've got some superstars in India.

Stuart Elliott (43:30)

I it completely agree. I want to talk about attrition in A lot of organisations, suppose, lot of people would say that's India. India, expect it. you see a lot of people sort of move on from organisations. You see a lot of people sometimes don't even turn up on day one. And I suppose there's a lot of that. Is that a cultural thing? Is that just... the market in India or is it especially a sort of a leadership or cultural issue underlying that?

Keith Pritchard (44:04)

Yeah, I think when I first came to the company 10 years ago, this was really, you, must keep attrition under 15%. I mean, if you can keep it under 20%, 25 % now you'd be doing a good job. Yeah. I think it's also reflective of the current employment market in India. I don't think truly the next generation of workforce are looking for a big name necessarily. As much as they will work for a larger company or an opportunity to work in a multinational is credible and looks good on the CV. I think they're looking for not just an increase in compensation, they're looking for a place where they're going to grow.

I think that is the, and that's the challenge for these companies that they always inevitably over promise and under deliver in terms of that, right? I think attrition is a factor of looking at the health of an organisation, but it's not about, I don't think that's the end all now. think the reality is, yes, you'll always have a level of attrition depending on the industry. It's more about what is causing the problem. What could we done differently to have addressed this? it became a point where we were just saying, well, why do we even present this information to the board? Or people move for career and more money. It's just a waste of time. Where are they going?

Where did they come from? Why did they join us and why did they leave? So we actively looked at questioning and looking, exploring that. the first, and the thing, that's the thing. I'll come onto your point about why people don't join you. when they join you, the first six months is critical in India. We might think in West Indies, we'll look after a year and we'll do a year survey. The first six months, even first three months are critical because they've either come directly into the company for an option or they've been referred by somebody coming into the company. If they've been referred, they might be a bit more active about that. They just come in. It's more about how do we build a new entrant experience? Because I think that's the downsides of that because they'll come in more money. fine. I'll actively look. And the market is always looking for talent and there's no loyalty. don't think there's much in the way of loyalty at the Gen Z type of environment in India. Not really.

I think they're looking for a set of skills that pivot them to another level. So what is the next skill I need to learn? I've never seen anywhere else where HR people in my time were learning different coding language skills because they didn't know if they had to move to this bit of the world. Yeah. Learn that. So I think the competition is always going to be on. I think the ability to move or similar type of job for more money is always there.

Stuart Elliott (46:57)

It is, it is an India because I think again, the cost, depending on who the company is, they can come in and trump that depending on what you're paying somebody. Like the cost differential is so big.

Keith Pritchard (47:08)

But then you look at why, so we're talking about people will leave somewhere like a sign and double their salary and people are, wow, that's incredible. They've gone there. But then once they've got to that level and that's the job in that company, not necessarily the market, the company they went to have outstripped the market and paid a premium to bring that person on board. Coming back into the market, they always, they potentially don't have the ability to move for the same price point again.

So the tolerance is a quick win, get some, you know, do that. don't know, you know, dispose. think there's, if someone offered you treble your salary, there have to be a really good reason to stay, you know. And I think in a marketplace where cost of living is increasing, the ability to have a level of betterment in their life. And I think you also have to realise that people in India are not just looking like, you know, a 21 year old here might not be necessarily looking after their family.

In India, they're looking after their extended family, everything. their salary is spread and they're not taking home really what they're thinking. They're paying for their rent, they're paying for their families, upkeep, their healthcare. So there's a lot riding on young people in India. And I think that's not always the case in other parts of the world. think that's the extension of that is always there. So no one will ever question that. Why people don't join in the first, you know,

It's a bit like saying, I don't want to upset you, right? I'm just, it's probably safer if I just don't turn up, you know, I just think what you're doing. Yeah. So we, as a company, we, had a 50 % conversion rate. We'd offer somebody 50 % would turn up 50 % wouldn't. We proactively put a team in place to start talking to people and not just saying, oh, please come, please come. But actually reminding them what the role is about the company, inviting them to events, because India is a far more social place than you can ever kind of think about anywhere else.

So invite them to events before they joined. Yeah. Get them feeling what the culture is like before you get there. Get them to meet other people because before joining they can still walk away, but at least they've met people who have worked there. And more importantly, they meet people who are similar to them in the sense that there might be the similar sort of age range, kind of gone maybe through the same academic route as them, or equally might have the same interest levels as them. So there's things that we did that...

Stuart Elliott (49:32)

Intimate and part of family.

Keith Pritchard (49:34)

Yeah. Even before they join. And even after they leave, okay, to be honest, because it is, I think it's a bit of a revolving door. It's a market where that skill set will always be there and it's, it's more comforting when you can bring somebody back. And I think we saw a lot of boomerang hiring that we went on and did because they were trusted. Yes, they left them more opportunity, but no one begrudges that. It's just, that's just life. And so if they have the skills to take you forward, I think the challenge equally is that as long as you don't, if you don't build, you're always going to buy. So you have to build. And that's the real jig.

Stuart Elliott (50:11)

Yeah, and that makes sense. Now, looking at the clocks, we are definitely coming up to the end of the show. So last question for you then, now that you're back in the UK, how has your experience in India, I suppose, shaped how you look at maybe UK workplace culture or leadership in the UK?

Keith Pritchard (50:21)

Yeah. So I think as I look out now and look to the next opportunity, it's really about, I think there's the reality that you can do more in a different way. So you can do more by ultimately engaging with people differently. I think there's an opportunity to get to the point quicker. You I think there's a lot of talk that goes on, we think about doing this, do that.

I think I've been very fortunate to work in roles outside of the HR function where I can look further down the line, qualify things, really test what this is about. And also how will it adapt to different parts of the market? Will this land in a market such as India or will it land in a market like the US? So really

taking my time or taking the time of the organisation to do things differently. My openness to be, I think I've become a kinder person.

I think I look at things and I look for the, I always like looking at the potential of somebody. in India, like the potential is everywhere. And I just love the fact that if you just give somebody an opportunity and it could be in the UK, anywhere, the opportunity to do something, just do it. Just let it happen. And what's the worst that's going to happen.

Stuart Elliott (51:54)

I'm throwing the cow amongst the pigeons here because I'm conscious of the time but I want to ask this question. What about the work ethic? How does the work ethic between the UK and India

Keith Pritchard (52:02)

Yeah. think people in the UK probably just think India time is free time. I just call them up at any time. think there's also a, Indians are very gracious about their time. They'll spend time doing in your thing. Please go to sleep. know, please go to sleep. I would, I would, you know, when I was giving people time off and doing that, that was quite unusual, you know, because they weren't on. Yeah.

Stuart Elliott (52:18)

Always on.

Keith Pritchard (52:30)

I think the distinction is really, I don't think there's a great, everybody wants to do a good job. It's more about getting the job done in a way that's far more efficient, far more collaborative in a way. To me, it's really about just keep talking to each other, doing that. think there's a culturally UK is, likes to talk a lot, India doesn't do much talking, but then the talking happens in other places. You have to make sure it happens. So just making sure that you are always on to the feeling in the room.

Stuart Elliott (53:10)

Awesome. Over time. we're to have to sort of wrap things up. Thank you so much for coming on the show. It's been a pleasure. And thank you for addressing a topic that increasingly I'm getting asked questions about. Like we're getting more and more companies now come to us and say, we want to get India right. Like we've probably not done that historically and we want to do that going forward. So thank you so much. And if I do get any questions, we're happy to put them, put them your way.

Keith Pritchard (53:35)

Bye.

Stuart Elliott (53:36)

And for our audience, if anyone has any questions, can contact me at se@elliottscotthr.com.

Keith Pritchard (53:41)

Thank you again. Thank you. Cheers. it. Thank you. Bye.