

business today
for managing tomorrow

INDIAN PHARMA's
**MID-LIFE
CRISIS**

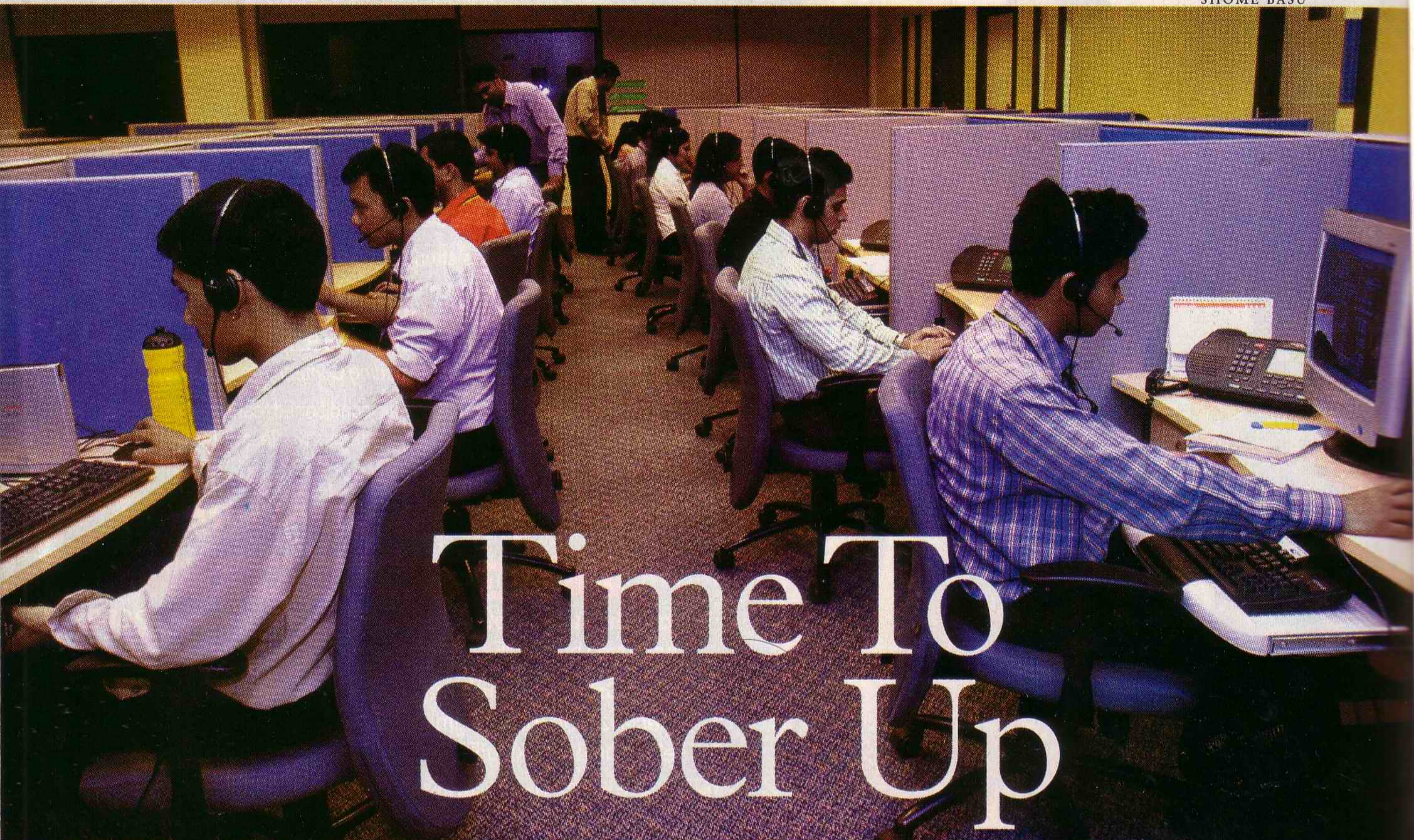


Pfizer's Viagra

Dr Reddy's Q3 net profit down 93%

Ranbaxy's Q4 net profit down 30%

Indian pharma needs a big pick-me-up. Is one coming?



Time To Sober Up

The rebalancing act: All work and no play is the new slogan at Indian BPOs such as this one at ICICI OneSource

India's BPO units no longer want to be seen as fun places to work. How come?

BY SUPRIYA SHRINATE

SOMETHING'S UP AT INDIA'S BPO UNITS. ICICI OneSource no longer wants to recruit 'customer jockeys', preferring 'corporate journeymen' instead. At 24/7 BPO in Bangalore, the workfloor guitarist has suffered the fate of Cacophonix—not quite gagged and bound, but banished to the café. At Progeon, notorious for motherhood posters on cubicle walls, employees have been put into tight-collar formals, necktie *et al* (on Mondays and Tuesdays).

Hey—hang on, somebody changed the buzzwords... what's going on?

An image remake. 'Fun' is out. Sobriety is in. And it's for the better. Relief is forecast for BPO employees who have been forcing polite smiles for people who, on hearing where they work, half-expect them to break into some circus act. They're at fun jobs, after all—given to rock-around-the-clock lifestyles that mix

telethons with revelthons. With management consent too. Aren't they?

No, not for much longer anyhow. BPO units are keen to reposition their work culture in the popular mind as something decidedly more serious than often imagined.

How Come?

Available evidence suggests that people at large have over-bought the industry's 'fun' portrayal, done as part of the effort to project an image less dreary. "In a rush to compete and get more talent," concedes S. Nagarajan, COO, 24/7, "the industry went overboard and promoted the job as an extension of college." Well, speak of the risks of over-projection...

The collegiate environment, it turned out, was not doing the business much good. According to Ananda

The repositioning will help deliver people who can

Mukerji, CEO, ICICI OneSource, "BPOs were initially positioned as fun" in a "bid to generate excitement and attract people". But this 'fun' turned counterproductive once it started attracting the frivolous sort—brats in for a few laughs, working on whim, ever ready to walk out. "High attrition cannot deliver customer quality," says Pramod Bhasin, President and CEO, GECIS Global, "so more players are moving away from that, testing what works and what doesn't."

In a business where each premature employee departure sets the BPO back by some \$9,000 or Rs 3,96,000 (the training bill and so on), getting earnest recruits commands a premium. Pleasure-seekers are in for disappointment, and it's best that they stay away. "There is more awareness now," says Mukerji, "and people understand our work, which makes it possible to take a serious stance." The new seriousness, he adds, has already changed the profile of the people applying for BPO jobs. More and more want BPO careers rather than stints.

But what about the Chief Fun Officers appointed earlier with so much gusto? Aren't they out of place now? Not quite, says Nandita Gurjar, Head (HR), Progeon, redefining their role in terms of commitment to "team collaboration to make a healthy place to work". No more painted faces and theme-dress contests, that's for sure. Even family photos and cartoon figures have been ripped off the cubicle walls. Dating, or any over-amorous campus activity for that matter, is simply not on. "Companies that are unable to offer a career for employees," scoffs Gurjar with more than a hint of disapproval, are the ones that "distract them by providing space for social life."

Business Imperatives

The rules are tightening at countless other places too. The reason: there's work to be done. Work. If it's a

four-letter word that draws groans of anguish, so be it. Clients, after all, are not handing out contracts for BPO crowds to have a ball. "We are here to create professional leaders, dealing with serious positions of the business of *Fortune 500* clients; there is no room for any carelessness," says Nagarajan. "Repositioning is also driven by the fact that clients demand greater efficiency as we move up the value chain," adds Vikram Talwar, CEO, EXL Service. "No fun should eat up the efficiency of the employee or our ability to deliver for them."

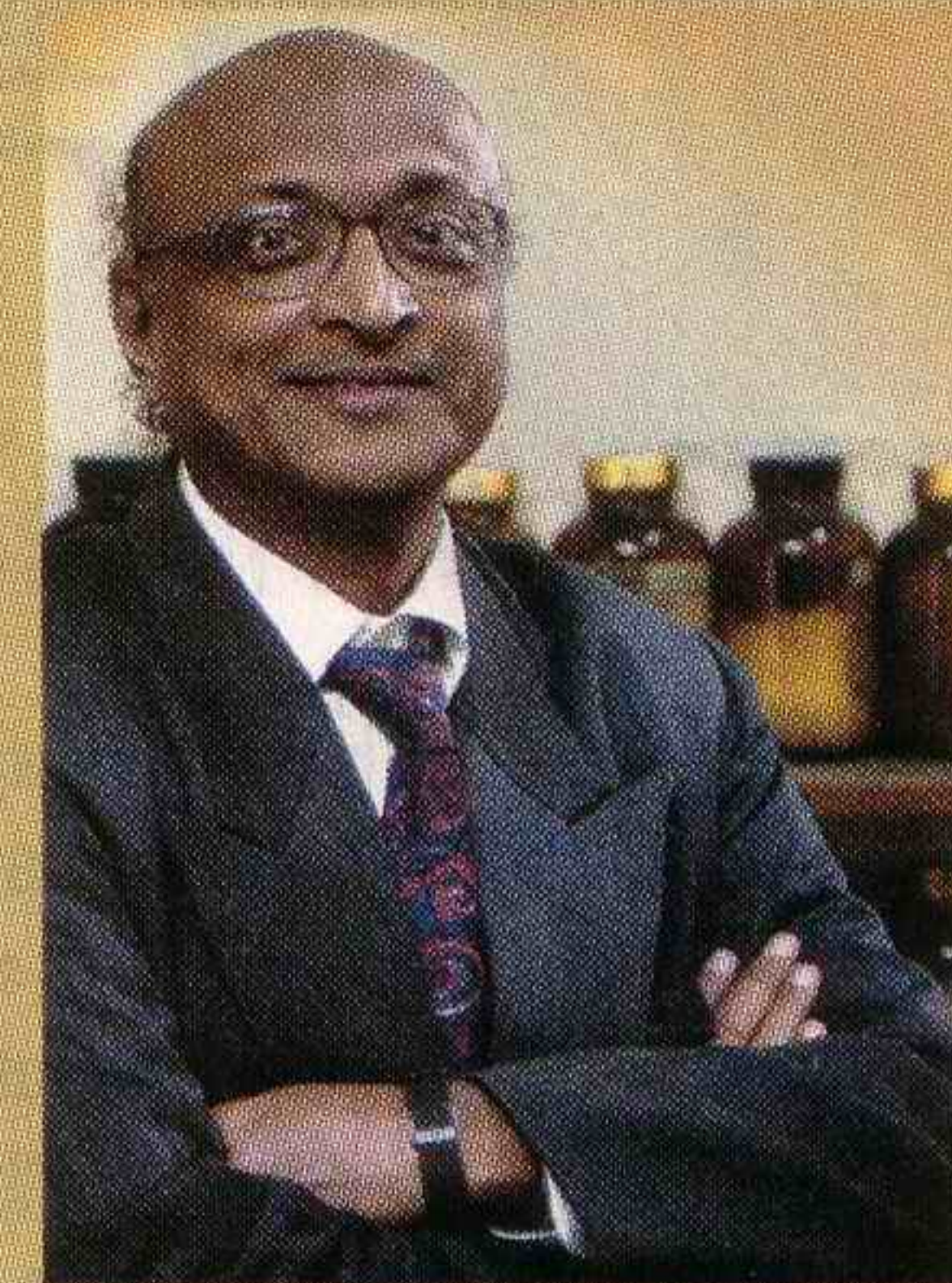
So ICICI OneSource makes it a point to indicate that 'fun' is just one of the six values it endorses, and the HR focus is on rewarding performance. Celebration, says Mukerji, "is not about a weekly party sponsored by the company, but achievement of targets".

To ensure proper goal-orientation, BPO units have also begun undertaking a series of training modules designed to align employees' personal job motivations with the business objectives. According to Bhasin, the industry's repositioning exercise will help deliver people who can ascend the management hierarchy and contribute to top leadership. Of course, customer satisfaction levels are expected to rise too. According to Jeffrey Sampler, Fellow in Management of Strategy and Technology at Templeton College, University of Oxford, clients now treat their offshore partners as value providers and not mere call centres. "The BPO industry is evolving from general purpose into more specialised verticals," he says, "for which it needs to give its employees deep expertise—and thus the repositioning."

So, does that leave call centres a dreary place for dullards? Not at all, goes the chorus. It's a re-balance. "The point," elaborates Bhasin, "is to stay focussed on goals even while having fun."

SPOTLIGHT

Forensic Scientists



MAMC's Aggarwal:
New-age sleuth

IT'S NOT ELEMENTARY. IT TAKES plenty of rigorous scientific training. Bachelors, Masters degrees and even doctorates are available in forensic science, with forensic medicine a popular specialisation. Employment? India has four Central Forensic Science Laboratories for top sleuths located in Delhi, Chandigarh, Hyderabad and Kolkata, apart from 26 state-level labs. "In terms of job prospects, all medical colleges across the country, regardless of whether those universities offer forensic medicine as a course or not, employ forensic scientists for teaching their undergraduate courses," says Dr. Anil Aggarwal, Forensic Pathologist, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Medical College, New Delhi. Helping police investigations—detecting doctored images and other set-ups, among other things—is often part of the job. Also, note: Your scientific integrity is always under test.

ALIA RAMASWAMY

ascend the management hierarchy and contribute more