

Motown's Made-in-India Execs Switch Smoothly to Global Roles

Auto giants bet on their frugal engineering skills and wide experience

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The trend has started with the consumer-goods, banking and services sectors. It is now spreading to the automobile industry. More and more global auto majors are promoting their executives in India to international roles. Their experience in managing challenges in a disparate and diversified market is proving to be the biggest advantage for these people.

Volvo, the second-largest truck maker in the world, has recently named Rajesh Mittal to lead manufacturing operations at the Swedish company's newly formed joint venture in China, Dongfeng Commercial Vehicle. Mittal was previously the manufacturing head of Volvo's equally owned Indian joint venture, VE Commercial Vehicle.

Sandeep Singh, deputy managing director of the India unit of Toyota Motor, has been moved to the Asia Pacific headquarters of the world's largest car maker to strategise on corporate planning, project planning, production planning and external affairs.

Joginder Singh, the MD of the local operations of Ford Motor, has been drafted back to the US to oversee the corporate strategy for the second largest US car maker.

Ford has at least two more people of Indian origin in globally key roles. Raj Nair heads the global product development function overseeing about 20,000 Ford engineers, designers and suppliers around the world. The team's mandate is to create new vehicles which will eventually succeed the Fusion, Focus, F-150 and form almost 80% of the company's future product portfolio. Kumar Galhotra, vice-president of engineering, supports Nair. Galhotra was previously vice-president of product development in the Asia Pacific region, playing an important role in the development of the

Figo and EcoSport, two big blockbusters from Ford.

"What gives Indians the edge over other nationals is the ability to deal with diversity in geographies and different kinds of people," said Aditya Narayan Mishra, president of human resources firm Randstad India. Also, these executives have spent several years with the companies and are well versed with their culture and way of doing things, and their experience is now being valued at a global stage, he said.

The skill on frugal engineering that these executives gain in India enables them to play global roles at a time when auto makers are looking at emerging markets for growth and when demand for cheaper, fuel-efficient vehicles is growing fast.

According to Dave Schoch, president of Ford Asia Pacific, having Nair and Galhotra and other people with the experience of the Asia Pacific helps the company understand the market. "It is a plus, they understand the customers better."

Clearly the demand of customers in emerging markets like India and some of the developed markets is converging. Ford India has plans of exporting the EcoSport compact sport-utility vehicle to more than 50 countries, including the evolved markets of Europe.

At VE Commercial Vehicle—the Volvo-Eicher Motors joint venture that is the country's most profitable commercial vehicle maker—the engine plant at Pithampur in Madhya Pradesh has become the export hub for 5- to 8-litre Euro-V and VI heavy-duty engines. Siddharth Lal, MD of Eicher Motors, credits the success of the joint venture to a blend of the team at VE Commercial Vehicle. "Our talent is recognised by the Volvo Group," he said.

Having Indians in roles which are linked to the local market are clearly turning out to be more fruitful. While Sandeep Singh of Toyota will be based out of Thailand to oversee



the company's growth strategy in the Asia Pacific region, he will be visiting India quite often as it is one of the growth markets in the region.

"It is very important to have an Indian voice at the time of strategy. That is the role I will play," he said at the recently concluded Auto Expo in Greater Noida.

Another Indian, Ashwani Gupta, is playing a very important role as the programme director of the Datsun business unit at Nissan. Gupta has been assigned to steer the revival of Nissan's storied Datsun brand for the emerging markets. Gupta will be one of the key executives to drive Nissan Motor Company's 'Power 88' plan of achieving 8% market share and 8% profitability by 2016 from emerging markets.

The sourcing stints of Gupta at Honda Cars India in its key projects of the City and Civic sedans, as well as helping Renault-Nissan Alliance set up a plant in Chennai, made him a suitable contender for leading Nissan's ambitious entry into the mass market with Datsun's small car, Go.

VG Ramakrishnan, South Asia MD of Frost & Sullivan, attributes the expanding importance of Indian executives to the growing maturity of the manufacturing sector in India.

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