

# License to skill: equipping India's next-gen

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For a better future: Youth4Jobs has set up placement linked skilling centres for youngsters with locomotor, hearing and speech disabilities.

**Start-ups showcase their approach to the problem of skill development in the country**

By 2020, India will be the youngest country in the world with a median age of 29. This ‘demographic dividend,’ according to some, will drive the country’s increased manufacturing capabilities and fuel India’s rise to the top of the global economic ladder. But first, a significant portion of this potential new workforce — about 4 lakh youth who will be looking for jobs — must have employable skills.

There is perhaps no bigger buzzword in the economic and development sectors right now than skill development, or to use the inelegant neologism, ‘skilling.’ The government of India continues to spend heavily on the sector, launching a plethora of programmes and training centres under the Skill India programme and the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY). Despite this, several gaps remain, particularly in the quality of training, links with industry, and connecting potential beneficiaries with the right opportunities. Hearteningly, there are efforts in progress outside government channels to explore avenues by which the whole process can be more efficient, and increasingly, skilling is an area in which social entrepreneurs are looking to do innovative work.

## **Investing in entrepreneurs**

A recent event, The Huddle, hosted by UnLtd India, an organisation that invests in early stage social entrepreneurs, saw the launch of a skilling portfolio in partnership with J.P. Morgan and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation. The partnership is a customised incubation programme for enterprises with innovative skilling solutions, and it will also search for more such enterprises.

For UnLtd India, this is the first time they are choosing organisations in a specific sector to scale up; their approach has been sector-agnostic thus far. They are clear that there is no one approach to the problem, not a single business model that is appropriate. This portfolio, which will include non-profit and social enterprise models, will, after more scouting and selection cycles in the coming months, increase to 26 organisations.

At the event, five social enterprises, each with different views on what the sector needs and requires, presented their innovative approaches.

Medha, which works primarily in Uttar Pradesh, addresses the problem of poor quality instruction and placement outcomes at ITIs, Polytechnics and various Skill India schemes by partnering with public sector colleges. They introduce courses that develop transferable skills that prepare students not just for their first job, but for a career. They also facilitate on-the-job training and workplace visits to improve the fit between employee and employer. Working within the government set up of public colleges creates its own problems, but Christopher Turillo, co-founder, says that the significant advantage is that they don't have to go out looking for students to train, and can work with students already on campus.

### **More career options**

The Mumbai-based Antarang Foundation sees itself as a facilitator, connecting at-risk or disadvantaged youth with employment opportunities. It runs two programmes: CareerAware, which encourages children to stay in school till they are 18; and CareerStart, which gives them career guidance, core employability skills and connections with opportunities. Founder Priya Agarwal says that the organisation does not seek to create a parallel set up; it works with the multitude of training centres for various professions already available, and act as a link. Importantly, Antarang recognises that not everybody who come to vocational training wants to take up professions like carpentry or plumbing, and so it works to expand the range of career options available.

Involute, a company based in Telengana, started with looking to address the poor quality of education given at ITIs, but came up with a different approach. They started their own three-month training programme to provide work-ready technicians for the manufacturing industry. A significant proportion of those they train are students who weren't accepted at ITIs. Co-founder Mukkamala Bala says that the skill development sector is at a space

in which different ideas are being accepted and taken on board, which makes it a good space for innovative intervention. She feels, however, that the incubation programme will give Involute the opportunity to move away from trying to work with ITIs and to expand their own training centres as separate business entities.

Youth4Jobs, another organisation that presented at the Huddle, has set up placement linked skilling centres for youngsters with locomotor, hearing and speech disabilities. Having had previous experience of working with tribal and other disadvantaged groups in Andhra Pradesh, in 2011, it extended the training to persons with disabilities. “There was initially a lot of reluctance by corporates to look at people with disabilities as a talent pool, and it took a while also for our trainees to perform,” says Gopal Garg, a co-founder. Today though, it has 18 centres across 11 states, and has managed to place a significant number of trainees in the BPO, retail and manufacturing sectors, and they are now trying to crack the banking sector.

Pragati Poshak, the fifth organisation that presented, runs graduate training programmes that impart a range of employability skills to students who finish their degrees but are unable to find employment. They work with disadvantaged youth, and work on the premise that despite getting good marks these students are lacking in some basic skills needed in a competitive employment world.

## **Intensive training**

Two other organisations are part of the portfolio, but did not make presentations. NavGurukul, set up by two IIT students, has set up a residential facility for a one-year intensive training programme on a par with a B.Sc. IT degree to create skilled programmers. MasterG, a social enterprise, is a comprehensive garment skills training programme, which condenses the traditional decades of apprenticeship model into a year-long industry standards module.