

It's good for the game, great for the workplace

Sporting activities promote not just fitness but also camaraderie between employees

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Charan Sampath, a solution analyst at The Adecco Group, India, didn't think he would be running the Win4Youth Triathlon in Lanzarote, Spain, when he joined his company's in-house sports programme. Along with Bharatsh Benni, Sampath was one of the ambassadors for the programme organized by the Bengaluru-based HR solutions company. "This is a great initiative and the biggest benefits are personal fitness and engagement with colleagues," says Sampath, who has worked with Adecco Group for three and a half years now.

In a 2017 study, *What Benefits Does Team Sport Hold for the Workplace*, researchers found sporting activities at work improve team performance, organizational productivity, and employee health. Researchers Andrew Brinkley, Hilary McDermott, and Fehmidah Munir at Loughborough's School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, said the benefits included improvements in individual health outcomes, "reduced sickness costs, increased work performance, and team cohesion among those participating".

THE DUAL ROLE

Corporates and startups across India are recognizing that sports can play a positive role in the workplace. "We believe people who play sports tend to be better team players. They have more resilience and discipline, and deal with failure better. After all, it teaches you that wins don't happen every day," says Anne Soumya, HR director, Adecco Group India, adding that making sports a part of the workplace offers significant gains to the organizations. "We have 700 employees in India, and though participation in our Win4Youth programme is not compulsory, most employees join in. I am a running newbie, but I am enjoying it," says Soumya.

At RBS India, Maneesh Menda, human resources lead—operations shared service India, says sport is part of the bank's culture and "runs in our DNA". The bank has close to 14,000 employees in India, spread mainly across Delhi-NCR, Mumbai and Chennai, and Menda believes sporting events are an important employee value proposition. Apart from facilities in office premises for table tennis, carrom, chess and other indoor games, the bank hosts matches and tournaments at third venues in every city for cricket, football, and badminton. "We are fostering collaboration, team work, and building friendships and bonds. That's why we don't outsource sports activities. Our employee-led network (chosen via elections) prepares a yearly sports calendar. These representatives focus on fun at work and well being," says Menda.

Chennai-based Gowri Shankar, who is part of the RBS employee-led network, feels sport is integral in creating an enjoyable team spirit. "People form teams on their own; they often practice together on weekends as a tournament nears. The events are an ongoing engagement and the fact that there are winners and trophies makes things competitive and challenging," he says. The RBS Bank has a cricket tournament in



Charan Sampath (third from the left) competed in a triathlon event (below) as a member of the sports team of his company.

Chennai scheduled on 20-21 January, while informal matches for pool or badminton are organized every week.

BUILDING BRANDS AND MINDS

Sport events can clearly help increase team spirit, bonding and productivity. But not all activities need to be physically challenging sports.

Bajaj Allianz Life believes sports works as a connector for employees and can also help build a brand, so when the company launched a product that offers an umbrella cover for 36 critical illnesses, it decided to create awareness—among employees first—by announcing a "plankathon". "Teams plank before meetings; employees do it on their own, and we often start off business meetings like this," says Chandramohan Mehra, CMO, Bajaj Allianz Life. The "plankathon" which became the "#36Sec-Plank Challenge, designed to motivate people to join the healthy living bandwagon. The challenge, which required people hold a plank for 36 seconds, went viral, and those who "planked" included Saina Nehwal, Geeta Phogat, and several corporate leaders.

Meanwhile, at Ambit Pvt. Ltd, a full-

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service investment bank, apart from football and box cricket tournaments, poker has emerged as a major flagship event. "During our poker training sessions last year, participants were surprised to learn that it is more of a game

of probability and strategy, and not all about luck. The poker fraternity has been growing steadily at our bank," says Tulika Das, group head, human resources, Ambit. She believes that sporting events get employees from different businesses and roles to come together and chase a common goal. "From helping new employees to settle in (socially) to working out a winning strategy or just playing together—the sheer energy of these events makes sports a relevant proposition."

Ambit formed a sports council comprising six-seven employees, three years ago. This council executes all sporting events across the year, figuring out the prizes, awards, rolling trophies, and celebrations.

SPORTS: THE EQUALIZER

Raman Jaulhar, managing director, sales and trading, institutional equities, Ambit Capital, participated in the cricket and poker tournaments in 2018. He believes team sports break down the traditional office hierarchy and decision-making structures, and can often even invert them. "This introduces informality in otherwise rigid reporting lines. Individual sports like poker level the playing field and allows healthy competition in otherwise non-competitive circles," he says.

A 1 Piramal Enter-

prises, various sporting events are held through the year, but the box cricket tournament is the most anticipated event of the year, since they set up an in-house sports council in 2012. "The objective was to bring employees from across offices in Mumbai together and foster a sense of camaraderie and team spirit," says Vikram Bector, president and chief human resources officer, Piramal Enterprises, which has several business verticals including health-care, life sciences, etc. "With a championship title on the line, teams put on their thinking caps to devise strategies and gather to practice at the nets. There's a competitive spirit, but such events let employees unwind, interact with each other, and improve interpersonal relations," adds Bector.

Jaulhar echoes the view, specially when it comes to an activity like poker and what it brings to the table. "One can learn a lot about others and even themselves on a poker table. How an individual conducts themselves when winning or losing a game, shows character. Bluffing your boss takes courage, and folding an inferior hand against your teammate is a test of humility," he says.

Sporting activities help you to see colleagues in beyond their day-to-day work tasks. At Cactus Communications, a Mumbai-based communications agency with 650-plus employees, sport brings together leaders and employees, and helps hone leadership skills. "Everyone is equal on the field, and this encourages participation. People come out to play as themselves. Sporting events help bring out the inherent leadership skills in people. These events help us grow nascent leaders," says Abhishek Goel, chief executive officer and co-founder, Cactus Communications.

Organizations across India are leveraging sport in a corporate setup as it promotes camaraderie and belonging. For when people come together outside of the work environment for a common goal, they tend to get fitter mentally and physically, be much more engaged, and be better able to collaborate, and be more productive.

