

# BACK TO SCHOOL

Why Indian companies like the offshoring giant Wipro are supplanting the educational system to develop the employees they need *By Arianne Cohen*



WHEN YOU WALK around the Bangalore campus of technology-outsourcing giant Wipro, something feels familiar. Sure, it's India, so the sun is too hot and the women float by in a rainbow of saris. But there's still a sense of déjà vu. At lunchtime, young employees (average age: 27) swarm into cafeteria cliques, or stream into computer labs, or exit en masse from one three-story lecture hall into another. Oh, that's right. It feels like college.

The university vibe is no mistake. With Indian outsourcers booming, pressure is intense to find the right employees and quickly get them up to speed. Wipro, whose revenue hit \$3.4 billion last year, has perhaps the most ambitious training program: A span of buildings is devoted solely to education, with all the library, classroom, lab, and lecture-hall trappings of a university. The expansive offerings, ranging from Japanese to advanced engineering, rival those of



#### HARVARD, INDIAN STYLE

Wipro employees study for degrees and new job responsibilities at its Bangalore campus.

many universities in the United States. There are 300 professors on staff, who typically earn more than they would at Indian universities, and hundreds more are "shared" with top local schools.

The practice began out of necessity. Wipro, which now has 80,000 employees, struggled to grow because the Indian university system couldn't supply enough qualified engineers. "Today, we pick youngsters who aren't fully trained, bring them to campus, and train them," says Pratik Kumar,

executive VP of human resources.

"There is a minimum of 12 to 14 weeks in our methodologies, technical knowledge, and of course, languages and accents. Many employees study longer."

After introductory classes, there are two paths of so-called Wipro University: Most employees are enrolled in mandatory development training. So, for example, when a Japanese client calls, the education department can produce a few dozen hand-groomed engineers in a matter of months who are well versed in both Japanese and the C++ programming language.

The second track is voluntary graduate-level coursework, such as Friday and Saturday MBA programs and training in computer skills, leadership, and management. Some have a tuition fee, although many are "you pass, we pay." The courses, says Sreekala Ramamurthy, a former university professor and Wipro's general manager of talent transformation, are a way to limit job jumpers, an issue for Wipro: "The master's programs lower our attrition rate to below 1%."

The programs also entice workers in a competitive market. "There's always another company that can pay them more," Kumar says, "but the university shows what else they can be doing while they're here." Wipro drops new employees who don't make the grade, eliminating risk from its hiring.

Wipro is now grappling with the sheer scale of its endeavor, as the company plans to double in size over the next three years. The Bangalore campus gets 350 new employees every Monday; all need at least 45 full-time school days before they become billable employees—amounting to some 3,150 mandatory students at all times. "We have the physical space for up to 5,000, but the bigger issue is how to scale the faculty to that number of students," says Ramamurthy. She points out the two-way video cameras in an auditorium, which connect to the Chennai campus, so professors can teach twice as many students. She then nods to a small room across the hall. "That's a professor's studio, where he can teach eight or nine centers at once." Student-teacher ratio: not a priority at Wipro University. 