

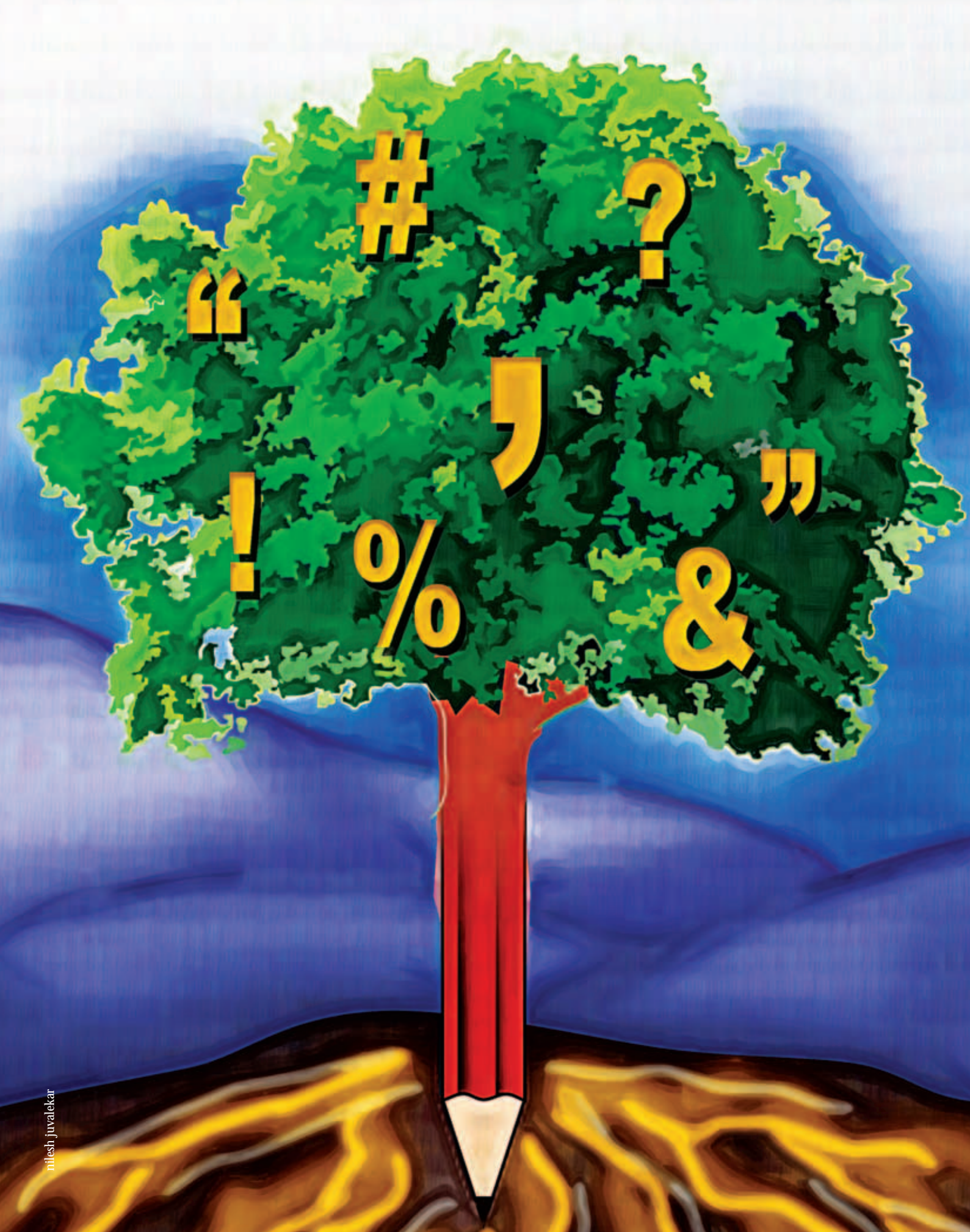
*The*  
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# fighting for the humble comma

by Anurag Goel

It is difficult to bracket Cactus Communications into any industry. Founded by a Wharton graduate in Computer Science, Finance and Accounting and his Mumbai-educated brother with a degree in Commerce, Cactus is rather an industry unto itself. A NASSCOM survey recently crowned it one of the most exciting emerging companies to work for in India, and its employees often call themselves 'Cactus Alumni' for life. Among those who know its inner workings, the company is as famous for the eagerly anticipated Cactus Carnival as for its seven training modules on comma usage.

So what does this ISO 9001:2000-certified company do? It edits academic research papers on any subject under the sun, teaches written English, and transcribes all forms of dialogue—primarily for Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese and other non-native speakers of English. Its eclectic clientele includes Kyoto University Press, Waseda International University, the Gil Medical Center at Gachon University, the Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, Kangwon National University College of Medicine, as well as some mid-sized and large pharma companies. It now has two offices in Mumbai, one in Tokyo and one in the US. And its unique contribution to the credo of 'Growth through Effective Communication', especially in relation to Japan, has earned it the distinction of being a liaison partner between the sister cities of Yokohama and Mumbai. The CEO writes on what the buzz is all about.



After a degree from Wharton, Goel had a hundred options to choose from. However, not many of them would have allowed him to indulge in his passion to "build" new things. A chance incident in Japan showed him the way, a way that led to a very unlikely enterprise without any precedents in India. Today, Goel is the CEO of Cactus Communications which has offices in three countries, employs some of the smartest young people in Mumbai, and was recently crowned by NASSCOM as one of the most exciting emerging workplaces in the country.

A survey on the 'Most Exciting Emerging Companies to Work for' was recently conducted by NASSCOM, a leading trade body with more than 1200 members from the global IT and ITES industry. Approximately seventy of India's 'coolest' employers were party to the survey, which involved an anonymous online exercise by employees and an audit of each company's HR practices. When we heard about it, we thought, "let's figure out if our people think we really are an exciting company!" We didn't hope to end up on the honor board, because this was the first time Cactus was entering a survey of such scale. We simply wanted to know whether we were making an impact on our employees, and more

## *any ORGANIZATION is as exciting as the PEOPLE who DRIVE it, and we are no EXCEPTION*

importantly, where we needed to improve. As it turned out, we got a pleasant vote of confidence from our team, and Cactus found pride of place in the top fifteen most exciting emerging workplaces in the country.

When **The Smart Manager** approached me to write about how we made this happen, the answer could have been deceptively simple. Any organization is as exciting as the people who drive it, and we are no exception. If Cactus is seen as an exciting company today, it owes this to a team of 180-odd smart youngsters—some engineers, some writers, some teachers, some lovers of good conversation, some simply good listeners—but all united by their love for the English language. They are exciting because they are a study in contrasting virtues. They like to think, but they also execute with great facility. They love spending time with each other, but they are passionate enough about their work to come to the office every day for just that. They want to have fun, but they are not frivolous. They constantly want to do new things, but not at the cost of the business's immediate priorities. When a company is fuelled by such dynamic yet sensible people, what else does it need to be called 'exciting'?

Just one small thing—it needs to really be exciting in the first place so that it can attract such people, and crucially, retain them! It has to define itself as or at least aspire to be an exciting organization, even before it has hired its first employee. The spirit of excitement and energy has to be in its DNA. When it manages to ensure that, the right people follow, and then they can tango with the company to make things

better and better. The bottom line is, a bunch of exciting people in a company that doesn't define itself as such won't work, and the reverse too will be disastrous. So what is about the Cactus DNA that makes it organically exciting? To begin with, the very nature of all our businesses and the rather unconventional way in which the company came into existence.

### *the genesis: Editage*

It was 2001, and I was working as an Associate with McKinsey & Company. Perhaps life would have taken a different course but for a chance incident that panned out in the other end of the world, Japan.

Earlier that year, a professor at the University of Tokyo requested an Indian acquaintance to edit a technical research paper. That acquaintance was my brother Abhishek, who was then working as an inhouse AIESEC consultant in Tokyo, and who would later be a co-founder of Cactus.

Abhishek agreed, but hesitatingly because he didn't have a technical background. To his surprise, the professor was very impressed with what he had done to the paper! Abhishek edited a few more papers for him and then left it at that.

My brother and I have always liked 'building' things. In late-2001, I left McKinsey and we started working together to try and build something that would be unique and new. As we looked around at the landscape of options available to

#### exhibit 01: what's in a name?

"The cactus plant has a unique appearance, and it is known to survive in extreme conditions. Further, some cactus plants can live for up to 300 years!

In the Japanese business world, a small potted cactus plant is considered a lucky charm. It is often given as a gift to business associates with the hope that the relationship will thrive and last for a long time.

In Cactus, we are inspired by the plant as well as its apt use in Japan. With every client, we strive to establish an enduring relationship by providing high value-added services at a superior quality." – from [www.cactusglobal.com](http://www.cactusglobal.com)

## *WE had created a unique SERVICE simply by being at the RIGHT place at the right TIME*

us, we suddenly recalled Abhishek's editing experience from over a year ago.

We were intrigued by his experience. We thought there may be many more researchers in Japan who have difficulty publishing papers in spite of their world-class research activities and significant investments in research. A little bit of digging revealed that Japan is ranked second (790,000 papers) in the world after the US (2,900,000) in terms of the number of English papers presented at academic conferences in the past ten years. However, from the point of view of the number of citations, Japan ranks fifth after the US, UK, Germany, and France, clearly because of language-related obstacles. Japanese scholars produce huge volumes of original research each year, aided by the best technology and solid funding, but being non-native speakers of English, they find it hard to meet the high language standards of international journals. It seemed like there was a latent demand for the kind of help Abhishek had provided his professor.

This was enough of a signal to both of us that there was a service out there that needed to be built, although it would be for a niche market, without any precedents to learn from, and in a part of the world that is culturally different from India. The newness of it all was a great magnet for us. If we could pull this off, we would virtually be starting a whole new industry! However, it was also clear to us that building this service successfully would call for a bit more than my degree in Finance/ Computer Science and Abhishek's education in Commerce. We started to work toward creating a team of professionals in India with

academic inclinations and superior English skills, a team that could thoroughly edit research papers to make them fit for publication anywhere.

In April 2002, Cactus was born with its first and only business unit—Editage. From the outset, we realized that we were in the business of adding value to someone else's hard work. Hence, Editage was designed in such a manner that it could add the maximum value, no matter what the client's background. In keeping with this, we were soon running three subject-specific teams: Noesis for humanities, Medlife for life sciences and Resonance for physical sciences. Not only was Editage refining the language of non-native research writers, it was also providing them the comfort of knowing that their paper was in the hands of someone who could appreciate their field of work. We had created a unique service simply by being at the right place at the right time and believing that it could be done, and the steady surge in demand proved our instincts right.

### *moving up the value chain*

With time, we added another level to our services. Many of the journals our clients write for have very stringent formatting guidelines. For a long paper, and we get plenty of those, simply formatting the bibliography and endnotes could take hours, which would naturally be counterproductive for the researchers themselves. So Editage started offering this service to all its clients for free, along with the editing. Though it was a small gesture on the surface, it made a huge impact on our clients. It told them that we are not just 'vendors' but 'partners'. It created a lot of goodwill, which is critical if you want to impress the Japanese, who are renowned for their immaculate business ethics.

Thanks to our excellent editorial output, client servicing and the pervading will to go that extra mile, Editage became a leading name in research editing in Japan, and before long in other ESL ('English as second language') geographies such as Korea and Taiwan as well. Soon, we were adding finesse to journal submissions, conference papers, dissertations, grant proposals as well as a whole gamut of non-academic writing.

*our CREDIBILITY got an immense FILLIP when twenty of our editors were AWARDED the prestigious 'BELS' certification*

Those were exciting times for us, but we knew that as part of the larger services industry, we had to constantly be on our toes and keep innovating; else, the novelty of our service could lose sheen. Volumes were increasing every day, and we were looking for ways to reduce our turnaround time. The answer led to the next process innovation—our premium express services devised to assist researchers working under time constraints. Our senior editors were fully capable of returning any piece of work in much less time than a regular edit took, and we committed to our clients that we would still be delivering the highest quality. The results were delightful. All three teams

started getting a lot of express requests, and we quite easily managed to keep our quality promise.

This enthused our people to do more. We were now ready to extend Editage to other areas of writing support which demonstrated growing demand, and we came up with what is today the most high-end offering of brand Editage: its medical manuscript writing service. This service spans the entire spectrum of regulatory and non-regulatory medical writing and is customized to meet the needs of CROs and individual researchers. It is gaining traction in our new North American market, in addition to our regular territories. Earlier this year, our credibility got an immense fillip when twenty of our editors were awarded the prestigious Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) certification. This is a first for any organization in India, and with this 20 out of 21 BELS-accredited editors in India now belong to Editage.

exhibit 02: the six values of Cactus



## CACTUS *now edits more than* 15,000 MANUSCRIPTS *every* YEAR

While soaking in the heady feeling of success, we did not let ourselves lose sight of the fact that our clients are not merely publishing papers; they are making a career for themselves in the rigorous world of research, which merits far greater stewardship than help with editing and writing. This insight led to the inception of our publication support service to help first-time researchers select journals as per their requirements. Publication support extends to submission assistance and the drafting of responses to referee comments. We also write submission/cover letters for our clients and design posters that carry international visual appeal. All these services have become extremely popular among our clients, who often act as our strongest brand ambassadors now!

It is in fact a testimony to the exemplary standards achieved by our editors that Cactus now edits more than 15,000 manuscripts every year. Over the years, we have had very few rework requests from our clients, and many of them regularly write to us conveying their appreciation and gratitude. Today, we even offer a service that goes beyond language correction and helps clients with the actual content of their research. Our repeat clients often want to work with a familiar set of editors, which has resulted in the creation of a bonhomie that is critical for a totally new business such as ours. Client confidence has been boosted by the fact that we now have a number of Japanese people working fulltime in our Marketing and Client Servicing teams. Thanks to all these factors, Editage has managed to put in place a strong and robust

client relationship management model that we seamlessly grafted onto our next ventures—Cripton and i-osmosis.

### english transcription and education

The success of Editage renewed our faith in our mission—‘Growth through Effective Communication’. Expansion into other areas of ‘communication’ was a natural outcome, though we had to choose carefully and wisely. Our success was based on a niche, and we needed to preserve that identity. So when we zeroed in on our next service lines—English transcription and education—we made sure that we retained our brand identity as the providers of high-quality language support that went beyond the conventional.

Our transcription team, Cripton, has worked with professional conference organizers, translation companies, academic institutes, consultants, and individuals, providing best-in-class, reader-friendly, verbatim transcripts. All our transcripts go through two levels of checks by experienced, in-house professionals who are well versed in a variety of fields such as medicine, business, media, science and technology. They are experienced in transcribing various accents and dialects, and specialize in transcribing heavy accents used by speakers for whom English is a second language. As a second step, all transcripts are proofread again by a senior proofreader.

As with Editage, Cripton too is fully equipped to handle urgent requests and has different turnaround times depending on the client’s requirement. It has its own secure extranet facility for file transfers, which works faster than a normal FTP.

Our English education division, i-osmosis, focuses on teaching written English. The “i” represents our students, who we respect as “individuals” with unique needs and goals, just like Editage’s researcher clients. “Osmosis” refers to the absorption of language skills through English immersion. In Japan, spoken English is big business, whereas the important skill of writing well has been neglected. To plug this gap, we introduced a battery of test-based and foundation courses based on a 1:1 teaching model, where each course has one

## *only academic BRILLIANCE or superior language SKILLS are not GOOD enough for this JOB*

student and one instructor. i-osmosis works through essays and evaluations—attempting to teach writing through writing, and one-to-one interaction over a moderated forum—which provides a personal touch to the learning experience. Thanks to our instructors, all of whom have fantastic aptitude for teaching and superior application knowledge of the language, i-osmosis has become the teaching service of choice among a wide array of clients in Japan.

Like I stated in the beginning, thanks to the collective efforts of Editage, Cripton and i-osmosis, Cactus today is seen as a growth partner and not just a service provider in Japan. A highly satisfying acknowledgement of this came our way in March 2009 when the City of Yokohama government launched its liaison office in Mumbai as part of the Yokohama-Mumbai Economic Mission. This is an initiative aimed at strengthening sister-city relations between Yokohama and Mumbai, and it is the Yokohama government's fifth liaison office outside Japan, in addition to its existing offices in Shanghai, Beijing, Los Angeles, and Frankfurt. That Cactus, a private limited company with clearly defined 'business objectives', was chosen for such a strategic mission, was a statement that made us proud and humble in equal measure. It was a resounding affirmation of the magic that 'effective communication' can work.

### *and finally, our people*

The theme for this piece was supposed to be centered on our people, about what makes them think of Cactus as an exciting

workplace, and yet I have spent two-thirds of the story describing our businesses. This was important, because like I said in the beginning, the real reason why we are exciting lies in the work that we do. Everything else—our HR practices, our values, our work culture—revolves around and complements this element. Let me explain how.

In our early days, like any other start-up, we faced problems with employee attrition. We grappled with this issue perhaps like any other organization would, till things started stabilizing. Now we have a set of senior employees who have spent five years or more with us, and that is not the result of some extraneous policy. These people have all had brilliant academic careers and they are passionate about the subjects that they specialize in. But they are also absolutely in love with language, its myriad nuances and its ability to throw up new surprises and challenges every day. Together, they form a rare but hearteningly growing species of people who want to indulge in both their love for an academic discipline and their interest in effective communication. Cactus offered them an opportunity to combine both these passions in a financially rewarding climate, something that was nonexistent in the conventional academic research or language services setup in India. That was and continues to be the biggest attraction for most people who join us, the fact that here's a place where they can debate a clause from the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the latest publication from MIT with like-minded people. They can cringe at bad punctuation in a street hoarding and feel really concerned about an unwieldy sentence in a paper without inviting funny stares. So we have had people with advanced degrees in geomagnetic studies and computer engineering from reputed universities around the world editing research papers, transcribing and teaching as a labor of love, not a 9-5 job that does not do justice to who they really are, and that's a really small sample I have shown you. Our hiring philosophy is also geared to finding the right fit—only academic brilliance or superior language skills are not good enough for this job. One needs to have the right mix of both, and then of course one needs to be compatible with our six core values—Integrity, Trust, Excellence, Innovation,

## *at CACTUS, if you let the values MANAGE you, you don't have to WORRY about managing PROBLEMS*

Communication, and Fun. In fact we have now started quizzing people at the pre-recruitment stage about their understanding of and respect for each of these values, and we do reject candidates who seem unwilling to adapt to our worldview.

So what is our worldview? Since this is supposed to be an article on why we are exciting, let me tackle that question through the prism of our sixth value—Fun. For some time, we used to think “Hey, our work itself should be fun enough!”, and we rested on that. Soon, we started getting feedback from people that this wasn’t enough. That the work at Cactus is ‘fun’ is indeed our big strength, but we needed to go the extra mile to keep our staff happy and engaged, like we were constantly doing for our clients. That’s when we started sprinkling our calendars liberally with parties, sports events, festival celebrations, and the Cactus Carnival. Like other companies, we also have a committee to oversee matters, but at Cactus, this committee does not lord over things. People are constantly coming up with ideas, and they bounce it off each other till it reaches a stage when it requires facilitation. This is where the committee steps in, strictly as a facilitator, and not as a body with a rubber stamp that says “no” more often than “yes”. On a typical workday, you’d see people coming to the office and leaving when they want, editing, transcribing, or teaching what is required of them, and spending a lot of time actively contributing to how the workplace can be made more fun. We are lucky that here the approach to fun is not top-down, it is bottom-up, and that’s what puts the smiles where they belong. In fact

our HR head can tell you stories of a great many candidates who want to join us because they have heard about our love for fun! And it suits us fine because we are always looking out for smart and energetic people who love having fun as much as we do.

### happy to be ‘emerging’!

Cactus remains a young and youthful organization, and it is also a flat company. Hence, the title of an ‘emerging’ company sits rather comfortably on us, because we do not want to be seen as a place with stiff principles and processes set in stone. This explains why we do not have too many hierarchies, but we fully understand that career growth is a critical determinant of our success as an employer. We do offer vertical growth opportunities, but we encourage all our people to grow horizontally as well. Editors from the three different subject teams often help each other out at times of crisis, and the best of the lot may go on to become reviewers, quality experts or trainers, depending on what they fancy the most. A good transcriber has the opportunity to become a proofreader, or even an editor. A great instructor becomes a mentor to newbies. The performance appraisal system is based on 360° peer review, and those who shine in it are entrusted with managerial assignments as well. But we always emphasize that at Cactus, if you let the values manage you, you don’t have to worry too much about managing problems.

We are now a little over seven years old, and there have already been cases of senior employees coming back to us after a stint elsewhere because they missed Cactus wherever they went. Our ex-employees have often told us how fondly they remember the grueling training imparted during induction, and how it made them permanently incapable of being patient with any disrespect for the tenets of good communication! I think that sums it up rather nicely—there’s a growing, vibrant set of ‘Cactus Alumni’ out there who carry what they experience here wherever they go. Now that is an exciting thought, one that volume growth or awards can never be a complete measure of. ■