

Flying start

For B-School graduates, the conduit to top-level management has become short

BY SHARMISTA CHAUDHURY

Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.

—Benjamin Franklin

What better way to learn then, than being in the core group of the chairman of one of the largest companies in India? Surbhi Garg and Pranay Kumar Jain of IIM Bangalore managed to impress their way into the inner circle of Reliance Industries Limited. The duo, according to an IIM press release, will work towards enabling RIL chairman Mukesh Ambani's office to guide and set the direction of long-term strategy for the company.

Another similar appointment at IIM Bangalore was by information technology giant HCL. The selected students, under an initiative called @Residence, will work directly under Shiv Nadar, founder and chairman of the company.

What these appointments mean is that, the conduit to the top has become considerably short for B-School graduates. Reportedly, the role offered to those selected by RIL is that of execu-

tive assistants to Ambani—an unusual one for management graduates who usually start their career in marketing, finance or human resources.

So, what does the role of an executive assistant have to offer? "The executive assistant needs to ensure all the pieces are aligned, should have a sharp intellect and be able to ask tough questions," says Mohinish Sinha, leadership and talent practice leader at Hay Group India, a management consulting firm.

The appointments also show India Inc.'s changing attitude towards the youth. Experience is definitely appreciated, but fresh new ideas and a shift in the ideation paradigm seem to be welcome, too. "What they are essentially looking for is someone with a fresh perspective, who comes with a lot of new ideas, ways to implement them, who has an ability to sieve through clutter and focus on the relevant, who is energetic, who understands the importance of time and knows how to efficiently manage it, who has an analytical bent of mind and to some degree fearless and not overawed by a situation or a person," says Rituparna Chakraborty, senior vice-president, TeamLease Services, a human resources services

The hiring of IIM Bangalore students to work directly under Mukesh Ambani and Shiv Nadar shows India Inc.'s changing attitude towards the youth.

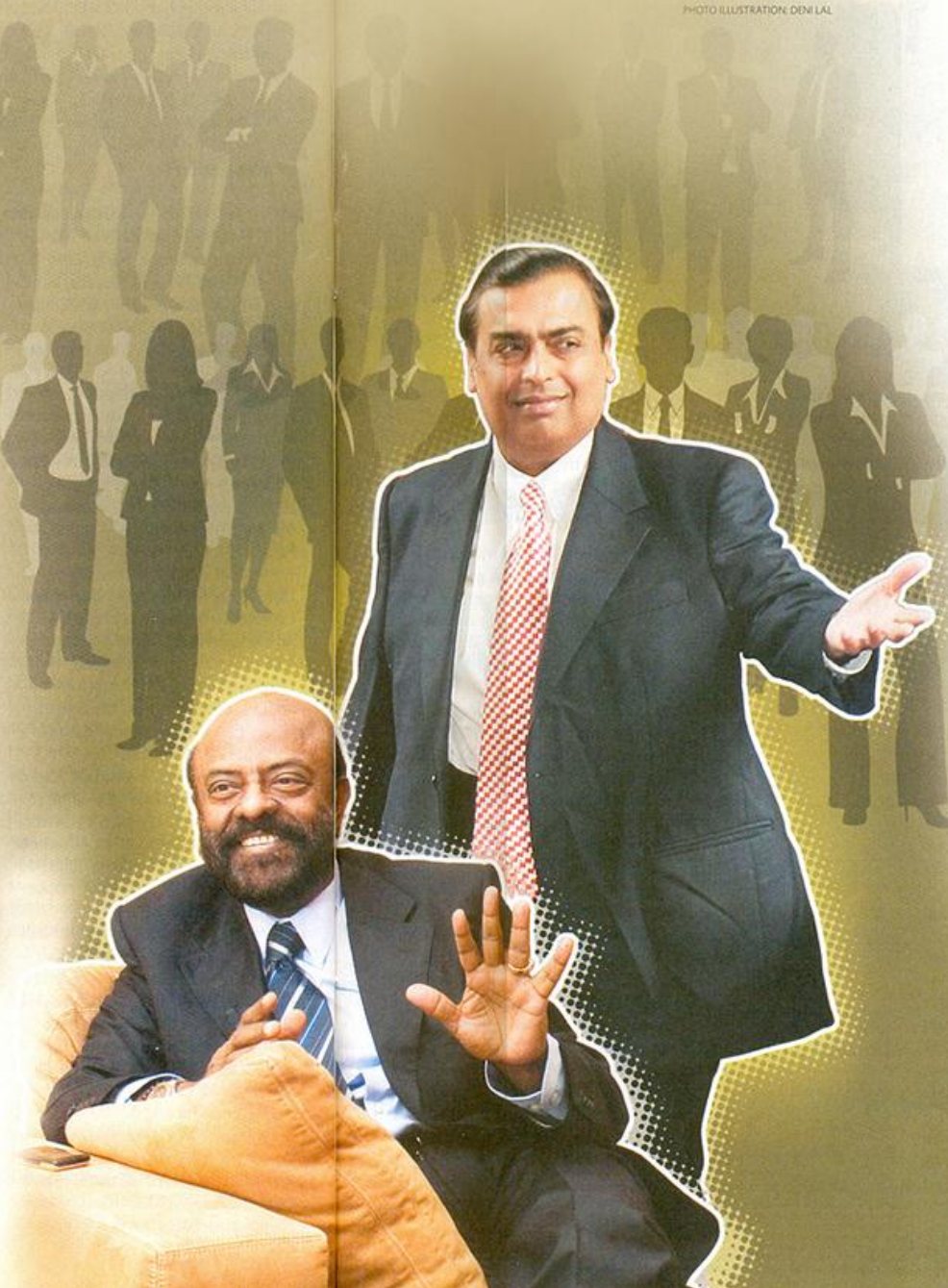


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company. "All of these sum up in a candidate with a good MBA degree."

For a student, working closely with the head of a company makes sure that he does not start at a specific function, but gets a holistic view of running an organisation and an opportunity to hone his leadership skills. On the other hand, for the company, hiring from a top-notch institute will ensure that students view the company as a place that appreciates young minds. "It is a good branding tool for the organisation. It makes the company an attractive place for MBAs who think they will join an institution that they are valued in," says Mohinish Sinha, leadership and talent practice leader, Hay Group India.

If an executive assistant conjures up the images of someone who trails the chairman and plans his day, that is not a bad thing. "By watching and moving with the CEO in close quarters, an executive assistant can learn plenty of things, like time management and people management. An executive assistant possibly has the best chance to decode the success factors and decision making process of the CEO," says Tina Vas, vice-president (human resources), Collabera, a consulting firm.

The job of an executive assistant is often like being the eyes of a CEO. It is an opportunity to go through the vast amount of information available to the CEO, prioritise it and then present it to the boss. "One gets exposed to every aspect of a business and gets to learn on the way faster than most people in a given organisation. While on one hand it could be the most effective apprenticeship programme for young managers, it is also the best way to get mentored by the biggest business brains," says Chakraborty.

And that definitely is a shorter way to the top. Says Vas, "There are quite a few examples of people in corporate circles who worked as executive assistants to the managing director or CEO quickly gaining the leadership and business acumen, and eventually rising up to top positions." ●