

# INDIAN CEMENT REVIEW®

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## REFRACTORIES: 'TECH'ING UP!

Automation, upgradation and robotics are key for the future development of the segment.



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# “Automation will help make the job of our human resource more productive.”

**Poonam Sharma, HR Director, Heidelberg Cement India Ltd. and Zuari Cement Ltd., sheds light on the human resource factor in the cement industry, given its labour-intensive nature and safety protocol.**

**Cement industry being labor intensive industry where physical presence of the manpower is required especially at production sites. How were you able to manage the availability of manpower during the COVID times?**

As per the government norms and covid restrictions, initially we allowed only one-third of the total workforce in the workplace, gradually increasing it to about fifty percent as restrictions eased up. Eventually when all covid related restrictions were lifted, plants worked with full manpower capacity following the safety measures like wearing masks, making sure that social distancing was observed by the workforce and moving to contact-less attendance system. There were regular temperature checks at the workplace and we regularly sanitised the workplace and supplied oxygen cylinders to the hospitals in our colonies. The Organisation tried to provide as much support as possible to our employees and their families which helped seamless operations at the plant and our production output remain unhindered.

**With the easing of COVID outbreak and economies coming back to normal, is there any change of strategies in terms of driving a positive work environment?**

We were allowed to work from home for almost a year. This was a new way of working bringing in a realisation that much was possible in the new connected virtual world. Many of us became more skilled in the IT world.

As employees got back to the office, we continued to take covid prevention measures. If there was anyone who was Covid positive or had a family member who was Covid positive, we allowed them paid leave. This rule applied to all employees including workmen. We created a quarantine facility for our workmen as well.



**Poonam Sharma, Human Resource Director,  
Heidelberg Cement India**

Post the pandemic, there was a sudden spurt in hiring from all around in the industry. We observed that retaining talent became a big issue for the organisation and hence we started looking at avenues for employee retention. To begin with, our efforts focused on providing enhanced opportunities for employees to grow and learn. Although the Organisation always promoted internal talent, we formally launched an internal job portal, giving maximum opportunities to our in-house talent while promoting them to the available vacancies. The capacity expansion and sudden transformations in the Indian cement sector created multifold opportunities for talent movement across the industry. It is likely that much exchange of workforce will happen through the pull and push within the sector, with employees moving to greener pastures



as any given opportunity. We have also been endeavoring to provide learning opportunities and hiring fresh talent from the campuses as well as laterally as a reinforcement strategy. We have not been hiring externally for the key positions, preferring to fill them with people from within the organisation.

Another initiative that we took was introducing special sales incentives and reward programs in order to keep our field- force motivated and reward the performers.

Initially we used to have career planning and succession planning only for the senior most people. We now have gone down one level, creating a healthy pipeline for talent in place and in our pursuit to create a positive and motivating work environment.

**Once the lockdown restrictions were removed, were there any challenges in bringing back the workforce to office? How do you feel the attrition rates have changed post COVID?**

As mentioned earlier, the opening of offices was a sigh of relief for many of our employees as it was a sign that the world would finally return to normal, and we would regain our freedom to socialise without fear after all. Those who were afraid of technology, found themselves discovering how they could achieve far more, connect to a larger section of teams, save the traffic snarls and time taken to reach office and still get the work done efficiently. Many Organisations moved to a permanent WFH policy or the hybrid model, considering the benefits like cost saving without losing quality and productivity.

However, there was also a realisation that the office doubled up as our social circle was healthier with in-person meetings now replacing the grueling on-screen time. Also, most people felt that they were working longer hours with more screen time when they were working from home and there was a pressure of always being online. Also, there is always that sense of being alone when one is working from home, while in the workplace there is interaction and a sense of normalcy.

While returning to office physically meant more time in traffic and other commuting issues, considering the other benefits, employees welcomed the decision of the organisation to open the offices and there was not much of an effort getting back willing people to office.

**Dealing with huge manpower, there are labour unions at the production level. How do you deal with these challenges like labour**

**disputes and violations?**

Cement is a labor-intensive industry. We have unions in all the plants. We have installed monitoring systems and access control for all those who enter our units, be it our employees, contract labour or visitors. We do have to make efforts to maintain a harmonious environment in the plant; however, we have been able to maintain peace almost always, we believe in preventive maintenance rather than breakdowns and especially in employee relations than Industrial relations. Towards adding value to our employees, we have been organising shop floor trainings for Wage board and contract workmen. Last year, we introduced a pilot program for our workmen where we took them out to an offsite venue for conducting behavioral training which was very well appreciated by the workmen. Hence, considering the good response we have now been planning more such interventions for workmen for motivation and skill upgradation.

We have our quarterly town hall address by our Managing Director for both staff and workmen. It helps them understand the direction in which the business is headed, the issues that the business is facing which is followed by an open house where they can ask questions directly to the Managing Director. This gives them a sense of inclusion and makes them understand the areas in which we need their support. As of now, our workmen are very supportive, and we do not have any major issues/disruptions.

**With Automation and robotics being on the rise, how do you feel it would affect the workforce in the cement industry?**

As of now cement is a very conventional industry where the shop floor is concerned and it is slowly getting completely automated, and we have the CCR machinery, which allows computer monitoring and controls to some extent. There are certain areas where the operations are to a large extent computer controlled and operated, especially the data collection and updates, but the industry at large, is still manual and labour intensive. Therefore, hopefully the automation will help make the job of our human resources more productive and error free and slowly the dependence on manpower may get reduced.

While we are looking to expand our capacities and productivity and make our organisation more cost effective, there have been some reductions in manpower where needed. We have also brought in some systemic controls for our contract labour as I mentioned earlier. There are many automation projects going on in the Company, which we hope will bring in more efficiency and enhance productivity.

**As mentioned by you, that the senior positions of those retiring from the organisation are being filled by the next in line hierarchy and new talent in senior positions is not being hired, does that mean that the average age of the organisation is reducing?**

Yes, the average age in the last 10 years has gone down a good five years. This had been done through concerted efforts to replace the outgoing employees with younger candidates. Apart from that, we are hiring from campuses and getting young talent in the workplace, further reducing the average age.

We had observed in the past that this young talent, especially from the campuses, left sooner than expected. In recent years, however, our retention has been much better. We have a good no. of management trainees in the sales team and graduate engineer trainees in the plants and customer services hired from premier institutes.

We are sure that this will energise the workforce and bring in fresh perspectives in the way of doing business. Our aim is to balance the invaluable experience already existing in the company with young energy.

**What are the dynamic policies that are there in your organisation to ensure the safety of your employees and labour?**

As a principle, we have a very strong safety policy from the Heidelberg Group in Germany. We cater to very high standards of safety and ensure continual sharing of the same through e-mailers and training.

Some awards have been constituted to promote safety at ground level such as the Golden Helmet award in the organisation that goes to any person who maintains and observes the most safety measures or implements something radical to increase the safety standards of the organisation. Some employees of the month awards have also been given to employees who have shown exemplary conduct towards safety.

It has been heartening to see women workmen also wearing the Golden Helmet. They treat it like a crown, as a symbol of pride and honour that they have earned in the organisation, thus, keeping them motivated to keep taking steps in the direction of safety.

On one hand we are rewarding safety, on the other hand we are also penalising people for violations even to the level of termination if they have a safety violation history. We also have a lot of training programs on safety as a reminder to every employee and contact worker of the organisation that safety is of the utmost importance in the workplace.



**Realignment and restructuring of the organisational hierarchy has resulted in lowering high cost manpower.**

**Is there any role of Heidelberg Cement Group in the HR policies of Heidelberg Cement India?**

Policies are a mix of both, the group policies, and the local ones. The basic tenets of the policies on an organisation level remains standard, like harnessing, safely operating electrical equipment etc. Safety training and norms are observed and policies regarding the same are very stringent from the group level as well as the local level. There is a lot of support from group level for implementing and standardising policies, but also local conditions are kept in mind while formulating policies.

**Working in the core sector, how do you promote diversity while hiring employees for your organisation?**

Cement industry is very labour intensive. In our corporate office we have some diversity. However, in the plants and sales offices, we find it difficult to attract women. Our endeavour has been to stay neutral and hire on merit and do our best to create an environment for comfortable working for women candidates.

Most women who work in the organisation are given an even playing field, and being a woman myself, I strongly feel that women are not weak in any sense of the way. All we need to do is not discriminate against them based on gender and support them fulfilling their family responsibilities. We have hired women in the sales and the plants as well. Unfortunately, the labour jobs are very labour oriented and there is a lot of physical strain involved. So even though we have been attempting to hire diversity candidates, the plant's retention has been an issue. We will continue to take steps in this direction going forward. 