

# RECRUITING CHALLENGES OF E-COMMERCE START-UPS IN INDIA

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**Abstract** *E-commerce start-ups in India have been on rise since last decade, offering numerous product choices to customers. But the start-ups cannot sustain and flourish only on the vision of entrepreneur. They need right employees to take the vision forward. Recruiting for start-ups is a challenge as start-ups are not in a position to offer what an established business house can. This study aims to find the key challenges faced by start-ups in acquiring the right, retainable, desired talent. This study has been carried out with the support of secondary sources as well as primary sources in form of personal interview with Human Resource personnel, hiring managers and the founders of the organizations selected; and a few recruitment consultants who serve e-commerce consultants. Findings suggest a strong inclination of start-ups towards applicants with Tier-1 education institutes' qualification and/or those coming from reputed big groups. Leadership qualities, flexibility, energetic and self-motivated, and the value/culture congruence of candidates with the organization are some of the key attributes as desired by them. High growth oriented, with almost no gestation period, and ambiguous nature of the start-ups during initial growing years throw a challenge whilst recruiting the desired talent. In today's competing era, start-ups also face competition from established groups. Whilst on applicants' front, though there are people willing to move from established groups to start-ups, job stability is one of the key concerns on the applicants' minds.*

**Keywords:** *Start-up, E-Commerce, Recruitment Challenges, Talent Acquisition*

## INTRODUCTION

E-commerce – a mix of retail and technology that is often also termed as online retail – has seen significant growth in India and is emerging as one of the key employers providing employment to many. Total e-commerce size in India in 2015 was \$16 billion and is expected to be \$101.90 billion in 2020 (E-Commerce in India: a game changer for the economy, 2016). Morgan Stanley report increased the estimate to \$119 billion (Maheshwari, 2016). The report also suggested that online shoppers in India will also increase to almost 320 million as compared to 50 million in 2015. This reflects the humongous industry growth and its employment potential cannot be ruled out.

E-commerce has different business models such as B2B, B2C and C2C (statista.com), and does not have product restriction as well. Categories being offered are extensive – from clothing to grocery, vegetables, handicrafts, agricultural produce, online services, etc. Any product or services that has the utility can reach customers through the e-commerce

model. The possibility of reaching out to customer with the help of technology has the potential to be a boon to reach interiors of the country benefitting small-scale and cottage industries as well. Realising the potential of technology-oriented start-ups, the government too has taken the initiating steps to promote and support the start-ups. Funding initiative of SIDBI for start-ups aims to generate 18 lakh jobs in India (Good news for start-ups: Govt approves 'fund of funds', 2016). This may support e-commerce start-ups as well.

The term start-up had been there since a long time and is associated with a firm that is new and is just starting up the business operations. The organizations that are fairly large today might have been a start-up once. It is not unlikely that a small new firm in the early 1900s were considered a (fairly) large new firm in the mid-1950s (Box, 2011). But it is recently that the term has been formally defined by the Indian government in context to India. As per the *Economics Times* (2016), the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of India released a notification to define 'start-ups'. According to the government notification, an entity will be identified as a start-up:

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- That is technology oriented.
- That has equity funding of at least 20% .
- Up to 7 years from the date of incorporation and that the turnover should not be > INR 25 crores in these 5 years.
- Structuring a part of the business into a separate entity is not a start-up.

The term start-up, in the present era, is usually linked with a business that is technology oriented and has high growth potential (Startups & High Growth Businesses). It also conveys that start-ups face some unique struggles. The US Small Business Administration says that in the world of business, the word start-up means much more than a company just in the starting or establishment stage. But the start-ups cannot sustain and flourish only on the vision of entrepreneur. One of the challenges, besides others, as faced by start-ups is to find right employees to take the vision forward and make it a reality. Start-ups need to consider recruitment strategically and align with business goals, culture as well as their limitations. Phillips and Gully (2015) emphasized that recruiting affects employees' motivation, performance and retention. The authors refer strategic recruitment as the practices that are interconnected across the various levels of analysis and are aligned with the goals, strategies and culture of the organization.

Different industries have their own unique characteristics and human resource requirements where one strategy does not fit all. The correct fit needs to be charted out so that the incumbent is retained for long and the desired results are achieved (Cho & Son, 2012). Similarly, start-ups have a different structure and their own unique challenges as compared to the established business houses. Even the source of funding has an impact on the organizational culture of e-commerce ventures (Hamilton, 2001). A case study shows that the careful and robust selection programme for hiring high-quality and motivated employees fosters the growth of entrepreneur led organization (Joshi & Srivastava, 2015). Talent acquisition, a term used to reflect strategic recruitment, needs to be done with due diligence (Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2008).

## OBJECTIVE

This research aims to find the key challenges faced by e-commerce start-ups whilst recruiting the desired talent/human capital to carry forward the vision of the entrepreneur and growth of the business.

Key objectives of the study are:

- To identify the key challenges that are faced by e-commerce start-ups for attracting and recruiting the

desired retainable talent force at mid and senior level roles.

- The study also aims to find the important attributes that e-commerce start-ups look for in the candidates for department leading mid-level and business-driven senior-level roles.

## METHODOLOGY

The prime focus of the study was to understand the key challenges faced by e-commerce start-ups in India for hiring the desired talent for the accomplishment of business goals. The objectives of the study have been served by exploring the secondary data and analysing the findings compiled from a primary data.

The following research design has been charted out for the study:

### Sample

Indian e-commerce start-ups established between year 2010 and 2015 were selected for the study. Products of these e-commerce organizations varied like some were into clothing, whilst some were into grocery, accessories and services.

### Sample size

The sample size was restricted to 30 as it was an open-ended discussion with the key personnel of the selected organizations. This included 25 e-commerce start-ups and five recruitment consultants serving such start-ups.

### Data Collection

This study was done by referring to scholarly articles, reports of some prestigious consulting firms as well as some online and print media news. Limited literature on e-commerce start-ups was found in terms of talent hiring though a substantial literature was available on Human Resource practices of SMEs and about recruitment practices and challenges for other sectors.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire that was left open ended. The questionnaire was shared with Human Resource personnel, hiring managers or founders of the e-commerce startups selected. Questionnaire was also shared with a few recruitment consultants providing recruitment services to e-commerce start-ups.

## Data Analysis

Results have been analysed and presented in a descriptive manner.

## BACKGROUND

### Employment Potential of E-commerce

In India, the technology-oriented e-commerce start-ups have been on rise since last decade offering numerous product choices to customers. The number of start-ups is expected to increase five times in the coming decade, which is expected to create 35 lakh jobs. E-commerce constitutes a major portion of these reported start-ups (Pasricha, 2016). The e-commerce sector already has a work strength of about 1 lakh people and is expected to reach around 2.5 lakh people in 2020 (NASSCOM, 2016), which points towards a humongous increase of 150% from that of 2016 within a span of about 4 years. The talent required by e-commerce is a mix of various profiles that, though is dominated by technology, logistics and warehouse, needs talent for marketing, customer care, merchandising, sourcing, etc., besides the support functions.

A consulting firm's report suggests that by 2018-2019, 70% of the sellers on online platform are anticipated to come from smaller towns (KPMG, 2016), which in turn can have an impact on employment in such areas. E-commerce has emerged as a preferred employer for placements by prestigious business and technology schools' graduates for the want of lucrative salaries, innovative, challenging and growth-offering job opportunities (KPMG, 2016).

### Attrition in E-commerce

Recruitment practices followed by the organizations have the impact on talent retention as well as the performance of business. Efficient hiring plans have the potential to decrease the attrition rate (Minton-Eversole, 2009). Hence, it is imperative for the e-commerce start-ups to consider talent acquisition strategically.

Though the e-commerce vertical had been a preferred employer since quite some time, the vertical faces talent attrition and retention issues, which is evident from certain recent incidents of people at leadership roles leaving the jobs within almost a year of joining (Have startups benefited from expensive Silicon Valley recruit, 2016). Employee costs lead to about 35% of cash burn rate in some leading e-commerce organizations (Basu & Sengupta, 2016). With such a high share of employee costs, employees need to be chosen carefully. There also has been a shift in the placement

choice of students across some prestigious schools because of rolling back of offer letters. The graduates now look for stability. This has hit the vertical's start-ups.

Livemint (2016) published about top executives of the established e-commerce start-ups – Flipkart and Zomato – leaving because of the cultural and the expectations mismatch of the executives and entrepreneurs. It is important for the new incumbent to fit in the culture and the structure of the organization to reduce attrition especially for the start-ups, as frequent movement in the workforce can adversely affect the business because of the hiring costs and the business loss. Wrong hiring decisions can adversely affect the business and even prove to be one of the major reasons for shutting down of the business. According to an article published by *Business Standard* (2016), one of the major reasons for the fall of TinyOwl – an e-commerce start-up – was the wrong hiring decisions.

The start-ups need to consider recruitment strategically. HR practices of the start-ups must suit the organization's phase of development, which implies informal and flexible styles of HRM during formative years and formal and professional styles as the firms mature and there is increase in number of employees (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988).

### Talent' Attributes for E-commerce Start-ups

E-commerce start-ups are technology driven, look for incumbents who are updated and have the traits to suit a start-up. The talent or the human capital employed by a firm is not only about the required technical skills, but also it is combination of skills and traits such as intelligence, positive attitude, commitment, work-energy and reliability (Fitz-enz, 2000). These traits are of utmost importance for the start-ups, which are in the stage of building up their existence. A report suggests that required skills for e-commerce start-ups include risk-taking attitude, innovative mind-set, flexibility to work hours and cross-functional expertise. It also suggests that start-ups need mature and adaptable professionals (NASSCOM, 2016).

Incumbents' goal orientation also has the impact on their inclination towards start-ups. Results of a research demonstrate that individuals with higher LGO (Learning goal orientations) are more inclined towards small organizations than those with higher PGO (Performance goal orientations) (Phillips, Gully, & Castellano, 2014)

### Hiring Challenges of Start-ups

Start-ups operate in an organizational setting that is different from those of the established companies and the

managers in start-ups have to be adaptable to changing situations. Individual competencies, flexibility, networking and innovation capacity are the key attributes besides other factors that play important role for the success of entrepreneurial venture (Forster, Parrer, & Wöss, 2013).

Start-ups especially struggle for the right-fit talent that is retainable as well. During the initial years, they look for skilled and talented employees who are motivated to perform and can also be retained. Parthasarthy and Pingle (2014) believe that there is huge potential for talented resource and it is a challenge for the organizations to attain and retain such talent. The authors emphasise that it is imperative for the organizations to do in-depth analysis of their business and goals and align these with recruitment practices. Technological progresses and global competition too lead to changes in the employment pattern (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988). Recruiting decisions effect the way organizations are perceived by the job applicants which further positively or negatively impacts in attracting more desired applicants. Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2008) suggest that organizations' success can be attributed to the talent they acquire. They further say that due diligence is important whilst acquiring talent as with right talent acquisition, the productivity of the organization improves. But the pressure of delivering results is such immense in start-ups that entrepreneurs at times don't even strategize recruitment and don't assess the right type of talent needed (Holley, 1999).

Start-ups are often described as young (Leung, 2003) and considering the expectations of the incumbents whilst recruiting becomes more important because of high percentage of 'Generation Y (born between 1980-1995)' already on their rolls; and 'Generation Z (1995-2010)' has started joining in. These generations have different expectations from their forerunners and from each other as well (Bencsik, Horváth-Csikós, & Juhász, 2016). Jacoby (2015) says that Generation Z comprises a small percentage of the existing workforce; however, by 2019, it is estimated that 30 million people will be employed across various sectors. The author also says that Generation Z workers are complex, challenging and entrepreneurial. Ganesh and Kimani (2013) suggest that the organizations need to understand the pulse

and the thought process of the generation to attract them and the get the best of them.

There are various factors that may affect recruitment in start-ups. Some of them are – finding the right fit based on their culture, almost no brand identity and probably source of funding.

### Culture and Fit

The culture of the organization impacts the recruitment practices followed by them and the challenges it throws in acquiring the desired talent. The misfit of incumbent with the existing culture may lead to low performance and attrition (Cho & Son, 2012). Considering the fit and the expectations of the applicants with that of the organizations' structure and culture is also important. The employees should get what they look for (Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2008). The mismatch of what the incumbents look for and what they actually get from the organizations may prompt them to leave. Fit of a senior business-driven role with that of the founder is equally important. A case study demonstrated that the complimentary fit of a manager with the owner leads to the growth of entrepreneurial venture (Joshi & Srivastava, 2015).

### Source of Funding

Source of funding affects the organizational culture of e-commerce ventures, which in turn has its impact on the recruitment as well. Venture capitalists are often keen on enhancing the brand image of the e-commerce they fund, so that they can get quick returns on their money, which often leads to hiring the 'big names' rather than hiring based on competencies; whilst corporate funding, though more patient, may lead to slow decision-making process (Hamilton, 2001). The slow decision-making process has its own ripple effect on the organizational culture, which may impact recruitment and retention as well. The author also presents a table which shows the impact of different fund sources on different areas of organizational culture. The same has been presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Cultural Impacts of Funding Sources (Hamilton, 2001)**

	Self-funded	Venture Capital funded	Corporate funded
Typical firm	Web design	B2B, B2C	Technology"; spin-off
Strategic focus	Cost/profitability	Being cutting edge; alliances	Strategic germination
Daily orientation	Sales	Stock options	Technical issues
Stakeholders/networking	All ("help us!")	Funding stakeholders	Corporate friends
Politics	Transparent	Opaque	Translucent
Culture threat	Hostile external environment	Stakeholders	Technology failure
Big potential plus	We're in this together	We grow fast	Fewer money worries
Big potential minus	We can't grow fast	We were over-promised	Corporate bureaucracy

### No Brand Image

For some prospective employees, brand or the employer identity is also a crucial aspect. Messersmith and Guthrie (2010) also establish that start-ups often have almost no corporate image, and have limited ability to fill open positions during initial years. Data collected show that many candidates relate the brand with job security as well, which is one of the key concerns of the candidates whilst considering a job offer. Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2008) recommend providing a safe, stable, learning and entrepreneurial environment to the employees.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literature reviewed and the inputs on the questionnaire collected from the sample suggest that during initial years, the start-ups have high expectation from incumbents especially at leadership roles due to pressure from investors and high ambitious growth goals as well. Whilst on the candidates' front, they are reluctant in joining start-ups considering job stability, risk and the pressure involved in case they are coming from comfortable and professionalized workplaces.

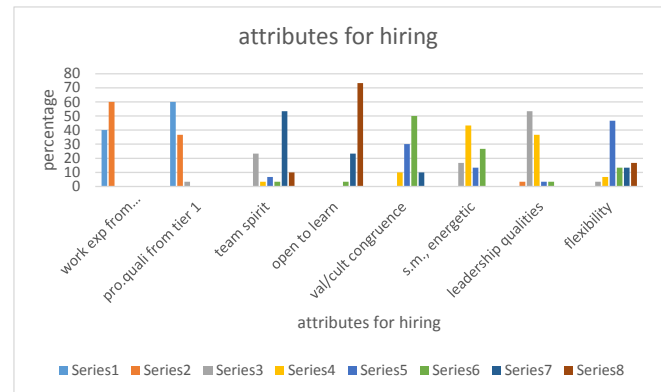
For some prospective employees, brand or the employer identity is also a crucial aspect. Messersmith and Guthrie (2010) also establish that start-ups often have almost no corporate image, and have limited ability to fill open positions during initial years.

The data collected suggest that though organizations strive to provide good culture, competitive salaries, organizational attributes (work infrastructure, facilities, etc.) and growth to the incumbents but the high demanding with almost no gestation period and ambiguous nature of the start-ups during initial growing years throws a challenge whilst recruiting the desired talent. Moreover, perks and amenities provided by established business houses are often an attraction to the candidates. Probably, this is the reason for high offer-loss percentage.

Our findings through primary data collected for mid-level and senior-level roles suggest high attrition in e-commerce start-ups, though attrition at senior level is low as compared to mid-level hiring. Mid-level hiring and attrition shows a strong positive correlation of 0.718 whilst senior-level hiring and attrition shows a weak positive correlation of 0.427.

Fig. 1 shows the attributes preferred by e-commerce start-ups in the candidates. Many e-commerce start-ups pointed towards an inclination for incumbents with qualification from Tier-1 institute and/or professional experience from a reputed brand. Series 1, 2 and so on till 8 in the below fig. denote the importance ranking with 1 as the most important

and 8 as the last. Attributes have been mentioned in the figure under horizontal axis.



**Fig. 1: Ranking for the Attributes of Hiring by E-commerce Start-ups**

(s.m. = self-motivated; val/cult congruence = value/ culture congruence)

Eighteen respondents out of 30 (60% respondents) ranked 'qualification from Tier-1 education institute' as the top most attribute they look for in an applicant, whilst 11 ranked it as 2. The reason explained for this particular choice was that such incumbents are believed to be process oriented. Eighteen out of 30 (60%) respondents ranked the desired attribute in candidates 'work experience of big reputed groups' as 2, and 12 respondents ranked it as 1. The reason cited for this particular attribute was that the candidates who have worked in a professional environment can bring in the same professionalism to their start-up. Another reason being that they believe that such incumbents have the experience of handling bigger volumes and, hence, can handle the business growth pressure. First two rankings/series show a strong inclination of start-ups towards candidates with Tier-1 education institutes' qualification and/or those coming from reputed big groups. Sixteen respondents (53.34%) chose leadership qualities as 3; 13 (43.34%) respondents chose energetic and self-motivated traits as 4; 14 (46.67%) chose flexibility as 5; value/culture congruence amongst organization and candidates was chosen as 6 by 15 (50% respondents); 16 (53.34%) chose team spirit as 7 and openness to learn was chosen as 8 by 22 (73.34%) respondents.

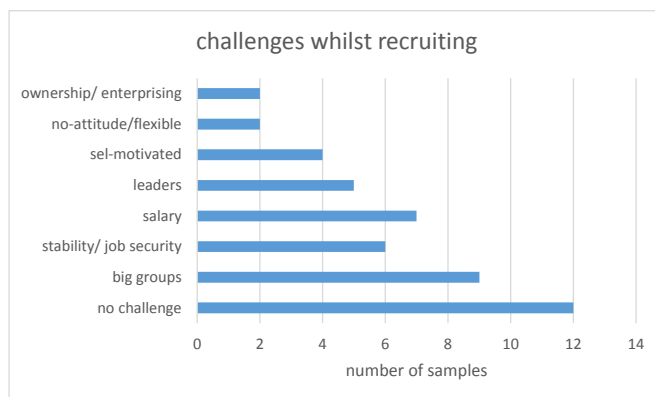
On discussing about the challenges faced by e-commerce start-ups in getting the desired workforce, 12 out of 30 respondents said that they never faced any challenges as such. They also said that senior-level hiring during early years was done from own references and close networks as there is no brand identity during initial years and it gets difficult to get people on board. This also sorted out mid-

level hiring for them initially as the senior management used their own contacts to bring them in.

Other respondents pointed that stability in job is usually an important criteria that people look into whilst taking up a job opportunity. Applicants' concerns over job stability and brand identity were the key challenges besides competition from established big groups, which are always an attraction for the applicants as compared to start-ups. Most of the start-ups offered, and were willing to offer, good salaries as per the industry standards.

A study commented that during early start-up phases, people are reluctant in joining as they do not see a career path, share the values and passion of an entrepreneur and size of the firm is not such that may attract a pool of talent. The entrepreneur's personality and professional experience may also have influence on their preference for recruitment through social or business network. Trust is another factor whilst hiring from business network. Having worked with the incumbent earlier or knowing through somebody from a business network gives them a level of trust about that person (Leung, 2003).

Key challenges as commented by start-ups (including those who do not face challenges as such) and consultants was finding people with desired personality traits. All the above has been presented in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2: Challenges Whilst Recruiting for E-commerce Start-ups**

(The figure does not depict ranking of challenges, it is the summary of response received from respondents.)

As quoted by sample numbers 1, 3, 7 and 9, 'finding self-motivated natural leaders is tough'. Start-ups face problems in finding people who have leadership traits in addition to being flexible and humble.

The reason pointed towards the fast culture of start-ups. They said that at leadership roles, there is almost no time to learn. During the initial years, the results are expected because of the

investing stakeholders' expectations and pressures. Also, the rapidly changing environment throws continuous challenges for which a person shall be flexible and adaptable. Though starts are fast-paced and sometimes ambiguous, they try to provide a culture of freedom, creativity and independence.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that attrition at senior level has been found to be low as compared to mid-level hiring. The reasons for low attrition at senior level as compared to middle-level roles could not be explained. One of the reasons as discussed for high attrition at the middle level might be that there is less strategic involvement of founders in it. Another reason as cited by one of the respondents is that there is immense pressure on seniors who are often over occupied with deliverables and growth, which gives them less time to be in regular touch with the mid-level managers; and this probably leads to a loss in connect between the two. A reason besides others for lower attrition at senior roles could be because of limited opportunities outside, which is a subject of study that can be explored.

Though various articles suggest learning attitude/orientation in addition to other attributes to be important for incumbents for start-ups, discussions with the respondents point towards other attributes as considered important. Qualification from Tier-1 institutes and professional experience of a reputed brand have been highlighted as the most important key factors whilst hiring. Leading percentages on rating for other attributes when asked pointed towards leadership qualities, energetic and self-motivated, flexibility as the most desired qualities in incumbents after the skill matching based on qualification and experience. These personality traits are followed by the value/cultural congruence of candidate with that of organization, team spirit and openness to learn in the same order.

It is important for start-ups to analyse their internal environment in addition to the external whilst hiring. Cultural misfit and the expectations mismatch of incumbents may lead to high attrition.

This study also pointed towards the key challenges faced by e-commerce start-ups whilst looking for the desired talent. One of the key factors being the concern over job security of the candidates as the start-ups are usually unheard of during initial years and they also have a reservation about the start-ups' stability during initial years. Though on start-ups' front, they strive their best to offer competitive salaries, a good infrastructure and open, fun-filled culture keeping the current generation in mind (average employee range based on discussion was 30-35- more towards early 30s), but the pressure of performance and delivering results is immense

in addition to competition from the established business houses, which remains an attraction for the incumbents. It is also important to understand the candidates' expectations from the organizations on various aspects to assess the fit of the candidate with that of the organization. Organizational cultural differences can throw a challenge later. Some e-commerce start-ups admitted to have pressure from venture capitalists on hiring decisions for key business-driven leadership roles, whilst some did not and consultants selected for the sample were not sure if there was any pressure from investors as such.

## LIMITATIONS

The study has been based on open discussions with HR personnel and founders who discussed more precisely about leadership roles. Mid-level roles could be discussed less as these positions are usually filled by functional heads based on their preferences and criteria. The study can be enhanced by discussing the viewpoints of functional heads and the leaders for mid-level hiring and its impact on attrition.

The match of attributes desired and those retained can be further studied.

## IMPLICATIONS

This study has been done by openly discussing the challenges that are very specific of e-commerce start-ups and the problems faced by entrepreneurs in acquiring and retaining talent. Aligning the business goals, culture and limitations with recruitment process can help them retain people for long, whilst effectively utilising them. This study may support in giving some inputs and pointers to the e-commerce start-ups with regards to their recruitment practices. It also adds to the existing literature available for the related field.

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