Shikha Sethi joins Nigel Wright's Executive Search practice in London

Having spent over seven years in senior HR roles at a multinational blue chip company in Hindustan, Shikha Sethi certainly has a unique understanding of the global FMCG industry.

Her experience gained from working in the high growth Indian consumer market has equipped her with in-depth knowledge of Asian culture and emerging market dynamics and in joining Nigel Wright she hopes to use this knowledge, as well as her experience in senior level talent acquisition, to help develop opportunities in international markets outside of Europe.

Tell us a bit about your background?

I'm Indian but I grew up and went to school in Lagos, Nigeria. I then moved to Bombay in India to complete my graduate degree and then to Sydney in Australia, where I got my MBA. Following the completion of my MBA, I returned to India as a Management Trainee with The Coca Cola Company. I stayed with the business for over seven years before moving to London, where my husband is now based, to join Nigel Wright.

What attracted you to the opportunity at Nigel Wright?

I have extensive experience of talent acquisition from the client's perspective, so I was interested in the opportunity to work for an executive search firm and see things from the other side of the fence, so to speak. Nigel Wright also offered me an exciting proposition to develop the Asia Pacific market. I believe there is a tremendous opportunity to identify talented candidates that can have an impact in the emerging consumer markets in Asia.

How are you finding the transition to executive search, having previously fulfilled in-house talent acquisition roles?

The transition is very interesting and challenging. I do still have a tendency to put the 'HR manager hat' on, but I think that actually makes talking to candidates and clients easier. I am also in the unique situation of knowing how best to approach HR professionals, having been one myself.

What impact do you hope to have at Nigel Wright?

I want to build a sustainable business for Nigel Wright in the Asia Pacific region.

You've spent over seven years in Asia during what has been a period of aggressive growth in the region. What key trends will define the region over the next few years?

The increase in the number of large retailers will challenge consumer goods companies to improve overall category management. By using better point-of-sale merchandising as well as taking advantage of the science of consumer behaviour, companies will seek to influence consumers to engage more with products in-store, and ultimately boost sales. With more and more international brands now available to consumers, especially luxury items, home-grown companies will have to place a greater emphasis on local quality and workmanship, to enable them to compete with international players. Lastly, the demographic dividend will lose steam if businesses fail to work towards improving home grown skills; specifically in areas such as Key Account Management, Category Management and Commercial Excellence.

What are main challenges for consumer businesses seeking to building capability in the Asian region?

I believe the main challenge is the 'Jack of all trades, master of none' milieu that is so pervasive in today's Asian workforce. To explain; graduates want to leave University and go straight into managerial jobs without gaining the vital experience they need to be able to fulfil these types of jobs. The lack of young people 'getting their hands dirty' has meant there is a situation today in the Asian consumer industry where there are a lot of managers but not many functional experts. It's important to realise therefore, that both education and experience are equally important and compliment each other in the workplace.

From a talent perspective, what skills are most in demand in Asia?

In India as well as Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia, there is definitely a need to build commercial and supply chain capability. There are a number of large retailers and FMCG businesses operating in these markets today that need people who have experience managing the commercial and supply chain functions of big, complex organisations. Cold chain management, category management and Lean Six Sigma, for example, are skill areas that Asian companies really need, to become truly competitive players in the consumer sector.

Is Nigel Wright well placed to facilitate client growth in international markets outside of Europe? How?

There are a lot of consultants operating in the industry, but I believe we stand out due to the fact that we take the time to understand our clients' culture and needs and act as brand ambassadors for them in the marketplace.

What's the business environment like in the Asia region compared to Europe?

Currently, Asia is experiencing high growth and in the main the business environment is buzzing. A lot of people are succeeding in their careers and there is a lot of positive energy in the region. At the same time however, rising commodity prices as well as Eurozone and US economic instability threatens to dampen the Asian spirit. Exports to the west have dropped and some people are beginning to feel the pinch.

Apart of the cultural aspect, what are the biggest challenges for US/European executives like relocating to Asia?

I don't think there are any significant challenges for executives. Life is certainly different compared to the west, but that just adds to the charm. As long as people learn to accept the cultural differences and not challenge them, either professionally or otherwise, then they will be fine.

From a personal and professional perspective what have you liked/disliked the most about working in Asia?

I can't talk about Asia, as I have only lived and worked in India. Even though the work life balance is still a challenge, in India relationships at work tend to transcend the professional space. People often become friends socially and sometimes, even for life. I think that separates India from the rest of the world.

What's the best piece of advice you have received?

From my father: *"You are running a marathon, not a race."*

Outside of work, how do you relax?

I like to travel and meet new people. I love to read and I'm also a bit of a TV junkie!

Gender diverse boards essential ...says consumer sector

A report by Nigel Wright found that the overwhelming opinion held by senior executives working for major global consumer brands, is that gender diverse boards are a good thing for business.

The report, which is based on data collected from over one hundred senior executives and board level employees at some of the world's biggest consumer companies, also found that the sector is largely opposed to the prospect of imposed quotas from the EU.

Looming in the background for firms with European operations is the 'threat' (as many perceive it) of quotas for the recommended number of women that should make up a board. Currently Norway, Spain and France are the only EU countries that have a legal quota system. In the next few years, if more member states or companies do not voluntarily move to a more diverse board structure, the European Union will begin enforcing quotas. Only 8% of respondents to Nigel Wight's survey believed quotas were necessary to incite change.

Time might be running out, however, for consumer businesses to pre-empt this shift in policy. An alarming 79% of respondents indicated that gender diversity was not a top ten strategic agenda at their business. Despite this, the majority agreed that having more women on the board would lead to better decision making, greater awareness of and attention to managing risk, better understating of employees' needs and better understanding of business culture.

Although, across the sectors, the move towards an acceptance of the benefits of gender diverse boards has been incremental, it was the view of many respondents that Consumer businesses are perhaps well placed to take a lead in promoting the benefits of gender diversity to other sectors:

"Many consumer businesses have female target audiences – even if the products themselves are used by men, women tend to be the purchasers. Consumer businesses have clearly recognised the benefit of having the internal insight of their purchasers on the boards." MD, Leading fashion brand.

The report also documents the alternative view, which is perhaps more prevalent outside of the consumer sector - that gender diversity is irrelevant. Proponents of this view argue that creating a team of 'well-rounded' individuals with the best skills, knowledge and experience should be the only important consideration when appointing a board. A discussion is also offered on why there are not currently more women on the boards of consumer companies.

The full report which includes a summary of other research conducted into this area and a suggested further reading list, can be downloaded from www.nigelwright.com/downloads