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How a Rolling Spirit Led to Managing Global Accountability at Infosys

Interviews and Profiles





Inderpreet Sawhney

GROUP GENERAL COUNSEL AND CHIEF COMPLIANCE OFFICER

INFOSYS

DALLAS, TEXAS

“The most exciting thing about working for Infosys is its global footprint,” exclaims Inderpreet Sawhney, the company’s group general counsel and chief compliance officer. Infosys, which provides IT services and solutions, is based in Bangalore and has over 200,000 employees in 46 countries, nearly 20,000 of whom work on its main campus. The Indian multinational’s largest customer base is in the United States, where it has offices in New York, Chicago, Indianapolis, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Dallas (where Sawhney is based); the company also serves Fortune 1000 companies around the world from London to Delhi to Tokyo. Its goal is to help enterprises understand where technology is going and how they can retool their resources to meet today’s evolving needs.

Using technology to free up time is critical in today’s business world, Sawhney argues. In her legal department, card tracks are used to review simple inquiries so her team can focus on more challenging problems.

Six areas of responsibility

Infosys’ legal department comprises 100 lawyers spread out in six “towers,” or specialized legal spheres that help the business. The largest area is contract negotiation strategy. Because Infosys operates in so many jurisdictions, and has such an intimate relationship with its clients, each jurisdiction has lawyers who specialize in local laws (sometimes supplemented with outside counsel). Working alongside the sales team, the lawyers help negotiate contracts with customers. When contract-related issues arise, whether a dispute or litigation, the lawyers are there to help clients resolve them.

The second pillar of the legal department is its global employment and immigration practice. “We often have to deal with the whole cycle of hire to retire,” Sawhney explains. The global nature of Infosys and its attendant challenges makes it a popular destination for employment lawyers who want to test themselves.

Getting to know... Inderpreet Sawhney

IS THERE A MOVIE OR BOOK YOU’VE RECENTLY SEEN THAT YOU WOULD RECOMMEND?

There are two I saw that made an impression. The first one is Bohemian Rhapsody — I just think the music and acting were very nice. I think Rami Malek did a terrific job playing Freddie Mercury. I’m not one to gravitate to musicals but I enjoyed it. Then I also liked A Star is Born very much.

WHAT’S THE BEST PIECE OF PROFESSIONAL ADVICE YOU’VE EVER RECEIVED?

The best piece of professional advice I’ve received is when you are presented with an issue, look at the message and provide your response rather than looking at the messenger. Don’t color your advice or your reaction based on who’s saying it but focus on what’s being said. I think in our day-to-day activities we often get biased by our relationships, good or bad or whatever our prior experience has been. And every time I find myself reacting to someone, it’s a good way to step back and say, no, this isn’t about the individual. It’s about the issue at hand. It’s simple but very effective.

Infosys, like many technology companies, is involved in several mergers.

The fourth tower is IP. “We look at the whole gamut: patent strategy, trademarks, licensing, and open source,” Sawhney says. For open source projects, lawyers partner with engineers to ensure the client has the proper expectations (Infosys also uses open source solutions in-house). The lawyers educate the developers and engineers so they know if the product will be sublicensed or if it touches any propriety. She also is responsible for negotiating with government relations and overseeing regulatory compliance internationally.

About 40 to 50 percent of the company’s lawyers are based in India. Sawhney visits Bangalore several times during the year and will often stop in the United Kingdom or Germany on the way there to have face-to-face meetings with her lawyers there. Every other year, the entire legal department meets in Bangalore. The reality of running a global department means that Sawhney needs to conduct most reviews and meetings online.

Sawhney identifies three legal challenges that Infosys continually needs to address. She contends that the biggest challenge is the very thing that is also most exciting — the breadth and scope of Infosys. “We are so spread out and have such a large footprint that we have to have a dynamic system in place to make sure we stay compliant with everything we need to be compliant with,” she shares.

The second area of concern is data breaches. With data protection laws changing around the world, ensuring enough protection is built into contractual agreements is always a top concern.

The third challenge is a synthesis of the first two: How does Infosys hire lawyers who have the skills to ensure there are adequate safeguards for the enterprise while also allowing the company to take the proper amount of risk? “We need to make sure we’re not turning down business,” Sawhney explains, “but also making sure the company is able to deal with challenges that may arise.”

While Infosys is an Indian company, Sawhney likes to think of it as a company that belongs to whatever jurisdiction it is operating in. It needs to adapt to its environment. In the United States, that means creating innovation hubs in a handful of cities. In some places, Infosys offices are embedded alongside clients. And everything flows back to its massive Bangalore headquarters.

No matter where the lawyers are based, Sawhney likes to be hands-on as a leader. If there is a high-level or strategic transaction, she will be involved. She constantly challenges her team to bring solutions to the table.

A last-minute lawyer

Sawhney describes herself as an Army brat. Her father was an officer in the Indian Army and her family relocated every two years, which gave her an appreciation of India’s diversity. “In India, everything changes from one state to another — the language, food, the way people dress,” she says. Her family lived on base in standardized housing, but when she and her sister went to school, they would join the local students and revel in the sights and sounds of their temporary town. Her mother was an occasional teacher and sometimes taught at the schools her daughters attended.

In India, by the time students are in high school, they have decided on a career path. Each student decides to pursue arts or engineering, medicine, or economics, etc. Sawhney was an economics student. She was considering furthering her economics education with a master’s degree when a friend mentioned she was applying to law school and encouraged her to apply as well. “It was a total last-minute decision,” Sawhney recalls. She was accepted.

No one in her family had practiced law and she didn’t really know any lawyers. “It wasn’t an elegant way to begin a career,” she admits. After she graduated from University of Delhi with a law degree, she pursued an LLM from Queens University in Ontario, Canada. She was struck by the difference in population — not only in general but in the classroom as well. As an LLM student, her classes were more research-oriented and smaller than the law classes she took in India. Her thesis was a comparative study on foreign direct investment in India.

Sawhney returned to India and took her first in-house job at ITC, a large corporation that had tobacco, paper, hotels, printing, and food verticals. Years later, she encountered a former coworker who said the company still uses the trademark system that Sawhney implemented. She recalls that the legal department at ITC was particularly advanced at the time and she credits the experience with infusing her with a passion for untangling business problems. At the time, the company was involved in tax litigation. “As a young lawyer, it was really great to grapple with issues that were so central to the business,” she says.

After relocating to the United States, she passed the notoriously difficult California bar exam, then joined a Los Angeles law firm. The firm decided it needed a Silicon Valley office and Sawhney’s “rolling spirit” prompted her to raise her hand. The relocation meant she experienced the first dot-com boom. “There was this buzz around,” she remembers, “and I wanted to step in and take advantage of that.” During her 14 years at the firm, she learned how to find answers independently and to not rely on others to come up with solutions — which is a crutch she’s seen in-house counsel

use too often.

“Ultimately, our job is to look for future GCs who are at Infosys or even create them for other organizations,” she says. “To do that, they need to be able to look at all aspects of the law so that they become generalists by nature and can provide better advice to internal clients.”

ACC EXTRAS ON... Data breaches

ACC Docket

Ethics of Data in the Digital Era (Aug. 2019).

How Europe’s General Data Protection Regulation Rewrote Data Protection Rules (March 2019).

Ten Steps to Protect Privilege in the Event of Data Breach (Dec. 2018).

Tips for Responding to a Breach (Aug. 2018).

Article

[ACC Response to White Paper of the Committee of Experts on a Data Protection Framework for India \(Jan. 2018\).](#)

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