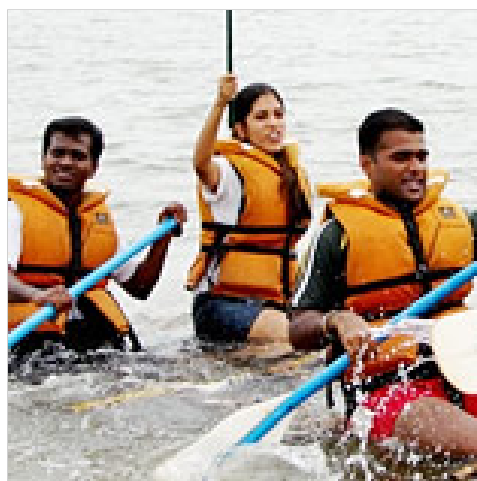


## Unconventional Training

Though the concept of the outbound training (OBT) institutes came from the west, the genesis of it can be traced in Indian mythology and history which is replete with the instances of Gurukul which involved learning through experience in the midst of nature

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BY [Entrepreneur](#) | Oct 13, 2009 [comments \(1\)](#) |



Man's aloofness from nature has led to the need of the institutions which can bring man back to nature to understand his own nature. Apart from the fatigue factor of trainer led indoor sessions, interventions like team building, leadership development and addressing behavioral related issues within teams and organizations is best addressed through outbound training (OBT). Secondly in this internet era all the desired information and knowledge are available at a click, OBT can be an interesting and relevant

alternative to learn lessons in the lap of nature. The other factor is the evolution of human capital intensive industries like IT and BPO which were exposed to such interventions and more importantly were open to experimenting different forms of learning. The OBT has already emerged as a prominent and useful tool for HR development, team building and creating excellent synergies in corporate sector as well as in educational institutes.

### Outbound training

Outbound training employs the concepts of action and experience to impart learning wherein one's experiences serve as a learning tool. The trainees gain immediate and powerful insights into their own through various outdoor activities where they will be required to face challenging situations as individuals and teams. This will help them see the importance of communication, leadership, teamwork, planning and delegation. OBT is one of the best platforms for personality development, confidence building, problem solving, conflict management and team building. One of the most unique aspects of OBT is that trainees are immediately able to see the consequences of wrong actions and can see the substantial difference that can be made by a change in thinking and behaviour.

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The concept of using the outbound as a modern tool in management training was first developed in the 1940's by Dr. Kurt Hahn, a philosopher. He believed that the outbound has many lessons for city people who with advancing civilizations and technology were losing touch with the opportunities to develop self-reliance, physical fitness and a compassion for others. In India, outbound segment has been in existence since 80's but has not evolved into an organized sector as the players active in this space vary from individual free lancers to small sized companies, the operating models are also different, hence it is difficult to put an exact number with regard to growth rate. However, looking at the number of new players cropping up and the positive growth being experienced by the existing players, it is safe to conclude that it is growing. It has the potential to grow into a separate industry provided it gets accepted as another form of learning in realms of soft skills in education, public and government sector. Today by and large the acceptance is mainly in the corporate sector.

### Pre requisites

For starting an OBT training institute the investment could range from some lakhs to crores depending upon whether one chooses to build one's own outdoor delivery centre or have tie ups with other companies for organizing camps in their locations, number of trainers (full time and part time) and kinds of activities designed. The trainers may further charge 2000 to 10,000 per day for imparting training whereas certain expert trainers may charge 30,000 to 40,000 per day. Investment can go up to few crores in setting up a resort which has cabins, tents and barracks as choices for living and outdoor facilities like rock climbing, rappelling, rope course, obstacle courses, water activities (like raft building, river crossing), horse riding, trekking, shooting, parasailing, theatre, dining areas and discussion halls.

Experience in defense services, corporate sector or education can certainly prove beneficial in taking off. It could be a wonderful opportunity for the retired defense professionals with an entrepreneurial zeal to get into this business as they can employ some of the practices to inculcate certain characteristics like team spirit, co-operation, leadership etc. that they have experienced. Brigadier Sushil Bhasin saw an opportunity when given the onerous responsibility of being the Chairman of Army School Bareilly in 2002. "While taking up this challenge, I fell in love with children and enjoyed working with them. A passion grew in me and one day when the Head Girl presented me with a 12 feet long scroll, in the shape of a pencil, on which 800 children had expressed their thanks to me, the passion grew into action and then germinated the seed of Empower," reminiscences Brigadier Sushil Bhasin, Chairman & MD, Empower Activity Camps. Girish Konkar, Founder, Beyond Horizon too was passionate about the outbound right from the school days and felt that what the outbound can teach one in the field of leadership, team building and personality development which no class room can teach. It was his passion for adventure and knowledge of management along with experiences while serving in the Indian Navy which introduced Konkar to this field.

With regard to faculty which includes mentors and trainers, 10–15 years work experience in any field besides an exposure to behavioral science or human psychology is a must. The facilitators must have ability to handle participants in extreme discomfort and willingness to go through the discomfort along with the participants apart from the passion for outdoors, knowledge of management and leadership principles besides behavioral skills and sciences. Highlighting the importance of a rich faculty Tarun Chandna, Founder, Exper avers, "We are management graduates from XLRI, Aim's and INSEAD collectively having 15 to 40 years of experience. The diverse backgrounds of

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the facilitators help us target the right person to the right organisation and the issue being tackled.”

### Location

While most of the OBT institutes develop their own delivery centres and camp sites, they can also have tie ups with certain companies or forest department or take the camp site on rent for arranging camps. They may provide training at their client’s location as well. However, their own captive centers offer them the flexibility to choose from a vast pool of activities to address the program objectives, while for programs at other venues may have constrains in terms of resources available at these venues.

Capt Sanmugham Ravi, Founder, Pegasus says, “The learning programs are conducted at our delivery centers located at Bangalore, Pune, Bhubaneshwar, Pondicherry and Dehradun. On rare occasions when it is absolutely non negotiable, we also work outside our centers but with a very clear understanding that the return on investment is far higher when the programs are conducted at our own centers.”

Exper recommends some locations that are ideal for training, though at times go with customer’s choice if the location meets the requirements. Some of the locations where it has trained includes, Bin tan Island in Indonesia, Sikkim, Mauritius, Bhutan, in and several off beat places all over India. The company currently is in the process of setting up three locations which will offer all the facilities it needs to deliver these trainings.

Empower too conducts most of the training at its own site. However, it has conducted many programmes for ICICI Bank, BAYER, Hyatt Regency, UTI, Franklin Templeton and GSK at other locations and for RYAN International Schools all over India. It has some tie ups with resorts and training companies all over India. Help Tourism has 28 locations across the East and Northeast India. Most of these sites are managed by local communities and are away from cities where the trainees have to cope up and acclimatize with the local living conditions as a part of the training.

### Services offered

Various services that are provided through OBT include leadership, team building, confidence raising, problem solving, decision making, conflict management and behavioural science through various activities and programmes. These programmes are further supplemented through discussions which ensure the fulfillment of the objectives. The duration of the programmes can be from one day to one month depending upon the requirements and budget of the company. OBT can be imparted to a small group of 5-10 people to 40-60 people at a time. However, the fee per person goes up in case of the smaller group.

The programmes designed by the companies by dialoging with the program initiator or some of the participants to understand the real life challenges, objectives and expectations of the client. At times, they also shadow the participants at their work places to get the real feel. Post this an appropriate programme is designed considering which activity would address the need of the client most effectively. Asit Biswas, Co-founder, Help Tourism avers, “Our modules are customized based on the requirement, type, size, budget and products of our clients. Our dedicated research team after series of meetings and interviews sets up the module and selects appropriate site. Outdoor lab



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(ODL) activities are led and managed by our own team that consists of highly professional and experienced trainers.”

Talking of the programmes that the company provides, Girish Konkar, Founder, Beyond Horizons, says, “Our programmes vary from one to seven days. The intensity of the programmes varies from plain simple resort or company premises based programmes to complex adventure based programmes.” Exper too offers interventions that use the outdoors to drive teamwork and enhancing leadership behaviour including enhancing specific competencies i.e. coaching skills, persuasion and influencing skills, communication skills and management skills. Talking about how their services are customized after understanding customers’ needs, Tarun Chandna, Founder, Exper Executive Education says, “We spend a lot of time and resources on talking to the concerned people through a structured process. This gives us a view of the organisation. Our consultants and facilitators do it themselves so there is no loss in communication. Post this we present back to the client our understanding and the intervention design that is most appropriate only then does the delivery occur. This implies that the customer has to be serious about the intervention and see a genuine need for the same.”

### **Target customers**

Target customers for these institutes could be anyone from corporates, students to families or individuals with an aim to have an experiential learning. Pegasus is involved with all levels of the outbound experience, across all levels of the client companies, with the right kind of people at each level, and at each part of the life cycle, to give its clients innovative methodologies to assist in real life change in behavior with the ability to document such change where required. Its target customers range from new inductee (campus to corporate) to the senior leadership team besides students and individuals. The client list of Help Tourism includes SMEs, creative companies (Advertisement & P R agencies, Film Production Houses), educational institutions, NGOs, development organizations, physically challenged persons and conservation organizations whereas Exper’s target customers are middle to senior executives. Empower also serves a broad spectrum which range from students, teachers, principals, to corporate executives at all levels. Beyond Horizon after experiencing success in its programmes for corporates launched its programme, ‘Igniting Minds’ for children.

The programmes for children are more basic and fundamental aimed at building self-confidence and other behavioural virtues while college students are prepared to enter into the professional world. On the other hand the training for professionals is designed keeping in mind the ultimate aim of the organization they are working for. Besides that programmes for children are more activity based as their energy levels are high whereas training for corporates is more learning oriented (sales enhancement skills, leadership qualities) with greater stress on one to one and interactions. At times similar activities are conducted for children and corporates but different goals are achieved through the discussion that follows the activity. Elaborating it further, Brigadier Sushil Bhasin, Chairman & MD, Empower activity Camps says, “We have an activity called ‘passing the ring’ wherein 30 participants are made to pass the ring while standing in a circle. When the ring gets passed through a few participants, each participant is asked to anticipate the time required to complete one circle. The answer may range from 10 minutes to one hour but when the whole activity takes place it may take 40 minutes.” The same activity

can be useful in making the children understand whether they under estimated their capabilities to score in their examination. However the inference can be in terms of capability to achieve higher sales targets in the case of a sales executive.

### **Safety measures**

As the activities are conducted outdoors, certain precautions need to be taken to ensure the safety of the attendees. It can be done by creating a safety net by anticipating the probable accidents. The participants should be given proper briefing before the activities as that could minimize risk. The trainers should be technically sound in mountaineering, skiing, rafting, shooting and other risky tasks. The manpower should adequately be trained to provide first aid and handle any unforeseen situation.

### **Hurdles**

Being an experiential learning format, the biggest challenge remains to communicate the power of the experience to the prospective participants as this is unlike a product or concept selling. Moreover, lack of an organised outbound training industry or an association further poses a challenge in terms of guidance and mutual co-operation. Further, there are problems related to a lot of negotiation for the training fee, last minute cancellations, not sharing goals and objectives, late payments etc. besides problems related to permissions and delay in construction.

Counting his initial challenges, Ravi says, "One of the major challenges we face is to match participants and organizations expectations, there is a strong misconception amongst many organizations that outbound means 'adventure' and 'fun'. While this is definitely there, at Pegasus the thrust is more on the learning. Hence when there is a mismatch in understanding the purpose then it becomes a challenge to get the participants to a learning mindset." Talking of the initial challenges the company faced, Biswas says, "To introduce the process of unlearning is the most challenging task. Trainees come with prejudices and presumptions. After few initial jerks they feel very relaxed and enjoy the lab." Other challenges could be getting equally passionate facilitators and willingness of corporate to push their people out of comfort zones. Explaining how they overcome such challenges, Konkar states, "We introduce the facilitators to our methodology and processes and give the corporates an insight into our programmes through photographs, presentations and one to one discussions and convince them to co operate us to get the best out of our programmes."

### **Levy, profit and break even**

The companies may reap huge profits as they usually charge 1000- 10,000 per head per day depending upon the kind of training and facilities (tent or cottage, food) they are providing. The charges go up for the corporates as compared to children. The company can earn anywhere between 10- 40 lakh per month. In a short span of less than two years, Exper has grown to 20 employees and a turnover of Rs 5 crore with a 70 plus customer base comprising key industry names whereas Beyond Horizon had a turnover of 55 lakh in the year 2008. Empower, however earns 10-15 lakh a month on an average. It can take a company one to four years to reach its break even depending upon the initial investment apart from the goal and strategy of the company.

### **Marketing**

Like every service industry the best marketing tool for OBT is 'word of mouth' as they

win new clients on referral basis besides retaining the old ones. Ravi reiterates similar view as he says, "Our marketing engine for the last 10 years has been word of mouth only, however recently we have engaged a professional agency to drive this initiative, the new positioning statement has been evolved, the communication in various forms will happen on a continuous basis henceforth." Empower has a small marketing team in Mumbai and Pune. Website can be another important marketing tool to popularize one's services. By uploading various case studies of the programmes done for the clients, you can give a better peep into the services you provide.

It is a good idea to send mails or give presentation in institutes and organization to introduce your company and explain the benefits of your services to them. Besides that conducting a few free workshops could rope in more clients. Empower conducts free workshops on certain issues and then explain to the attendees how its services can benefit in inculcating those virtues.

### **Future beyond recession**

Talking of the impact of recession on the outbound training sector, Konkar says, "The slowdown has definitely made us redesign the programmes. We have not made any major investments other than intellectual capital. Companies which have seen the benefit of these programmes continue to go in for them even in these trying times. In fact these programmes help companies to face the current situation and keep the team together and their morale high." Replying to whether the time is apt to make a debut in this industry, Ravi quotes a Chinese proverb, "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago, the next best time is today." He further adds, "These recessionary trends are short term and should not matter for long term players."

Talking of his strategy to cope with the slowdown, Bhasin says, "We had invested our pensions and personal savings and beyond that there were loans. For expenses we broke even in the second year. We have plans to expand our facility but due to the current market situation, we have put it on hold. We are working on various plans like including low cost training options to face the current market situation." Pegasus plans are to create 20 institutes in the next five years in India and abroad. Beyond Horizons too aims to go beyond the horizons by conducting programmes in locations outside India and providing quality services. Exper plans to launch a youth outbound training venture slated for April 2009. It also plans to launch outward bound educational programme for families as well as for the 18 to 25 age group.

Though recession has hit every sector especially when the corporates are cutting down on their expenses to save every single penny, OBT has a scope to emerge as a separate industry as it is possibly the time when one actually needs to come out of his comfort zone in an outbound environment and realize one's real strength to conquer the odds, people need to come together to build good teams and organizations need efficient leaders to lead them to success. To sum up we may say that outbound may prove therapeutic to heal the wounds of recession.