

Interview Article with Dr. Augustus Azariah
(Azariah Employee & Labor Relations Leader, Kyndryl, Asia Pacific Middle East & Africa region)



On 16th December 2022 Dr. Augustus Azariah Employee & Labor Relations Leader, Kyndryl, Asia Pacific Middle East & Africa region was at SDMIMD to deliver Valedictory Address for the 10th International HR Conference on the topic “HR for business Excellence”. Pre session the Dimensions committee had the opportunity to interview Dr. Augustus Azariah to capture insights from his experience rich illustrious career.

The interaction was as follows:

Dimensions Team: “Covid-19 pandemic has changed the work culture. We see employees predominantly choosing virtual mode of working and companies adopting virtual mode of working and hybrid mode of working. It is an understood concept that corporate culture is essential for shaping employee’s perception, work experience and brand building for all of which employees’ presence is rather important so, how do you reconcile the two?”

Dr. Augustus Azariah: “Very good question. The first thing here is, let us look at the work force. The work force that needs to be office and the work force that can work remotely, if you ask culture is key here, culture is something you’ve got to drive across your work force, across layers and levels. For you to have an effective pipe line starting with your early professional hire which will be, some of you getting into the corporate world. I would recommend that you get into the work place physically. What happens when you get into the work place physically is that you have a direct connect with your manager and your manager can couch you, mentor you, guide you through the ropes because you are new, they can bridge you from an academic lifestyle to a corporate lifestyle. That is key and can happen in an environment like this. Now you could also say can this not be done digitally? Of course, it can be done digitally. It is effectiveness of the collaboration that you’ll be driving here. Why do I bring in collaboration? It’s because, when you come together and collaborate it fasteners innovation. Which id defiantly a key in the growth of business. So early professional hires, supervisors and managers defiantly need it be in physical workplace, together is recommended. If not all days of the week, then three days in a week or whatever works. Then you have the tenure work force who have gone through

this and maybe have learned the roles and they are able to be self-driven, they have their own disciplined in terms of how to work remotely, they know company programs, policies, privacy laws so on and so forth to ensure that they are compliant to those things and are also having the right equipment for them to be productive at home or remotely.”

Dimensions Team: “Our country’s youth population is relatively high. We also have established companies with senior management. We see innovation in business across industries hence a shift in the way of thinking and way of doing is in order. In this situation a clash of ideas can be expected so, how do you reconcile the two?”

Dr. Augustus Azariah: “Fantastic question. If you look at a work place its multi-generational, you’re very right. I think this brings in tremendous value to the market place. You have their generations from where you can derive knowledge, now how do you get these three generations to work together. To me culture is important, a culture of inclusiveness and embracing diversity is important. You’ve got to build whether it is the younger generation or the senior generation in terms of having the same cultural orientation to diversity and inclusiveness in the work place, that’s the first thing. The company should promote the spirit, a behaviour of culture, diversity and inclusiveness. The world economic forum report indicated that one in every four-working people in the world by 2025 will be India, we have the youngest workforce in the world while the rest of the world is aging. What is the opportunity that we have to export knowledge? India becomes the knowledge capital of the world including other sector like manufacturing but knowledge, knowledge capital of the world, Indian has that opportunity. We have to grab that opportunity, underlining our sense of inclusivity and diversity. That will get you the business result you are looking for.”

Dimensions Team: “One of the major reason startups fails is because of talent acquisition. So, how do we acquire the right talent and retain the right talent because there’s a fear attached with startup regarding salary and work load.”

Dr. Augustus Azariah: Well, I think the first thing here is what employer brand are you able to promote to potential employees. Employer brand is so important weather you’re a start-up or established brand. An employer brand also reflects the value system that your organisation is. Let’s say you’re a start-up in healthcare industry and the best way to attract and retain people in the healthcare sector would be to say look what you are going to be doing weather its writing code or selling vaccines in the market place everything you do impacts life. If you are a kind of person that needs purpose to the work that you are doing then this is the right place for you. You got a pull factor there. It’s so important to have a pull factor in terms of weather if you’re a start-up or established company and your employer brand clearly resonates that.

Dimensions Team: “Post Covid pandemic we are witnessing great resignation, what do you think the companies should do to survive that? That is retaining good talent.”

Dr. Augustus Azariah: “What was the trigger for the great resignation? People were under lockdown and remotely working. During this time people fell sick, some lost loved ones, lot of grief and uncertainty weather

I will be there tomorrow, if somebody is going to be there or not. We had shortages be it of oxygen and various such things. So, this opened some questions within people, and those questions were what is the purpose to my work? Is there something greater than what I am doing today? Once people started seeing all this and experiencing the grief, loss and what not, they told themselves I need to do something beyond work and therefore the latent realisation was purpose driven life and purpose driven work. What is the purpose of the working in xyz company? So, when people saw that their personal believes was not resonating with the business strategies and value of the company, they started looking at other companies where could do it. So, of them also felt that time is so short let me earn more and they drive into companies where they were getting much more. The other factor was skills, the pandemic accelerated the need for technology and the skills to implement the technology was less because we didn't expect for the time cycle to be crunched. So, you didn't have time to train people and people didn't even get it in their mind that these are the skills for the future that I need to equip myself. With all these things people started leaving and because of the demand in the work place they started getting higher compensation and what not. These were some of the drivers for the great resignation."

Dimensions Team: "There are a lot of technologies like AI, cloud and etcetera. So, how does an HR in an organization know which technology to adopt and how to train the employees about that?"

Dr. Augustus Azariah: "One of them of course is the good old system of doing training means analysis based on your business forecast or pipeline of business you have, now in a data driven world and digital work place everybody has to be tech savvy irrespective of which sector your working in, you can't say I'm in shipping or mining and therefor the technology is not as much as in the IT sector. I think we all are influenced, driven, will drive and are driving on technology. So, the first thing is to come to a level plane field of being digital trained qualifier, it's the first thing your HR has to do or your business has to do. Now is training and skilling HR responsibility? Yes, to a large extent but those skills you're talking about be it AI, cloud analytics and its various derivatives are defiantly derived from the business. So, to a large extent business should be driving skilling. HR can contribute to management of education, management development and soft skills but the core technical skill should lie with the business or it should a collaborative effort between your training, skills department and business, you cannot do it isolation because it will not be aligned to what the market wants or future business. You have to make learning skills part of business responsibility while HR is a partner."

Dimensions Team: "What are your views on the role of AI in HRM?"

Dr. Augustus Azariah: Let me answer that question this way, today HR is at the table which means it's a crucial driver for the business and I say this because you put people at the core of the business, so where does HR come in AI, ML and digital work place? HR is right there and they have to ensure in employee experience which can be delivered digitally or any other manner. HR however cannot shy away from technological revolution that is sweeping across, it has to be at the forefront because it's about transformation, it's about your

business transformation and your workforce transformation. If you don't driver your work force transforming into a digital work force who else will do it? So that's a huge responsibility today for HR.

Dimensions Team: "During the pandemic, employees have worked from home. Recruitment happened online as well. So, how does origination ensure data privacy, how are cybersecurity issues taken care of?"

Dr. Augustus Azariah: "Very relevant question. Data privacy and security has to be out there as the most important complaints mechanism for employees, so if you're doing finance and banking related work sitting at home then you have to ensure that you are in a place which maintains that level of data privacy and confidentiality. Today companies give a laptop and a connection in the hope that you'll use it in a professional manner, so it's important for employees to have high level of ethics and integrity. Ethics and integrity are something which again is part of your culture and HR will need to drive education and enablement on the need to have the value system in the corporation and it also has to demonstrate what will happen if there is a violation of company data, you need to have the right mechanism to identify and also to take corrective action. If somebody is involved in misusing data whether its stealing data or acquiring data your disciplinary system should be very strong and ensure that appropriate action is taken, education is done so that it does not repeat. Company should also have its data privacy policies and guidelines. Employees that work remotely need to sign this, you need to have NDS for every project that you're working on, working within a very tight boundary so that there is no leakage inadvertently or even deliberately for confidential data."

Dimensions Team: "What do you look for in a fresh MBA graduate?"

Dr. Augustus Azariah: "One of the things we would be looking for is definitely that hunger to excel and be a risk taker, to have a mindset of inclusiveness. You cannot achieve things by yourself, you have to include people with a high level of adaptability because so much of uncertainty you must be able to adapt to different cinereous and situations very easily. Learning curve has to be high therefor I will call it the learnability. So, the ability to do these things in a quick manner, adapting to different manners and therefor becoming resilient. Resilience is very important, we were hit by a pandemic and we had a lot of things that had happen, God forbid is something similar happens do we have the resilience to overcome the next one? We have to build that resilience."

Dimension Team: "What are your advice for the young graduates of our collage who are moving in to corporate?"

Dr. Augustus Azariah: "I think you'll have to come with a high level of ethics, values, integrity and personal belief system. You must ensure that it resonates with the organisation and only when you are able to connect your personal values and belief system to organisational objectives or business strategies only then can you be on the same page. I'll end this with an example. What is my value system? Let's say I am concerned about pollution. What can I do? I can keep cursing about that and go about my work or actually do something about it, but I am working in this IT company writing code in java so how do I help in reducing the pollution? So, I see this advertisement from an airline company and it's a good opportunity so I applied. Why would I want to

join an airline company when they are the biggest polluters in the world? Because this role is actually to help this airline company reduce its carbon footprint and be carbon neutral by 2030. So, every line of java code that I am writing in this particular project helps reduce the emission and therefore my purpose of value system resonates with that business strategies and when these two are able to come together I am engaged. Engagement starts from there and this is engagement that is sustainable. I can take a few people to a hill station or beach resort and have a good time but will it help build a lasting engagement? It will help network, socialise and that is very good, we are human beings we need all that but what is sustainable in the long run is when you build a system where your values resonate with business methods for lasting engagement.”