

Preparing for the future

With a keen focus on under-resourced government educational institutions, Medha is bringing its career service model to the youth after school, writes **Sneha Bhattacharjee**

Working in the micro-finance world with a young population, hiring them for varied roles, and getting inspired by their journey in the organisation, two people from two different parts of the world never imagined that they would take the learning from there to build something of their own. Byomkesh Mishra and Chistopher Turillo set up Medha in 2011 to prepare the youth for life after schools by providing them 21st-century skills training, career counselling and workplace exposure, and ongoing job placement and alumni support to students at their existing educational institution.

Focusing currently on Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, Turillo and Mishra realised that there wasn't anyone working directly with the education system especially in this geography. "We try to work with the system and build their capacity to work with the students," says Turillo, who is the co-founder of the organisation.

Medha works on three modules — life skills, digital literacy and career advancement. They tie up with students from government institutions, IT institutes, and colleges across the smaller towns and cities of the northern belt where they are present at the moment. Through the modules, the education is imparted to the students with the help of faculty within the institution. "What we focus on is making the students confident, help them in effective communication skills, professional skills and

build their digital literacy," Turillo adds. With the aim to provide students basic employability skills, the organisation helps students avail of on-the-job training and gain confidence to face the competitive world.

But it is not that the organisation does all this without taking into consideration the aspirations of the students. It is very important that the students like the job they are in, feels Turillo, hence Medha believes in each student's talents and helps them identify and nurture it. The country is at the epicentre of a global employability crisis. In the next 20 years, over 300 million people are expected to join the workforce. However, less than 20 per cent have the knowledge, expertise and skills to make the cut in today's workforce.

It is these gaps that the organisation is trying to fill with its programme. The organisation considers alumni networking a very important aspect of its functioning. "Unless we track the progress of our students, we will not be able to guide them the right way. We have a team especially for keeping in touch with

the network so that they find us whenever they are in the midst of career crisis and discuss what decision should they take," says Turillo. Precisely why Medha has been able to improve the employment, employability and skills of 90 per cent of their students.

That there have been challenges, they are very typical of the geography that they work for, feels Turillo. "The basic questions are whether there are enough jobs and if they match the aspi-



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rations of the students is quite common. Not to forget funding alternatives," he adds. Further, to work with government institutions is no doddle. There have been times when the organisation has not been able to meet the respective faculty because "there was no one working as faculty there". But Turillo is happy that despite the challenges, about 70 per cent of the women have been brought into the educational institutes here. Take the case of Raginee from Varanasi, who has never felt as confident before as she feels now after having learnt communication team management skills at Medha. "Now I don't need to be asked to speak up, just pass me the mic and I will be on a roll," she says.

With the aim to reach over 40,000 students in the next three years, Medha is expanding to eight states with a focus on the north and northeast. The last five years have seen the organisation grow at over 300 per cent, making a difference to the life of students in 55 educational institutions. The organisation is supported by leading global foundations and corporations like the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, Citigroup, and Accenture; and has received numerous awards and recognition for its work, including the Echoing Green Global Fellowship, the Dasra Girl Power Award, and the Sitaram Rao Livelihoods Asia Award.



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