

New: employees booking a ticket to the far East for cheaper ICT-training HOW YOUR TRAINING GOT 50% CHEAPER

More and more employees are, urged by the economic crisis, flying to India to give their careers a new impulse. Employers are following hesitantly. Or how also the training-market is globalizing in rapid pace.

“With my first study trip to India I increased my income with 33%. Thanks to the certificate I got here, my annual salary went from 60000 to 90000 pound sterling.” David Ashley (43) says proudly. “I’m here now for the second time. I’ve been working on servers for 10 years and have done just about everything you can do with them. Now I’ve gotten bored by them and want to reorient my career. Three months I’m staying here, and by then end of that time I want to master SharePoint. This technology is really hot for the moment. The Microsoft product allows people to work together on projects remotely.” David Ashley is a freelance IT professional who works on projects during one or two year periods of time. “In order to get the necessary certificates I need to do eight exams these next few months, I’ve already done two so far. But once I’m back in England companies will come knocking on my door, I’m certain.”

David is one of the western IT professionals we met in the North Indian city of Dehradun. In the small training rooms of the brand new building of training provider Koenig Solutions they work on their IT knowledge. They increase their skills in software technologies from the likes of Microsoft, Oracle, Cisco... David Ashley: “I’ve tried several times from the UK, but I just can’t study at home. It doesn’t work with books and it doesn’t work online. After two week I would just give up. Here, the only thing you can do is study. You’re working with the material 12 hours a day. The first week you can’t take up a lot of information, but by the second week you digest information ten times faster. The trainers I get here are real experts. They tell me more than traditional trainers would do. But now and then I get homesick. I miss my six year old daughter.” Every evening David Skypes with his wife and kid.

Offshore your ICT training

Network provider Novell started issuing certificates back in 1989. A certificate proves that you have mastered a certain software product. In 1994 Microsoft jumped the bandwagon, when launching Windows 95. Meanwhile certification is common in the IT world. You receive a certificate when you pass an online exam. The cost of an exam is not excessively expensive: 120 euro. But in India it is cheaper: 35 euro. “But the training to prepare you for the exam, it is expensive!” explains Rohit Aggarwal, the CEO of the Indian company Koenig Solutions. Koenig Solutions is happy to be the cheaper alternative. “A European who is training with us pays about half (including airfare and accommodation) of what he would pay in his own country.” The western IT people we met in Delhi and Dehradun claimed that the price is the main reason why they chose to travel to India. Jacques Verleijen (54) of the Gemeenschapsonderwijs also had three week training at Koenig: “Koenig’s offer proved to be by far the best deal.” And it can even get cheaper. Koenig is certified by the Flemish Government. Companies, who send employees to India for training, can get subsidies up to about one third of the cost (via KMO Portefeuille). Individuals can get 250 euro worth of education-cheques from VDAB. Jason Verhaegen, owner of V-software, sent an employee over to Delhi for a five weeks training in January. “Even though we need to carry on paying salaries, I estimate that Koenig is one third cheaper than the competition. And the quality of the training was high. On top of that, the Flemish government subsidized one third of the cost.”

Focus on international customers

How did Koenig Solutions evolve? In 1993, Rohit Aggarwal and six others started an IT company in Delhi, hoping to get offshore jobs from western companies. “We started with the training of our first employees. And we never got beyond that first phase of the business plan.” When the dotcom bubble burst in 2002, things got difficult for Koenig. “We then decided to focus solely on international customers. In December 2002 we had our first American customer.” This year Koenig will attract 1500 students, most coming from Nigeria, Australia and the Gulf states. “Because of the crisis our growth has slowed down somewhat. Particularly European customers have been reducing volume, but slowly they are now coming back. But now more often on an individual basis: these customers are using the recession to further educate

themselves.” If this difference in price is so large, then why are American and European students not storming their way to India? “I notice a certain reserve, even distrust with regards to the offshoring of training,” says Dirk Praet, who represents Koenig in the Benelux. “I was recently in touch with Barco and Coca Cola. Our formula is completely new to them.” “In the Netherlands, Koenig was better known. “Getronix and ING used to send 5 to 10 people over on a regular basis” explains Rohit Aggarwal. “That flow decreased when these companies stopped hiring new staff. Before the recession, half of the students came from Europe, but now only 20% of them come over to Delhi.”

The glass office of Koenig is situated on a busy road leading to the metropolis. From afar the building looks quite chic, but the old army cupboard and the hastily installed fan at the entrance reminds us that we’re still in India. On the basement floor we visit the training rooms of Koenig. Three years ago Hema Sharma became responsible for this training centre. “Back then we could cater for up to 30 students, today it’s 50 and soon it will be 70. The rooms are clean but basic: computers, a whiteboard and some chairs. But all of the students are happy. One of them, Jason Carlton (35) has been working for 3 years on the IT of an American army base in Afghanistan. He is taking an MCSE course, probably the most popular course at Koenig. “As a freelance I do a lot of work for the Department of Defence. With this new certificate I will certainly get a lot more work. It’s good to be studying here, even though I have to admit that I had to adjust to the Indian English of my trainer the first day. The typical power failures you hear about cause no problem at all. Machines keep the power supply steady. With the other students here the atmosphere is excellent. I will surely come back here.”

Treating the trainers well

We also run into the Dutchman, from Surinam background called Zaïd Abdoelrahman (41) who is here to redirect his career. “I have a technical degree, but have been working as a television journalist for the ‘word service’ for years now. But the prospects in the media industry are limited. I am now doing a 6-week training to become a Java programmer. This training is costing me 4000 euro, including travel and accommodation. In the Netherlands the training in itself would have cost me 18000 euro. Apart from the lower price, the 120 Koenig trainers are the one who make the difference.” “Most of my attention goes to solving their problems,” says Aggarwal. “We offer our trainers a schedule that is quite unique in India: trainers have a nine to five job, are not obliged to work on weekends, but they do have to spend about one third of their time studying their subject matter. This way we can attract and keep the best trainers around. Their salary varies between 200 and 275 euro. A senior trainer can earn up to 675 euro and sometimes gets a company car.

“Not everyone is prepared to, or can, do this kind of trainings,” warns the British student David Ashley. “You need to have the right mindset; you have to concentrate on informatics for several weeks. Those who view it as a holiday will not get their certificate.” Swiss IT professional José Tapia (48) is finding it quite exhausting, “The training is intense. For some people it’s a nightmare, but me, I’m ‘buying time’. Here I can really concentrate on getting certification, and with those certificates I can easily manage competition back home in Switzerland.”

“The courses are indeed very intense. But my employee got a one-to-one training, without having asked for it. We were very pleased with the result,” says Flemish Jason Verhaegen of V-software. “The trip is an ideal incentive for young employees who want to have a taste of India. The fact that the employee got certified is also important for our company, because now we can request Microsoft to be rewarded a ‘Microsoft-partner’ status”.

Does the Koenig proposition threaten our Belgian training companies? Rohit Aggarwal: “They don’t need to worry too much. Not everyone likes the idea of a long period of foreign training. Koenig is also a niche player, offering training aimed at certification.” But a few minutes further into the conversation he mentions that in a few years time he would like to have a permanent office and representation in Amsterdam, “maybe even with our own trainer on site.”

_ would you travel to India for a training to increase your market value?

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