

# partnership in action

## UKIBC Case Study

# GET THROUGH GUIDES

Beginning her career as a Chartered Accountant, Vandana Saxena Poria OBE, Founder and Chief Executive of Get Through Guides has taken an entrepreneurial approach to her goal of making quality finance training accessible throughout the globe. Moving on from the role of Chief Executive of BPP International, Vandana has showcased the prevalence of talent in India's professional skills market, and developed a global provider of professional finance, management and accounting publications.



Lord Digby Jones inaugurates the Get Through Guides Research, Development and Training Centre. Vandana is in the centre.

### What does Get Through Guides do?

Get Through Guides is an educational publishing and information technology provider. In a way we're a social enterprise / ethical education provider. Basically we specialise in writing text books to pass on skills to people in India and also the rest of the world. So we publish books that are sold across the world and we do training in different parts of the world.

### Are you incorporated as a UK company?

We have both a UK company and an Indian company.

### How long has Get Through Guides been active in India?

Two years now.

### With how many current employees?

35 in India, a couple full time in the UK, eight or ten freelance.

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## **Tell me about how you started the company.**

I was brought up in South London, in Tooting. I qualified as a Chartered Accountant and then I moved to Romania with Ernst and Young. I got a bit bored in the UK. When you're a chartered accountant you're auditing, and all the companies that we used to audit in the UK just worked brilliantly, and I wanted a challenge. I wanted to see something that was slightly different. I got transferred to Romania, and there it was completely different. In 1995 / 96 it was like the Wild West out there. It was just after the fall of the Iron Curtain. I chose Romania also because I had some Romanian friends, since the early 90's, and I was aware of a real opportunity to make a difference, to teach people. I approached a listed company in the UK called BPP, who specialise in training people in finance, management and law, who I knew from my ACA. I told them that they needed a presence in Romania. They said, thanks but no thanks – but if you want to do it for us then we'll give you a franchise. The franchise was so successful they bought me out and set up the international division. I spent the next ten years in Central and Eastern Europe setting up businesses for them.

## **That's an amazing success story in itself. What were the difficulties that you overcame in setting up that business?**

When I first moved to Poland, BPP had wanted me to emulate the success of Romania. I knew nothing about the market, the clients, the students or anything. I remember being in my hotel room, in tears! I was almost sure I couldn't do this. Then I opened a local English business publication, called the Warsaw Business Journal, and it said 'British Chamber of Commerce cocktails'. I thought, 'why don't I go along to this?' I went along, and it was just men in suits. Suddenly I saw three women, and went to talk to them. By total coincidence, they happened to be partners at one of the accounting firms. So immediately, by going to that and chatting to them, I got to understand the whole lay of the land after that first meeting. They were great, because I was honest and said, 'I've got no idea what to do', and they said, 'listen, let's exchange numbers'. And that was the very first meeting that I had. And it was then that I realised the power of networks, and mixing with people who had already done it. Since then I've been so heavily involved with Government initiatives, which get groups of people together, because it really works. I think it's great.

## **Why did you decide to leave your work in Europe to set up Get Through Guides?**

Three years ago, I looked around at my former students. One was a minister. Another was CEO of a mobile phone network. I talked to my husband who is of Indian descent as well, and said that having made such an impact in this region, that we could make an impact in India. At that time I was pregnant. I said to my husband, let's go.

We went to five cities in India. We did all the research ourselves, because I'd set up businesses in central and eastern Europe, which was in some ways harder. We knew what we wanted to do; we wanted to produce text books, we wanted to begin teaching. We went to Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune and Kolkata. We spent four or five days in each city, looked around, researched the kind of companies which were there, and we made the decision to move to Pune. It was six months later that we moved, when I was seven months pregnant. It was because we wanted to see if we really could make a difference.

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## How certain were you that the company would succeed in India and why?

I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that the company would succeed. Partly because of my past experience, and partly because the brains in India are just superb. Intelligent, fiery people. What we needed to do was write text books, and I knew that they had the knowledge, because the local qualification is very good. So I was sure. It was not a question of if, it was a question of when.

## What was your planned company structure, and why?

We thought we would start with three or four senior level people, and three or four lower level people. That's what we did. It was funny when we started up – we started the office in a flat. The first desk was two piles of bricks with a cast-off wooden slab as the table. We did our first interviews like that. I remember thinking at the time, 'my God, who is going to come and join us?' But we were really convincing, and I think being British also helped. Our first two employees, one of whom is still with us, recalls that she came in and there was nothing there but a big smile on our faces. That we just sounded so confident about the business. And that was why they bought into it, straight away.

## How fast did the business expand?

We were in that apartment, which was effectively three rooms, with two people, and grew to 18 people in about eight months. We then moved to a separate stand alone office, which was opened by Lord Digby Jones, when he came over in September last year. Now we're up to 35 employees.

## Did you strike up partnerships?

Yes we did. We were very lucky. I guess two things happened; when I lived in Central and Eastern Europe, I learnt so much about the power of the network. And the power of the British Chambers of Commerce – I got very involved with them. I was the vice-chairman of the BCC in Hungary. The first thing I would do in any of the countries was go and see the embassy or the high commission. I went to see the high commission and told them about what I had been doing. They said that they would really like to set up a business network in Pune, and I said I was ready to do it. It was one of the best things we could have done, because it was through that that I also found our first printer, who we're still printing with.

## Does that network exist now for people?

Absolutely, it's called the British Business Group. There are British Business Groups in most of the major cities in India, but most prominent in Maharashtra. There are BBG Mumbai, Pune, Goa, Ahmadabad. The British Business Group has been set up to foster bi-lateral trade. It's for UK companies who are in India, and also Indian companies that have British subsidiaries, and Indian companies that would like to expand abroad. We also welcome people who are coming for a look-see visit. But the whole idea is to foster bi-lateral trade and understanding in business. We hold events, meeting on a monthly basis. In Pune on the first Tuesday, in Mumbai the first Monday. We get great speakers. We had Mark Tully, the BBC journalist in December. We had Lord Digby Jones over, and Prince Andrew over, so a really interesting mix. We also have panel discussions on future business trends by region.

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## **Did you find your company affected by cultural differences, in your work from Europe to India?**

Yes, it was different. I think one of the big differences was that people really appreciated some of the policies that we brought in. For example, I was adamant that when we moved to India that we would employ a significant number of women with young children. They get a raw deal everywhere in the world, especially in India. Most employers are not interested because the mothers won't be able to work the long hours. I think that's a huge pool of untapped talent. When we advertised and passed word of mouth out, we said that this is perfect for women: the hours are set, you don't have to work overtime, we'll give you flexi-time, we'll give you time off if your children are sick, and we'll be a family friendly office. That was a real surprise for a lot of people coming from, for example, outsourcing companies where they were just working horrific hours. They appreciated that side of what we did.

## **Would you recommend that flexibility if the business can sustain it?**

Yes, it was one of the best decisions that we took. The turnover on our author side is so low. Women who are with us have gone to have babies and come back, which to be honest is quite unheard of – much of the time women will stay at home with children, but they have come back.

## **Which other decisions are you pleased you took?**

Setting up in Pune was a fantastic one, because of the rich supply of talent there.

## **And any things that you were disappointed by?**

It's a controversial point, but there are a lot of sharks out there. When we first went over we got legal advice on how we should set up, and it wasn't effective value. You might say we were ripped off. We paid far over the odds for what it should have cost us to set up a company. There are people out there who will take advantage of the fact that you are foreigners, although we are Indian, therefore charge far above what should be. That's why I wanted to set up the British Business Group, so we could advise people that it shouldn't be like this. And that's why I like working with UKIBC, because it's an opportunity for us to tell people that it's not necessary to suffer – that we've done the hard work, so come in and learn from our experiences.

## **Other than joining the BBG, how could people avoid those pitfalls?**

It's really hard to avoid them. But you have to. It's all about who you know – it's all about networking. It's important that if you're planning to go across to India, that you meet as soon as possible with people who are in business there. They will tell you that they have a good accountant, or a good lawyer, or tell you what to avoid, which hotel to stay at; all of those things. I think meeting people is just very important.

## **One of the main problems that people report is staff attrition. You have said that you avoided this by employing women, but Dalbir Bains is unique in only employing women within Boudoir London, nevertheless that problem remains.**

Dalbir and I have actually had this conversation! Mumbai is fundamentally a different market to Pune. We have been very lucky with low attrition. One thing that I always try to show staff is the growth potential for them within the business. I point out that a manager was where they are two years ago. If someone is bored of editing I can move

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them on to marketing. I think there are a number of things that you have to do. Careful HR can really solve a lot of these problems.

## **Do you employ somebody for HR or do you take that responsibility?**

We believe that HR is a collective responsibility. We do have an HR manager, but I would say that 25% of my senior staff's time is managing everyone. We have proper appraisals twice a year, and give feedback as often as we can. We organise away days, evenings out and more. I think it's really important to do that, and I think the staff really appreciate it.

## **Did you have to manage the political and social environment around your company?**

Yes. We specialise in textbooks and training for professional qualifications. They are mainly in accountancy and financial services. The Indian Institute of Chartered Accountants is very strong, and are careful about their position. The Indian Government is concerned about Indian qualifications. We have to be careful how we position ourselves.

## **How do you align your international strategy?**

We are absolutely a global company. We were born in the UK, we spent ten years in central and eastern Europe, and we're now in India. We already do training in Romania, in Tanzania, and other parts of the world. It's not a question of: 'Here's the UK, here's India, so how do we align that?' It's more: 'Here's our global strategy. Now how does India and the UK fit into that?'

## **What are the future plans for your company?**

We want to be seen as the ethical education provider. We are trying, as far as possible, to keep the price of our books as low as possible, so that more people can benefit. I have personally seen the benefit of people gaining a professional qualification. It opens up their mind, it opens up opportunities to them, and it allows them to do so much more. So I would like to see us as a global player. We're already global in our publishing, because we're selling books across the globe. At the moment, we have pockets where we're training; I'd like to see us all over the country, and all over the world.

## **How do you think an organisation like UKIBC could have helped you when you were starting your company in India?**

Most important is giving advice to companies on what it's like – it's telling it how it is. It's trying to pre-empt some of the problems that could happen. Now a large company can afford to hire PricewaterhouseCoopers, to do it all for you, but a small or medium company sees the promise that is India and doesn't know where to start, and I think UKIBC plays a part in helping people and holding their hand, and saying, you know what? We understand what you want to do. Here are some simple steps that can help you along the way.

## **And can you give companies recommendations on service providers to avoid the ones of the sort mentioned earlier?**

We don't officially have a list of preferred service providers, but when somebody comes along to the BBG they get an opportunity they get an opportunity to mix with both locals and ex-pats, who have been there for a while. You strike up friendships and get

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interesting information on how to do things. So whilst we haven't got an approved list, you get to learn from people on where to go. We also have a lot of professional services firms as members.

## How do you join the BBG?

Very simple. You go to our website, [www.bbgpune.org](http://www.bbgpune.org), or [www.bbgmumbai.org](http://www.bbgmumbai.org), and that will give information about the events. You can contact the local UKTI or British High Commission, fill out a form, explain reasons on why you're in India. The fee is R 7,500 which is just under £100. For a small or medium sized company it's R 4000, and if you're an individual it's R 1,500.

Vandana is the Chair of the BBG in Pune.

## Are you happy to personally advise people?

Yes, either informally or officially on how things are done. And the one piece of advice I'd give is – don't give up. It's really daunting, but if you look at the facts, there are 600m people under the age of 30, and in that kind of market, if you get it right, it's phenomenal. Through UKIBC and BBG, you can receive the advice you need on how to operate your business in India. When I came over to India, I thought I understood India, very naively, because I'd spent a lot of time there – early summers, and a year after I graduated. But actually, three years on, living there, I can now say I'm starting to understand India. I guess one other thing that I'd say is that there is a skills gap at the moment; there's bound to be, and I think that when Brits go there they have to bring something, and I think the most important thing is our skills. In India at the moment, everyone is talking about the demographic dividend, because of a huge youthful population, but untrained, that could turn into the demographic debt, if they are untrained. So if you're in a professional skill then you can pass that on to people there. The more skills you can pass on, the faster they're going to grow your business. For me, that's where it's at.

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