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## India overabundant in creativity, but quality, execution essential: Arnoud De Meyer

The president of Singapore Management University on the lessons for emerging economies from practices in the competitive business landscape of the fast-growing Indian economy



Arnoud De Meyer says there could be so much more done in India if there was better infrastructure in terms of ports, highways, electricity and so on. Photo: Ramesh Pathania/Mint

**New Delhi:** India has no dearth of innovation, and practices in the competitive business landscape of the fast-growing Indian economy could hold interesting lessons for other emerging economies such as doing business with fewer resources, generating rapid growth and meeting the needs of a very demanding customer, said **Arnoud De Meyer**, president, Singapore Management University (SMU), in an interview to *MintAsia*.

Edited excerpts:

### **What are the new trends that are emerging in the area of technology management?**

We used to put a lot of emphasis on pure research and development of technology and we thought if you had technology, applications would come. I think that we see three major trends now. There is a lot more emphasis on business process innovation.

So now it's not only about developing new products but also how to deliver new services. The second major change is business model innovation—that is, we try to deliver similar goods and services with a very different approach.

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For example, in health management, you see that we have moved from a model where we were treating people to a model where we prevent diseases. The third trend is that we look for more appropriate solutions—you call it *jugaad* here in India. So, rather than creating the most sophisticated and complicated solutions, we pay more interest to create more appropriate solutions for the environment in which we work.

So you see that there is a shift from pure technology; I am not saying that technology is not important, but it's much more about how do we apply it.

### **What initiatives of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government have caught your interest?**

I have been coming to India since 1992 and I have been here between 30-40 times, so it's not that India is a completely new discovery for me. It's just that every time I came here, you see the backlog in investment in infrastructure. I think that there could be so much more done in India if we could have better infrastructure in terms of ports, highways, electricity and so on. So when I look at what the Modi government has emphasized, I think that there are three things that strike me—first, seemingly an intention and a willingness to speed up investment in infrastructure—I have read that they are looking to do 30km of highways per day.

The second one is the larger openness to foreign direct investment (FDI). I am convinced that more FDI, like we have seen in Singapore and China, could help the country to grow much faster and there is so much potential, as we know.

The third one is—I am very impressed by this intention of smart cities... If we could invent the city of the future in India, it will make a great contribution not only to India but to the world as we all are searching for the new model of urbanization.

### **How should the Indian government look to manage technology to make its “Make In India” campaign successful?**

To make this “Make in India” campaign successful, I think, there are two major challenges—first of all, making the products that are fit to the Indian market. India is a very demanding market, so listening very well to the customer and trying to come up with products that respond to their needs. Secondly, there needs to be a huge investment in quality improvement and management. It is not only the reliability of products but it's the whole service orientation to make sure the customer experience is a good one. It should become an ingrained culture and we are very far away from that.

### **How are the B-schools in Singapore or India different from those in the US or UK?**

How you build a brand in an emerging country, you can't learn that by studying in the US because it is not an emerging country. But if you learn from India or other countries in the region how to build brands or how to grow a business in an emerging country, you probably can use that in Brazil or in Africa.

So, while we should have the same quality as that of the US or European B-schools, we owe it to ourselves as young universities to channelize the same rigour and innovativeness to become more relevant to the region.

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Relevance to the region is very important, and that's where young universities like ours can help, because we are not sort of stuck in traditions, stuck in our fixed ways of doing things. We can also be creative and come up with different types of programmes. We need to find out different models for education that are much more fit for our environment.

**Are there any interesting management trends that you notice in emerging economies such as India?**

What we learn here, from this part of the world, in terms of management trends, is how do you do business with less resources, generate fast growth and meet the needs of a very demanding customer.

If you look at the American customer, there have been studies done to death by marketing companies and we know all the characteristics of these customers.

But when you ask what a rural Indian customer wants, there are not that many studies about. So three characteristics—less resources, speed and implementation and lack of knowledge about the real customer needs—if we work well on that, we can come up with concepts that help us to operate in other fast growing parts of the world.

**What message would you give India to manage innovation?**

In most other countries, I would say you have to stimulate creativity. However, I think there is an overabundance of creativity in India in getting practical solutions, but I think total commitment to quality and execution once you have that creative idea is absolutely essential for managing innovation.