

# IR MANAGEMENT CADRES NEED A REVIEW

*Management development for a large unit with low attrition cannot depend on short term answers. Preparing a Management Positioning vision , so far missing from IR plans, should be mandated.*



SK Bansal  
Ex Chief Rolling Stock Engineer  
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S K Bansal claims a record for any officer retiring from IR in the senior administrative grades: that of longest IR service. He recollects that he joined in Alambagh ( Lucknow ) workshop as an Apprentice Train Examiner ( a 5-year training programme, qualified as a diploma in engineering) in May 1962. This is a technical position at the start of the supervisory cadre. He was promoted early in April 1982 to Gr B through the IR competitive selection process.

Bansal's service record and skills helped him start in the Group B service as an Assistant Mech Engineer, progressing quickly into the Group A service, before retiring in the senior admin. grade, which is laudable for anybody joining as a supervisory trainee.

That is still unusual.

All through he worked in various positions in the mechanical department, gaining his spots through merit and dedication.

But how did he get involved with the management cadre data, a preserve of officers serving in the Railway Board offices, or the HR role? Bansal clears that his interest started as a measure of self-development as he progressed up the promotional ladder into Group B.

It was almost a given for us to reach to him for this report that connects some of the dots on the government's recent efforts on reorganizing the IR management and engineering cadres.

If there is one IR official, serving or retired, who has all the numbers and a first-rate appreciation of the recruitment processes into the IR management service cadres, that is SK Bansal, who retired as a Chief Rolling Stock Engineer. Bansal can produce the data, charts and verbatim records of everything, and almost anything, on the Group A and Group B services in the IR. The story goes that when an IR Board Member of the wanted talking points for an important meeting on IR cadre issues, Bansal was the one ( and only) person he called.

IR does not have a distinct general management cadre; instead, it has discipline/ department oriented services :

- Engineering services: Civil, Mechanical, Electrical and Signalling; ( the Stores Cadre is an offshoot requiring a Degree in Engineering.)

- **The 'allied services' (Traf-fic, Accounts, & Personnel are drawn from the Indian Administrative Service recruitment process.**
- **Cadres exist for the Medical and Security Departments.**

The government had publicised its intention to merge the engineering cadres into a single seniority group, under a revamped IR Management Service (IRMS). Existing procedures for promotions and cadre management are time-consuming and complex, with limited internal trust in the even-handedness of the promotion decisions; the matrix of a single cadre, to be deployed in essentially niche segments, with the Group B element thrown in for good measure, should make the key management decisions even more opaque. The cadres will in effect lose even more trust in the system. The ministry has not formally closed the chapter on the merged seniority issues, but

unconfirmed reports indicate that recruitment indents for UPSC for various services have been generated since. The issue was last known to have been referred to a Group of Ministers to determine the process of introducing this major change. The ministry needs to clear the air, which is abounding with guesses.

## The start of IR cadres

A senior IRSME officer, who retired in an apex position, wrote in: 'About two decades ago, while working in the Board's Management Services Directorate, I had a chance to see some papers related to the inception of the IR services. Authentic information would of course be available from the Board archives. From my recollection, seven organised Group A services were constituted in the early 60s. The Personnel and Medical/Security cadres came in later.



Recruitment Rules (RRs) for these organised Group A Services under Article 309 of the Constitution of India were notified over some time mostly in the 1960s. For example, the rules for the IRSME were first notified in the official gazette on 9th Nov 1968.

For the Personnel Department, the IRPS was established in 1976, though the first batch was recruited in 1980 through the UPSC. IRPS officers are responsible for managing the staff cadres, supervising human resources and the welfare of employees.

A retired IRSS officer writes in: ' ... we had an inconclusive conversation last year in an IRSS group chat about the inception date for the service. Are there any records? As far as stores as a function or department is concerned, it is much older, manned by other service officers who never went back to the parent cadre. There used to be a member for stores in 1905 in the Railway Board ( recorded in the book 100 Years of Railways).

Officers from the early 1900s are listed on the incumbency board of the Controller of Stores, Eastern Railway. One such officer became a GM in the early 1950s. The IR Stores code 2nd edition is dated 1939; perhaps the original was from 1918 but the formal cadre is presumed after independence. The oldest IRSS officer known is perhaps from the 1954 batch.'

**The skews between cadres**

One point of constant watch is that officers in various cadres get promotions evenly, with a benchmark to the Indian Administrative Services, the epitome of Indian government bureaucracy. Discontent brews as these promotions disparities grow, sometimes to years.

The government responds by restructuring exercises that give notional pay grade promotions ( non-functional posts in government-speak), even as the incumbent position in the

hierarchy and the job content remains static.

Bansal's data and analysis show 'wide variation in induction to Gr A in different departments, even on the same zone, and between IR zones.

**Missing managers**

Postings to the General Manager's cadre is from a pool of qualifying officers from various services, chosen based on interse seniority.

The rules for the interse seniority, though equitable in intent, leave perception questions on fairness. Uneven recruitment is various services and varying in-service attrition often result in some services missing from the GM list or others peaking a max representation of 10 in the General Manager positions.

In recent years, IR has had to deploy a special rule ( from a Railway Board

Resolution of August 16, 2016) to promote an IRTS officer to the GM position as otherwise it would not have any qualifying persons for the Member Traffic ( now Business Development) who has to be from the IRTS cadre.

We had this obvious question concerning the use of a special proviso for out of turn (n comparison to other services) promotion of an IRTS officer as a General Manager. It seems that the IRTS cadre has run dry at the top, where just one IRTS officer is working as a General Manager, that too out of turn. Bansal's data seems to point out that the average age at recruitment into Gr A for the IRTS is higher and most officers would retire before reaching the qualifying zone. Bansal's data points also to the likelihood that this situation will continue for some more years. This data also seems to point to an underlying cause: the average age at joining into the IRTS is somehow

The IR officers tally				
Service	Grades			
	Senior administrative SAG+	Junior administrative JAG +	Senior scale	Junior scale
Engineering Services				
Civil, IRSE	285	878	918	807
Mechanical IRSME	199	520	385	887
Electrical IRSEE	155	517	450	744
Signalling IRSTE	131	368	426	688
Others				
Traffic IRTS	165	210	331	809
Accounts IRAS	137	266	425	560
Personnel IRPS	55	166	188	407
Stores IRSS	98	277	231	341
Medical and Security departments are not listed here. The total numbers above are indicative; what is significant is the size stretching to about 13 500 ( as in April 2020).				

higher, leaving a vacuum in senior-most positions when suitable qualifying IRTS officers are not available for GM's positions. The data is voluminous and objective inference will need, perhaps, a rigorous simulation exercise.

**Recruitment decisions based on persons retiring this year cannot address issues that stretch to the normal three-decade service tenure of officers.**

### Poor on the job training

A personnel programme that depends heavily on in-service selections and long term retentions (IR attrition rates are still low) should be based around a high emphasis on skill-building on the job, with multiple training programmes drawn to match individual needs and prioritisation. IR does run multiple training institutes, but the programmes are designed around limited needs. The training schedules are typical of the past: send an officer for a lumpy training course every few years.

That needs replacement by training in smaller doses all through the career. Training of hopeful Group B officers for Gr A positions should gain higher attention.

### Discontent at the top

The General Managers are drawn from all these cadres, based on inter se seniority. A skew in first level junior scale UPSC recruitments, based on decisions taken about 3 decades back, results in a skew later in positions between departments.

For example, in April 2020, the Traffic cadre had just one occupant in a GM position, with the IRSME cadre taking up the max permitted positions, Civil at 5 and Electrical at 6. Current policies cannot avoid such skews that cause demotivation and a sense of non-involvement by senior managers a few years short of retirement at 60 years.

We posed this to a senior retired IR executive: what are the rules on how many recruitments are to be made through Gr A for these services? The response: 'I remember having been told that while calculating vacancies, work charged posts (related mostly to construction projects) are not to be considered. I have always wondered, what are the processes that make IR recruit 10 one year, and 50 the next.

Formula or not, the Board Member is expected to analyse and sign for a UPSC indent keeping legitimate career aspirations of the young recruits in view. Sadly, current legitimate aspiration in the minds of many Board members is not even the Higher Admin grade (HAG). Had it not been for the non-functional positions now, many Gr A Officers would retire in the SAG. Today, except for IR, in no other central cadre does a Gr A officer retire at less than HAG+ level.'

### Mid-level recruitment?

The IR management and engineering cadre model is now based fully on recruitment at the lowest end of the officers' chain. Graduates are recruited into the Gr A services when in their twenties, and most stay career long in the IR. The work culture looks at any external induction at middle or top levels as an intrusion and a dilution of the skills required for running railway businesses. This is unfortunate for now, even if the model was correct few decades back. There is a need to look at the possibilities and work towards an early redesign.

### A knowledgeable proponent

For any IR Group B officer, listing into the Group A service is a point of professional achievement. Bansal started understanding the mechanics and the arithmetic of how the numbers of officers to be engaged in Group A from Group B was determined. This was a selfish motive as he was impacted. Later, the management cadre data took its group root and has grown

consistently. And, leading to the present, if you have a question on the data, Bansal has the numbers. Bansal continues to gather the IR services seniority lists (started in 2003) for all services and publishes these at 2-year intervals, sharing these whenever asked for. We stand interested in reporting further on this issue, but leave that for a future edition.

### Discontent in Gr B too

Based on April 2020 data, about 53 % positions, mostly in the junior and senior scales, are taken by Gr B officers, who are promoted from non-officer positions. About 25 % of officers in Group A cadre have risen in the ranks from Gr B cadres. The eligibility for induction in Gr A from Gr B is three years, but data from some years back showed more than 2800 Gr B officers with more than 8 years stay in Gr B waiting for induction into Gr A.

A dated data set shows that 50.4 % of the officers in all these cadres are from Gr A, with 58.6 % being from internal Gr B promotes. That is much near the hoped-for 50/50 split. However, there are substantial Gr A vacancies, one estimate putting these at 36 % of the total posts. A criteria for Gr B promotees in Gr A posts is 50 %, which was at 16.4 % in this estimate.

The coveted direct entry to the Group A services of the government is through a qualifying entry examination by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC). The Gr A induction process has to be approved by the UPSC and is often a point of disagreement and discontent. Another officer opined: 'My assessment, while in service (till 2006) was that the basis for Gr A numbers to be recruited was the retirement figures for the year from that service. I did not understand how apportionment was done between Gr A and B'.





That seems to be the prevailing position for most IR managers in both Groups, A and B. One data set showed that 885 officers with 8 years or more service in Gr B, 547 with 6 to 8 years' service and 1278 with three to 6 years service were waiting for promotions into senior scale.

IR has tried to balance the promotional routes of officers from various cadres, but this has not been always feasible due to lumpy recruitment and different growths in needs in various disciplines. As technology eases routine jobs and many tasks are now automated, IR needs to look at and plan for differing growths in numbers

in various disciplines. Departmental boundaries need to be greyed out, and greater inter-disciplinary migrations made. This may also be necessary because cross-disciplinary mergers are shaping the modern world. The IR plan for a merged cadre was rooted in this belief but has its execution pitfalls that far outweigh the gains.

### The governance pointers

None of the recent IR administrative committees, vision plans, or white papers has addressed the issue of management cadres. A core question would be whether the Board expect the cadres to grow or shrink in numbers; the current practice of taking departmental decisions with a 1-year outlook is long passe. While IR traffic will continue to grow and construction investment also lead to a healthy uptrend, the manager number cannot grow at a mirroring rate.

IR has a declared a policy of reducing staff numbers from the near 13 lakhs now. A reduction of 2 % every year was in practice a few years back but is not being talked about, bowing to political expediency. A view on management cadre numbers is needed. A look at mid-level external recruitment should also be in order.

Modern tools and automation of many processes is leading to shrinking needs of many functions and even departments while creating better opportunities in others.

A vision driving managerial development in a large unit should not be based on disconnected decisions, with only short term impact. It may be time for IR to preparing a Management Development vision, publicise it well and develop shoots that address the longterm needs.



### Book Review

## IT IS A LOVELY STORY.

**S Mani ends his book with ' Listen to the silence, it has much to say... if things do not improve, I will temper my silence and speak to you through another book.'**

My plea is, please do the next book. This is not the time for silence. Those who know must speak aloud for knowledge, clarity and, above all, solutions. The next scholarly book on reform needed is due.

'My Train 18 Story' is set in an old government factory making trains, first imported in the 1950s and upgraded by another import set in the 1980s. The latest IR product is forty years old. IR, one of the oldest and largest railways in the world ,had never developed its own train sets . In this sold etting, Mani's efforts led to a new train set being born.

I do not like critics. I like creators. The book is more than a project story, though it may seem like one. It is a managers' book, on how to roll up your sleeves and lead to manage change. In a fossilized atmosphere, one can discover and ignite the light that is within us all. It is fashionable to show a balanced review to include shortcomings. I like to see the passion, the fire, the intelligence of the author. I can read pitch-perfect sterile content elsewhere. I have only praise. Yes, the book could have been universalised more. At this time, he wanted to be fair to his team, which I saw as goodness.

The average reader could get confused with undefined names and characters popping up. Skip these, read the content.



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