Steel is still not a very popular choice when it comes to building structures and that is one area where there is definitely a lot of scope for progress and Abhijit Shah, Principal and Managing Director, Walter P Moore India, hopes to be a part of the revolution. Excerpts from the interview...

ABHIJIT SHAH
Principal & Managing Director
Walter P Moore India

bringing in new perspectives

VIVA-VOCE

Q Working overseas has given you a whole new cultural perspective. What are the differences at the outset, between the work ethic in India and overseas?

A One of the main differences that I see is the fact that Walter P Moore as a company, is an organization which is not only focused on clients, but, also on our employees. We started hiring here in India about two and a half years ago, and I believe that is one of the things that separates us from other companies. Having the flexibility of work hours, access to recreational facilities like a table tennis, etc. – basically a work culture where people have fun while working is what attracts a lot of talented people to our firm as well.

Q Having the flexibility to interact is yet another area that differs between here and the west?

A From what I have heard, in a typical Indian company setup, there are restrictions and issues of propriety when it comes to addressing seniors and managers, while at Walter P Moore we call each other by first name. Everybody calls me Abhijit and I like it that way. Likewise, we call our seniors by name, which makes interaction a little bit more personal and "human." Also, everybody has the freedom to come up with different ideas, not just on the engineering side, but, for anything that they want done differently in the office. I think it makes a better work environment that is free, enjoyable, and more innovative as well.

Q Your stint in Dallas has enriched your experience. How do you translate that in your work in India?

A One advantage that I have is that I am working for the same company, so the culture definitely remains the same. In fact, I believe one of my main jobs is to ensure that the Walter P Moore India office is just like any other Walter P Moore office. We do not want this to be like a backend office, but a fully functioning partner.

My 13-year stint in Dallas has definitely helped me gain ample experience. As a project manager, I had the opportunity to work on several projects, small and large – from high-rise buildings to performing arts centers and stadiums. My work has definitely helped me get the overall picture; so when we have engineers working on international projects, I can share my experiences on similar projects.

Q In structures like stadiums, the roof offers quite a challenge. As a structural engineer, how do you overcome it?

A Stadium structures are inherently challenging to execute, especially the roof because of the long spans. As structural engineers, we try to make a lot of column-free spaces and fortunately that is a specialty of Walter P Moore. We have a wealth of experience when it comes to handling long-span structures, as we have designed over 100 stadiums. We have created an internal group of sports design experts and enthusiasts, which we call the 'Sports Community of Practice' that harvests information and best practices from all of our sports projects from across different offices. They are also up-to-date with all new products and technologies that are available.

Bringing efficiency to work is just second nature for us as a firm because we have a competent research and development team that is technically strong and can easily counter any challenges that crop up. If I don't know an answer, I know where to go and whom to ask to solve the issue. Once again, this kind of freedom is company-wide and goes a long way in making working easier. On most of our big projects we don't stop at design; we also provide erection engineering and connection design services. We have a separate team of engineers and Tekla modelers, called the Construction Engineering Group that is specialized in these services. We have this team in the India office as well.

Q What is Walter P Moore's strategy when approaching the Indian market?

A We started India operations about three years ago and initially, the strategy was to work on projects in India. We did not want to be the brand that has been around for 80+ years and bring all the experience only from the U.S. team. To supplement that in India, we began hiring from the top schools like IITs and other Indian institutions of repute; then we trained the entire team of engineers and Revit technicians.

We are working on several U.S.-based projects that include everything from buildings, stadiums, and airports. We now have a staff of 40 well-trained professionals that include young, enthusiastic people along with a few senior engineers. Currently, we are looking for projects in India which are in line with our area of specialization and have already started working on a few. At Walter P Moore, we do not believe in accepting every project opportunity that comes our way. We instead focus on those projects to which we can add value. So for 2015, we are looking for big projects such as airports, arenas, convention centers, and the like as we definitely enjoy working in India.

Q How much potential does steel construction have in India, taking recent and future trends into consideration?

A The steel construction scenario in India is only recently on the rise. If you compare the steel industry in India versus any other developed nation, I believe we have a lot of potential to develop. Currently the use of steel is restricted to industrial structures and to some extent on the infrastructural side. However, steel is still not a very popular choice when it comes to building structures and that is one area where we definitely see a lot of area for progress, which I hope that Walter P Moore is a part of.

Q Could you elaborate on the grey areas when it comes to steel construction in the Indian scenario?

A Fire proofing remains one of the main challenges, and the market still needs some educating on the topic. Despite manufacturers doing their bit, there is also the issue of not having enough sections; we still do not have the freedom of having structure-specific sections. In building structures where the use of composite steel is felt, we are not quite there, in terms of technology.

Even in engineering colleges across India, there is not enough training imparted for the use of steel. There are certain steel structures in India that seem over-designed because I feel that we do not train our engineers enough to handle steel in design. There seems to be a slight deficit in the propagation of awareness and with steel, a lot of knowledge comes from experience.

Understanding the stresses due to restraint conditions and temperature effects, the erection tolerances, the effect of erection sequencing on the structure, and other such parameters are a few areas where we are still lacking in India due to less experience in steel. I believe that with the wealth of experience that we bring, Walter P Moore can help overcome these challenges and make steel a preferred choice of material in India. ■

"Despite manufacturers doing their bit, there is also the issue of not having enough sections; we still do not have the freedom of having structure-specific sections"