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Cos tap cross-sector CXOs as leadership roles evolve

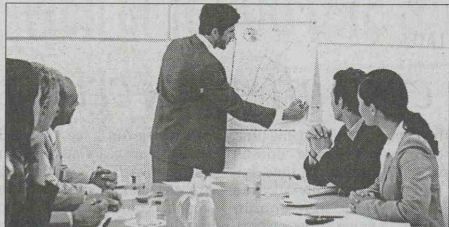
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MUMBAI: India Inc. is increasingly rewriting its leadership playbook, breaking industry silos as more companies tap talent from unrelated sectors for top roles.

From traditional manufacturing companies to startups, more firms are hiring chief experience officers (CXOs) across sectors as market volatility, artificial intelligence and digitization redefine business models.

Hiring a chief executive officer (CEO), a managing director (MD), or a chief financial officer (CFO) who has led acquisitions in unrelated sectors will not result in a myopic outlook that a top hat in the same industry might have. CXOs from unrelated sectors ask sharper questions, bring fresh thinking, and help reimagine how things can be done, experts said.

Over the past year, the boardroom shuffle has seen Neelendra Singh move from footwear



Companies believe cross-sector CXOs will question existing practices and introduce new ways of working.
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major Adidas to Lemon Tree Hotels as managing director last month. Abhishek Maheshwari joined fintech platform OneAsist as CEO from alternative asset manager Blackstone in September, and Shubbam Sharma took charge as chief growth officer at furniture startup Pepperfry from crowdfunding platform ImpactGuru in October.

Harsh Chitale, who is expected to join auto major Hero MotoCorp in January 2026, comes from lighting products

maker Signify.

Other similar hires include Niranjan Gupta as chief financial officer at FMCG giant Hindustan Unilever in September from Hero MotoCorp and Mayank Gupta from Jindal Steel as group CFO of CarDekho, an online marketplace for buying vehicles, in July. Interestingly, both marked their second stints at their respective firms.

"When it comes to traditional firms, the initial comfort is to find people from within the industry, but inadequate depth

of talent within the sector or the need to differentiate causes the need to look at adjacent sectors and not hire from a rival," Puneet Kalra, MD of executive search firm Russell Reynolds Associates told *Mint*. Hospitality, telecom and FMCG can be collectively seen as pan-India distribution businesses for a large part, and therefore, the shift from one to another is plausible.

"The startup sector needs CEOs from other sectors as their business model is typically unique and the key skill needed is systems thinking, i.e., connect the dots and imagine new business models," said Kalra, who also advises on boards and CEOs for the search firm.

Hiring from different sectors adds new expertise, strengthens strategic thinking, and drives innovation, which is critical in today's consumer landscape, an HUL spokesperson said. "This approach also helps us stay competitive and adapt to a fast-changing market."

The hunt to zero in on the right CXO also takes long. Search

firms often spend months to find a suitable candidate. All checks and balances must be in place to ensure that the senior executive is shortlisted, which includes a higher success rate if they are from a different industry.

Companies believe cross-sector CXOs will question existing practices, introduce new ways of working and often draw parallels from sectors that have seen similar crests and troughs amid market volatility, tariff struggles, and rapid pace of digitization.

Pepperfry has made several such cross-sector hires in the past, and is "open to continuing—especially because innovation often comes from looking at old problems through new lenses", said Joee De Choudhury, head, human resource, at the company.

"Furniture e-commerce, as a category, is still relatively nascent and evolving in India. Unlike more mature sectors, it continues to benefit immensely from diverse thinking and cross-industry expertise," said Choudhury.