



Reimagining Workforce Management in Manufacturing: HR Challenges and Solutions at Axles India

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ABSTRACT :

Human resource (HR) management in industrial manufacturing, especially in India, presents different and unique challenges, many of which are often overlooked. My internship at Axles India, a major manufacturer of axle assemblies for commercial vehicles, was a useful introduction to the field of HR in a high-volume, labor-intensive manufacturing environment. This article draws on my observations and participation in the daily HR operations at Axles India's facility in Sriperumbudur, India, aimed at identifying the most significant inefficiencies and employee-facing issues associated with HR functional capabilities. The article seeks to provide structured and practical solutions adapted to the Indian industrial experience.

Axles India is a joint venture between the TVS Group, Dana Incorporated (USA), and Sundaram Finance and is a respectable producer of automotive components with over 1,200 employees. Unlike the overall technical and operational capabilities of the organisation, the HR systems have not similarly evolved regarding process automation, internal communication, and the development of the workforce. During my internship, I discovered that the company's core HR responsibilities, such as onboarding, communicating with employees, the skills learned and developed in the workplace, and employee engagement, were manual processes and very time-consuming. For example, onboarding was almost entirely paper-based, involving various verification processes and long waits for employees to receive the basic login inputs. This was demoralizing for new employees and inefficient for HR. The payroll function existed in digital form. However, other aspects such as training records, vacation leave tracking and employee feedback were either on paper or outdated spreadsheets. This hybrid method of using both manual and digital data made maintaining consistency, transparency and traceability a challenge.

Communication was a very large gap between HR and the large number of blue-collar workers. Most of the announcements and policy communications were undertaken in English in emails or through notice boards. This proved ineffective for many workers due to issues surrounding language and access. As a consequence, important information, such as eligibility for bonus payments, was either miscommunicated or completely missed, thereby leading to dissatisfaction and resulting in unnecessary disputes. Another key area was the absence of structured pathways for career progression or skill development for long service workers. Many employees, especially those with 10+ years' service expressed concern that they were doing the same task over and over again, they very rarely were promoted, and there were no upskilling for current tasks. All of this led to declining morale and increasing attrition risk.

1. Introduction

The Human Resource (HR) function is the backbone of any modern organization. It is responsible for recruiting, training, motivating, and retaining talent. As part of my MBA program at NICM, Chennai, I undertook an internship at **Axles India Limited**, a renowned manufacturer of axle assemblies and components for commercial vehicles. My internship was mainly aligned with the **HR Department**, giving me an excellent opportunity to understand workforce dynamics in a manufacturing setup.

This article aims to identify the **challenges observed in the HR functions** during my internship and suggest **practical solutions**. The study draws insights from my direct involvement in employee onboarding, attendance tracking, communication, and employee welfare programs.

2. Overview of Axles India

Established in 1981, Axles India Ltd. is one of the leading companies in India's automotive component manufacturing industry that focuses on axle assemblies and systems for medium and heavy commercial vehicles (M&HCV) which emerged as a direct result of the joint venture formed between three influential entities — TVS Group (a respected conglomerate in India); Dana Incorporated (a global leader in drivetrain technologies based in the USA); and Sundaram Finance (the trusted name in Indian financial services). Combined, the engineering quality, global exposure and financial discipline that has resulted in Axles India being a stable and future-oriented company.

The Unite's corporate headquarters are located in Chennai, Tamil Nadu with major manufacturing operations located in two specific industrial locations... Sriperumbudur and Cheyyar. These manufacturing facilities utilize modern production lines, robots, quality testing labs, and lean-manufacturing processes, with a commitment to satisfying global automotive standards. Axles India is known for offering solve OEM customers a range of axle assemblies from commercial vehicle firms including Ashok Leyland, Tata Motors, and other firms who export vehicles. With a workforce of more than 1,200 employees, the company has a well-defined organizational structure to handle its large business needs. Employees work as skilled blue-collar workers and technicians to engineers, managers, and corporate employees in support functions like Production, Quality, Maintenance, Logistics, HR, and Finance. Due to the auto industry's difficult focus on safety, quality, accuracy, and durability, Axles India recognizes the need for employee discipline, technical training, and operational consistency in its workforce. Key elements of people management are managed by a dedicated Human Resources (HR) department. HR is key in hiring, employee assistance, and compliance management. The supports and delivers

key functions of HR team:

- **Recruitment and On-boarding:** The company recruits in a variety of ways, including campus placements, city referrals, and de facto lateral lifting. The on boarding process includes a documentation process, orientation process, ID allocation, work tools, and basic welfare services. Talent Development and Training - Axles India strongly believes in the development of skills by conducting several standard workshops, in-house technical training programs, and certification programs externally. The points of focus in developing skills include safety practices, quality practices, improved processes, and managerial practices.
- **Payroll and Compliance** - The HR team also represents a trusted role for employees by ensuring that employees receive their full salary in a timely manner while remaining compliant by adhering to rate of pays, labor laws, PF-ESI contributions, and gratuity processing, Factory Act, etc; in order to protect both the employee and the company.
- **Industrial Relations** - Since a major part of the employee population consists of shop-floor workers and technicians, the HR team is also responsible for developing a positive relationship between unions and management. This involves dispute resolution, grievance disposition, and regular negotiation of terms of work within an environment conducive to its employees and fair for management.
- **Employee Engagement and Welfare** - The organization engages in regular welfare programs.⁶⁹ These include health checks, safety weeks, festival days, and sports, and recognition activities. Furthermore, the ancient Egyptians engaged in form of recreation and organizational culture which promotes the retention of employees.

At Axles India, the organizational culture and business processes are rooted in traditional values and respect for practitioners; an openness and awareness of technology emergence and contemporary HR practices is developing. The organization has made its reputation on operational discipline, and engineering success; nevertheless, at the present time, the organization is also going through a transition; one that enables more employee-centric improvements and digitization among required organizational practices in which employees expect from an engaging employer of choice, if Axles India is to become just that.

3. HR Challenges Observed

During my time at Axles India, I observed several HR-related bottlenecks that affect efficiency, employee satisfaction, and long-term retention.

3.1 Lengthy Manual Onboarding Process

New hires went through a multistep onboarding that involved physical form filling, multiple round verifications, and delayed system entries.

→ **Impact:** New employees had to wait several days for ID cards, payroll registration, and access to basic amenities like the canteen and transport.

3.2 Limited Digital HR Systems

Although payroll was automated, many other HR functions (like training records, feedback forms, leave tracking) were maintained on Excel or paper. This often caused:

- Misplaced training records
- Delay in issuing experience certificates
- Duplication in data entry

3.3 Communication Gap Between HR and Workers

Axles India has a large number of blue-collar employees. While the HR team communicated policy changes via email or noticeboards, many workers missed the updates due to:

- Language barriers
- Irregular access to digital platforms
- Lack of personal interaction

→ **Example:** A bonus eligibility update was not clearly explained to the shop-floor teams, resulting in multiple complaints and confusion.

3.4 Minimal Focus on Career Growth for Workers

While engineers and executives had well-defined training and promotion pathways, many long-serving workers (10+ years) expressed concerns about:

- Lack of role upgrades
- No structured skill training
- Being stuck in repetitive tasks

→ **Impact:** Morale dips and risk of attrition to competitors

3.5 Absence of Real-Time Feedback Mechanisms

There was no anonymous or real-time channel for employees to share feedback about working conditions, management style, or policy clarity. Most feedback was shared only during annual reviews, which led to:

- Missed opportunities for timely improvement
- One-sided performance assessments
- Delayed conflict resolution

4. Root Cause Analysis

A deeper look at the challenges revealed the following underlying causes:

Problem Area	Root Cause
Manual onboarding	No integration between departments (Admin, Security, HR)
Poor HR digitization	Budget prioritization toward production systems, not HR tech
Worker communication gap	Over-reliance on written English; limited bilingual communication
Career stagnation of workers	No career path framework or upskilling policy for floor-level staff
Lack of real-time feedback	Absence of structured tools like anonymous surveys or HR kiosks

Additionally, the HR department's **lean team size** and **traditional HR practices** made it harder to scale support for a growing and diverse workforce.

5. Impact on Stakeholders

5.1 Employees (Blue-Collar and White-Collar)

- Frustration due to delayed onboarding and lack of information
- Workers feeling left out of development programs
- Lower motivation and increased turnover intention

5.2 HR Department

- Time wasted on repetitive tasks (manual attendance verification, tracking onboarding steps)
- Low capacity for proactive engagement or policy innovation
- Increased stress during audits or compliance reviews

5.3 Organization as a Whole

- Missed productivity due to slow onboarding and unclear communication
- Risk of non-compliance (labor laws, factory act, etc.)

- Difficulty in retaining experienced workers or attracting new talent in competitive sectors

6. Recommendations and Solutions

To renovate the HR ecosystem towards higher employee satisfaction, Axles India can roll out the following actions:

6.1 Digital HR Transformation

- Deploy an integrated HRMS (human resource management system) for:
- Onboarding through the preset checklists
- Attendance, payroll, and leave in a single platform
- Employee document repository and training dashboard.

Tools Suggested: Zoho People, Darwin box, Greyt HR (India-based, affordable)

6.2 Multilingual Internal Communication

- Translate all policy circulars into **Tamil and English**
- Use **video explainers or posters with visuals** in shop floor areas
- Assign “Communication Champions” in each department to clarify updates

6.3 Skill Development Pathways

- Partner with NSDC (National Skill Development Corporation) or in-house trainers
- Offer **certification programs**, e-learning modules, and cross-training for promotion readiness
- Track progress in skill matrix and reward employees with performance-linked upgrades

6.4 Real-Time Feedback Systems

- Install **digital HR kiosks** in shop floors where employees can submit feedback or grievances confidentially
- Launch a **bi-monthly pulse survey** with a few short questions on satisfaction and suggestions
- Introduce “Open HR Fridays” where employees can walk in without appointment

6.5 HR Internship/Volunteer Program

- Engage MBA interns in creating dashboards, digital forms, and process manuals
- Allow them to do field observations and suggest process improvements
- This also creates a **future talent pool** for Axles India itself

7. Conclusion

My tenure at Axles India was more than a part of my academic requirement; it was one of the most enlightening times in my MBA experience. Seeing how the HR department operated in a large manufacturing organization helped me realize how a human resources management function is vital to supporting productivity, employee morale and sustainable growth in organizations. Through my time on site at the Sriperumbudur plant, I fully appreciated the amount of work that it takes to support a workforce with hundreds of employees with varying skill levels from trained machine operators and senior technicians to engineers and production managers. I had also become more attuned to the silent resistance that HR functions in organizations deal with daily, such as balancing compliance with engagement, providing feedback and advising on grievance processes compassionately, and designing processes with efficiency and with a “human” face. What I noticed most was the strong ethical culture and discipline among the employees. There were evident pride in the workmanship and a strong belief in the company values. It was equally evident that the HR function is at a critical transition point - with the workforce evolving, rising employee expectations and a switch to real-time, transparent communication.

I sincerely thank the entire HR team at Axles India for allowing me the opportunity to work with you and for supporting me throughout the duration of the internship. Your support and willingness to encourage me and include me in day-to-day activities made this learning experience not only beneficial, but also a fun and memorable one. I've certainly gained skills and expanded my outlook that will help me in the future, and I have gained a stronger sense of interest in potentially pursuing HR strategy as a career path.

8. REFERENCES

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