

Indian Managers attend lesson on flexibility

Pubblicato: Giovedì 3 Dicembre 2009

From India to Brunello to learn Italian flexibility. This is what happened to about twenty managers, primarily from the computer science and telecommunications sectors, experienced also in marketing and in various production fields, who are attending the Advanced Masters Program in Management of Global Enterprises (AMPM), organized by the Management School of Bocconi University and the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB). The programme is one of **managerial training**, the objective of which is to teach Asian managers, who are increasingly close to western markets, but who still operate in very different company cultures, about companies in other continents. The IIMB is one of the most prestigious, and most expensive education institutions in India. Eighteen managers selected from the numerous applications, come from the Accenture branch, in Mauritius, or the Intel branch, in Bangalore, from the Tata branch, in Japan, or the Samsung branch in South Korean, or even from the Microsoft branch, in Hyderabad. "Many of them come at the expense of the company, others, at their own expense," explains **Paola Bielli**, the coordinator of the course at Bocconi University. "In order to attend this course, which they consider essential for their careers, they take out loans, or get their families to help."

But what were the Indian Managers doing in Brunello? They were following a particular company case, that of Elmec, whose head office is situated a few kilometres from Malpensa International Airport, not far from the Swiss border; this company deals with the Italian production companies best known around the world (from **Ermenegildo Zegna** to **Campari**, from **Barilla** to **Ferrari**), has 40 years' experience in the computer and computer services sector (making it historical, so much so that there is also a *retrocomputing* museum in the rooms of the company), has 460 employees, and an annual turnover of more than €100 million. For foreign managers, Elmec is an Italian mystery: how does a company remain small (according to international parameters, of course) but be highly innovative, be called upon for a one-to-one relationship with the client, but, at the same time, be organised, highly specific and equally ready for the global market. The secret appears to lie in a single concept: organised flexibility.

"Flexibility and the possibility to personalise each order is an entirely Italian necessity that stems from the customer's needs." explains **Rinaldo Ballerio**, the company's chairman. "In Italy, everybody has a specific request. Using a gastronomic metaphor, the American model is that of **Mac Donald's**, where the promise is that the product will have the same flavour, the same quality, and be ready to eat, always, and everywhere. These are objective qualities, and there is nothing to add. But for Italians,

this is not enough, and the requirement is completely different. The Italian restaurateur's promise to his customer is: "only here, only for today, made to your taste, cooked at the moment". Because all Italians want to be special. Every customer is a market in himself. This enables us to be very good at handling emergencies, but maybe a little less at planning."

It is a concept that is not easy to understand for anyone that works in a big company, with big numbers, such as the as the "go-getting" Indians, who, in more than one question, associated flexibility with chaos, personalisation with improvisation. "In fact, **flexibility does not mean chaos**, or poor quality," Ballerio said, "particularly in the computer science sector. It means the opposite, a product that is less generic, more "made to measure" for the customer. For us, flexibility without technological skill is meaningless. We cannot work without careful planning of the evolution the technological profiles and of the growth of computer and network skills. In computer services, no product is bad, or less good; such a product would disappear from the market immediately. Going back to the gastronomic metaphor, in Italy, if we go to the pizzeria, there are dozens and dozens of different pizzas on the menu, but despite this, you can still personalise your pizza. But when I ask for "a Margherita pizza with double mozzarella," I wouldn't dream of adding "but make sure it's good quality". This is implicit in the Italian product. Quality is a requirement that is never in doubt."

It is a difficult concept to explain to other economic models, but it still makes the difference, so "made in Italy" is not only found in fashion and in textiles, but **also in the mechanical and furniture sectors**. This, then, is "an important opportunity for the Asian managers, who need to stand out from his numerous colleagues, to build up a professional curriculum of international value," explained the Bocconi lecturer. After a barrage of detailed questions about flexibility, one of them even asked about how the employment market works in Italy, maybe in order to understand better the possibilities offered by a place that is so different from the rest of the world, and so difficult, but a thousand times more creative, stimulating and, let's face it, human.

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redazione@varesenews.it