

## The ROI on talent: Educating both sides of the equation

**A summary of the live panel discussion on human resources in the HVACR industry**

**On June 24, 2021, Eurovent Middle East hosted a live panel discussion addressing challenges related to obtaining and retaining talent to meet the HVACR sector's evolving requirements. Moderated by Nerissa Deoraj and Markus Lattner, the panel members shared their experiences and insights on how investing in skills training for the improvement of the industry can meet broader goals related to energy efficiency.**



**Nodirjon Rasulov**

From global logistics' reliance on secure cold chains across various sectors to the growing demand for clean and comfortable indoor climates, the critical role the HVACR sector plays in society is irrefutable. However, as the industry evolves, there is a shortage of individuals capable of bringing the necessary training and skillsets to meet the sector's requirement for human capital.

The noticeable skills gap can be attributed to the lack of awareness of job opportunities within the industry. It is also aggravated by a lack of understanding of the sector's importance in so many aspects of our everyday lives. As Nodirjon Rasulov, Business Development Manager, Camfil Middle East, pointed out, "What is invisible is indispensable," underscoring how the impact of high indoor air quality on human

health and productivity can be so easily overlooked. He says this can serve as a barrier for the youth to be excited to become part of the industry. Naveen Sivakumar, Head of Marketing and Business Development for Turkey, Middle East and Africa, Danfoss, shared the same sentiment. "We are behind the ceilings and on the rooftops," he says. "So, the exposure is missing in colleges. It is an industry that is taken for granted. We set the thermostat, and that is it."

However, there are many initiatives the industry can take to address the challenge of not only drawing talent but also retaining them. Sivakumar said the only way for the industry to be attractive is to cultivate a more robust employment ecosystem comprising proper legislation, greater education, as well as a richer and more diversified skill set supported by competitive salaries. It is vital to identify individual challenges and effectively address them to develop such an ecosystem.



**Naveen Sivakumar**

## The need for government intervention and certification

When it comes to the public sector's role, Sivakumar said government intervention is particularly important for developing legislation that can audit the skill set of people doing maintenance and repair work on HVACR systems in buildings. Criticising the level of knowledge in the Middle East, Sivakumar points out that many of the major hotel operators still confuse refrigeration and air conditioning by setting room thermostats at 17 or 18 degrees C. Markus Lattner, Managing Director, Eurovent Middle


**Roudha Bin Baher**

East, adds that the lack of adequately trained technicians is not only leading to inefficient operations, but it also poses a threat to the safety and wellbeing of people involved in building operations especially with the outdated systems prevalent in many buildings

Underlining the gravity of the situation, Lattner points to the [tragic incident](#) earlier this year when the compressor of an air conditioning unit burst during routine maintenance work, resulting in the death of one worker and severe injury of two others. There must be frameworks in place to avoid such risks, he added.

Weighing in as a representative of the industry and as an Emirati, Roudha Bin Baher, Commissioning Engineer, Petrofac, highlighted opportunities for the private

sector to support government through their expertise in this regard, underlining the need for greater collaboration. "Even the people that are preparing most curriculums for the government need extra knowledge and experience in the industry," she said, "That's why I encourage the private sector to get involved."

Bin Baher's observation stems from her own experience, as she credits private companies for her introduction and exposure to the refrigeration and air conditioning sector. "These companies fill the gap between education and the real world," she said. "I can really see the benefit of getting the training from the company itself, to teach us what's happening in the real markets." This sort of private sector involvement, she adds, can help overcome possible shortcomings from educational institutions.


**Markus Lattner**

The benefit from the expertise that private companies bring to the table is also obvious to Rasulov. "There is a very big gap between universities and the industry," he said. "When it comes to a topic like filtration, for example, it is not even extensively covered in the HVACR part of engineering. They spend only 10-15 minutes talking about the basics. However, when we go and approach schools to offer classes on a voluntary basis, we find that they are very welcoming."

### A diversified workforce and skillset

Sivakumar believes that a framework for formal technical education should be directed to the youth and should also be made available to existing technicians. "I'm talking about the simple blue-collar air conditioning technicians that are hungry for knowledge," he said. Sivakumar pointed out how such technicians, typically expatriates, are employed with a low salary and have little opportunity to enhance their position. Their experience assisting in projects has given them an intuitive understanding of how HVACR components work. "If you introduce theory to them, you could be getting an amazing technician," he said. "There is enough motivation, but, unfortunately, that kind of formal education isn't happening here."

Rasulov added that companies need not look far to see the benefits that can be unlocked by proper training mechanisms, highlighting the untapped opportunities within companies' existing workforce.

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"It always depends on the company how they want to nurture a candidate," he said, "but if we give proper and continuous training even after employees join, it will be not only for the benefit of the person but also for the benefit of the company."

### Expanding the search with evolving technologies

There is also a need to cast a wider net when assessing potential candidates for HVACR positions. Bin Baher said that candidates with a background in chemical and mechanical engineering would be ideal for HVACR positions. Purwanti Alissa Paillé, Founder & CEO, careersbay.com, an HVACR recruitment company, confirms that candidates with diploma showcasing additional specialisations on relevant topics are favoured by companies.



Purwanti Alissa Paillé

Rasulov added that while the technical background is essential, there are plenty of opportunities for people from other fields, given the broad nature of available positions. "In our company, we look at not only the intellectual capabilities of the person but the emotional capabilities also," he said. "I would suggest to anyone who is looking into HVACR positions to focus on what different perspectives they can share and to think out of the box."

Sivakumar said that openness to specialists from different backgrounds is so crucial, considering HVACR systems have also evolved. "Mechanical engineering was the classical choice for specialists in the sector," he said, "but we need to remember that the industry has moved on from simple air conditioning systems to complicated Internet-of-Things and BMS systems - all of which require an appreciation for electronics. So, let us not stick to one branch of knowledge. The industry has moved on, the systems have evolved, and they are now not only talking to each other but to other systems as well."

### Opening the doors for women in the industry

The need for diversification also touches on opportunities for women in the sector. Paillé said that from her experience, there had been a great demand for women among HVACR companies, especially for management positions. Rasulov observed the same trend, adding, "There are also frameworks in place to encourage a positive move in this direction, through frameworks such as GEEIS (Gender Equality European & International Standard), awarded to company's showing the willingness to open the doors for women."



Nerissa Deoraj

Sivakumar added that many companies are following suit and that Danfoss has the ambition to have 30% of their leadership positions held by women by 2025. "This is a commitment that we have taken all those years, and we are pushing the agenda very clear," he said. "Even for me, personally speaking, I lead a team of six strong females in the marketing and business development team, three of which are engineers, and I know their energy and what they can bring to the table."

Nerissa Deoraj, Executive Director, Eurovent Middle East, added that positive moment is evident but there is room for growth. "The number of women in the industry has increased," she said, "And they bring a lot of skills and competence. Women should definitely be considered more when it comes to positions requiring higher technical skill sets because they actually are very capable, and competent."

Sivakumar agreed, also highlighting how there is scope for women's expertise and skills behind the scenes as well, and that it is up to the industry to improve the image of many roles within the sector. "The technician is not a guy in overalls, covered with oil and grease and with the hard hat," he said. "These days, HVACR technicians work with a computer or a mobile phone trying to troubleshoot the problem through the internet - so that image change is also needed."

### **What does it take to get them to stay?**

While equipping individuals with the latest skillsets is important, keeping them will only be possible if they are given proper compensation for their work. Currently, this is more the exception rather than the rule. Rasulov shared that while white-collar technicians have a competitive salary, there is a big gap in the salary of blue-collar technicians. "What they are getting is unfair presently," he said.

Sivakumar calls the salary discrepancy "a clear disgrace", especially when companies consider candidates' nationality, opting for people from developing countries and making a case for low compensation because of the conversion rate. "It's not fair," he said, adding that the loser, at the end of the day, is the industry. "If you are trying to hire a designer with five years of experience at AED 6,000, you are not going to get the right people."

Paille said salary is a key determining factor for people's decision to stay in the industry, adding that while the amount varies among different companies, she encourages companies to increase their offer to attract better candidates and cultivate loyalty between the parties. Sivakumar shared that, unfortunately, salary has often been the cause of companies losing out on great talent. He believes proper legislation that places value on skilled technicians would contribute to an ecosystem where buyers are given a chance to pay more to benefit from excellent service.

### **Why education is money**

Despite the complex nature of these issues, there is an urgent need to strengthen the human resource ecosystem to meet a growing sector's human capital requirements and accommodate the expected wave of retrofits given the region's ageing built environment. "Most of the air conditioning systems in the Middle East are getting old, and we have many outdated systems all over the Gulf countries," he said. "This brings into the picture potential opportunities for retrofit. Remember: a retrofit is not only to make a building safer it's also about making it more economical and more viable."

Education, Sivakumar said, must also be directed to the government to highlight the benefit of eliminating energy guzzlers, given the more efficient technologies available in the market. "It's about educating both sides of the equation," he said, "Government stakeholders need to understand the new technologies coming up and how it can be economical." Providing an example, Sivakumar points to how 40% of a supermarket's energy bill comes from refrigeration. "Globally, 1% of the global energy consumption comes from supermarkets, so there is a lot of money to be saved. That's how I see it: Education is money. Yes, it's about developing a person, but it's also bringing money back to the economy."

Sivakumar said that this crucial topic underlines the importance of organisations such as Eurovent Middle East, which operates at the juncture among the different stakeholders that need to come together. "If the industry has to work together, they need to have a neutral platform, and this is where I believe Eurovent is adding great value as well," he said.

Deoraj confirmed that work is underway for Eurovent Middle East's Leadership Academy, which will provide engineers and MEP consultants with a holistic overview of technologies that are available in the market. Deoraj said that the training sessions would be facilitated by members offering real-world technical expertise to address problems and misperceptions in the market, especially when it comes to technical knowledge and specifications.

In addition to educating stakeholders, Deoraj said the Academy aims to empower consultants to shift their focus from typical fixed design methods in projects. "Symptoms of these problems include issues related to copy-pasting of specifications, without really thinking about what the technology is or having a clear understanding of what they are asking for," she said. "Our Academy is just one of the projects we are working on to try and change these perceptions and educate the market. This is one of our biggest targets for this year, and we hope that to have it up and running by early 2022."