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Willie Walsh is that rarity in India – a foreign chief executive



When Willie Walsh takes over at IndiGo, India's largest airline, he will have to adapt to a very different working culture compared to his experience in the west © Caroline Chia/Reuters

Krishn Kaushik in Mumbai

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Management talent is one of India's biggest exports but when Willie Walsh [takes over at IndiGo](#), the country's biggest airline, he will become the rare chief executive to go in the other direction.

Sundar Pichai at Alphabet, Satya Nadella at Microsoft, Arvind Krishna at IBM, Leena Nair at Chanel and Ajay Banga at the World Bank are high-profile cases of Indian talent running some of the world's biggest companies and institutions.

There are few examples of the opposite move, with just 39 foreigners among the 3,114 chief executives and managing directors at companies listed on the National Stock Exchange, according to Prime Database.

But management experts said Walsh makes sense given the state of India's aviation market — a duopoly that is still heavily influenced by government regulation.

“It's not a question of being able to attract global talent, but one of need,” said Navnit Singh, India chair of Korn Ferry, the headhunter.

Financial services, consumer goods and technology are all mature industries in India and have enough local talent to lead them. But in sectors such as semiconductors, which are new in India, or aviation, which lacks a wide pool of competitors, the domestic expertise “does not exist”, said Singh.

Walsh, the former boss of British Airways, will replace Pieter Elbers, a Dutch national who had previously led his country's flag carrier KLM.

Elbers [resigned from the IndiGo job](#) in March, three months after personnel planning issues at the airline led to the cancellation of thousands of domestic flights.

IndiGo has performed well, but last year's flight chaos was a setback

Share price, Indian rupee

— Interglobe Aviation



Source: LSEG via markets.ft.com

[IndiGo controls two-thirds](#) of India's domestic air traffic. Another 25 per cent is handled by Air India, which also has a foreign CEO: the New Zealand national Campbell Wilson, who came from Singapore Airlines.

That is in contrast to other industries, where foreign leaders rarely make sense for Indian companies.

“India is a very complex and unique market. It is very difficult to just bring a person who has headed a company in developed markets

earlier,” said Pranav Haldea, managing director of Prime Database.

The price points in India, the dynamism of the market, the diversity across Indian states and the different mindset of consumers make it challenging for an outsider.

“Companies mostly prefer homegrown talent which has been through the grind,” Haldea said.

Talent that rises to the top in India, on the other hand, can be highly competitive in global markets.

Sougata Ray, professor of strategy and business at the Indian School of Business, said the country has a “hyper-competitive education system” that selects the best talent — people fluent in English — who go to “primarily those countries where meritocracy is highly prevalent”.

One factor a foreign leader such as Walsh will need to watch out for is the role of the government.

“The Indian market is very regulated, very dependent on the government. This makes boundary management and relationship management with all the stakeholders, including the authorities, tougher, which foreign talent will find difficult,” said Ray.

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British Airways and Iberia to form International Airlines Group in 2011, is known for his blunt, direct style.

One person in the industry said that his candour would be helpful within the airline but could “become a problem” with India’s conservative

officials.

Walsh will also have to adapt to a very different working culture compared to his experience in the west. Preety Kumar, managing partner of Amrop India, a headhunter, said there will be “surprises” for expat leaders such as Walsh.

You can empower staff and delegate work in India, she said, “but not delegate responsibility”. Walsh will need to review the work of subordinates, which is especially tough in an “operationally driven heavy-duty leadership role, like running an airline”.

Kapil Kaul, the head of industry research firm CAPA India, said it was a good appointment by IndiGo. Walsh’s willingness to join, he said, shows, “he believes in what IndiGo is doing and [that] it can become much bigger. And he also believes that India has that ability to move to the next level in aviation.”

Markets reacted enthusiastically to Walsh's appointment, with shares in InterGlobe Aviation, IndiGo's parent company, rising by 6 per cent.

Over the past three years IndiGo and Air India have placed orders for more than 1,000 aircraft. As IndiGo grows from a 400-aircraft carrier to a fleet of 900-1,000 over the next decade, Walsh will have to manage the growing complexity of its operations.

His appointment shows the ambition of the company — and of corporate India. “IndiGo is not attempting to be number one just in India,” Kaul said. “It is trying to be at the top globally, in size and scale.”

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