

Meera Nair at PhoenixWay: Which Way to Go?

It was February 21, 2017. As Meera Nair, Chief Manager – Operations, PhoenixWay started packing for the day, she received an email from Mohit Dubey. Having gone through the mail, Nair felt perturbed. Deciding to mentally address the cause of her irritation later, she turned off her computer and rushed to pick her daughter from the company’s day care centre. She had been working on designing an upcoming Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) International Conference that PhoenixWay was hosting as knowledge partner. It was one of the major events for potential foreign collaborations. She knew that they had to collectively put their best foot forward. It involved a lot of groundwork requiring extra efforts and she had found little support from Dubey, Chief Manager, Client Relationship, who had once again claimed to be occupied with his work.

It was not the first time that Dubey had refused to take up responsibilities that were not under his key result areas but were part of their overall organizational duties. This time, he had refused to travel to Ahmedabad for conducting campus interviews at a premier institute. Even before she could discuss this with him, he had shot her an email citing his inconvenience to travel during the said dates (Refer Exhibit 1 for the email).

Company and Industry Background

PhoenixWay was the consulting arm of Phoenix Group, a well-known and reputed family business group established over the years. PhoenixWay was founded in 2008 in India when the consulting industry had just started expanding. It competed with specialist consulting organizations but had the advantage of the strong reputation of the parent brand. The core values of the group were integrity, customer first, people centricity, loyalty to customers, sustainability, teamwork and quality. The service sector had been growing at a fast pace. Management consulting was much in demand due to its ability to help businesses improve their performance through need analysis and development of a detailed plan of action or change management projects for transformation of organizations. PhoenixWay also offered training modules to its clients in various management areas. It had an easy sailing in the initial years due to the backing of its parent brand group. Over the years, the consulting industry witnessed a considerable increase in the number of newcomers and also international players drawing on their specialist knowledge base and resources to meet the demand for specialist consulting services.

Leadership Team

PhoenixWay attracted the best brains of the country by offering them high remuneration and other perks. The Managing Director, Shekhar Sinha was a renowned name in the consulting industry. He was a sharp and brilliant mind with a lot of passion to take PhoenixWay to newer heights. He had joined PhoenixWay in 2010. His predecessor had left the organization due to differences with the Board. Sinha had come in with a lot of radical

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ideas and energy to take PhoenixWay on the path to success. His profile sketch is given in Exhibit 2.

Dubey had been handpicked by Sinha in 2012 when he was looking to establish the client interface role for his organization. Sinha had met Dubey at an FICCI event where Sinha was one of the speakers. He had earlier met Dubey as a student at the Golden Jubilee Alumni Meet at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIMA) in 2011. Dubey was the General Secretary of his batch then. Sinha had been highly impressed with Dubey's ability to interact with people and win them over with his charm. He was quite keen to bring him on board as he thought of him as the perfect fit for the qualities that he was looking for. Dubey readily accepted the offer as he had been looking for an exciting 'entrepreneurial' opportunity to establish something on his own. He reported to Sinha and was responsible for initiating contact with the clients and ensuring a fruitful end by bagging the deal. (Exhibit 2 provides a brief profile and background of Dubey).

PhoenixWay had grown faster (refer Exhibit 4 for information on growth of PhoenixWay) and business was booming. Dubey had strong credentials and a sharp business sense. Sinha had sensed that Dubey was the right person to build PhoenixWay's presence in the market and two years later, Dubey had more than proved his worth. The numbers were growing and the big clients flocked to him. Sinha and Dubey had formed an instant connection and he seemed to have taken Dubey under his wing.

Nair joined PhoenixWay in 2014 as Chief Manager - Operations. It was almost like a tailor made role for her with the right work-life balance. Once the client accepted the proposal, Dubey handed the project to Nair for execution. (Exhibit 5 depicts the process of a consulting project.) The execution of a project involved a lot of detail orientation and formed an important part of the client experience. Nair had to work with independent consultants and industry experts to plan and deliver the projects successfully. She had created a reputation of her own of being a highly dedicated and committed professional. She used to keep herself available over phone all the time and owned up to mistakes and shared the successes. A brief profile on Nair is provided in Exhibit 2.

The administration was headed by Gopalkrishnan Iyer who looked after the day-to-day administration and human resource activities. The organization structure of PhoenixWay is given in Exhibit 3.

Work Culture at PhoenixWay

The employees at PhoenixWay were in awe of Sinha considering his great oratory skills, sharp sense of details, ability to identify any lacuna in the processes or people's performance. Sinha lived out of a suitcase and sometimes managed his role at PhoenixWay almost virtually. He had to travel frequently within the country as well as across the continents making his presence at PhoenixWay quite intermittent.

Dubey and Nair were largely responsible for managing the technical side of the organization. Everyone in the organization was quite impressed with Dubey's confidence, his presence of mind to provide quick suggestions and his ability to convince clients. Dubey was very well informed about PhoenixWay's processes and history of dealing with all its clients. He was quite good with accounting and numbers. He had become the face of PhoenixWay for the clients and was extremely effective in getting new projects for the organization. Nair, too, was exceptional at her work. She was meticulous, sincere and put in

her best to ensure excellent client experience once the project was brought into the organization. She was committed to her work and always put in her best for PhoenixWay.

It was company culture that employees interacted through intercom or through emails. Each employee was provided two email addresses by the IT department at PhoenixWay: one address in their own name that became their personal id and another based on their designation which was the official one used for all formal communication. The purpose of this policy was centralization of information and smooth transition of data if the designated person left or was transferred. The personal email-id was used mainly for email exchanges on the employee forum created for the engagement and wellness initiatives.

Every Friday morning, an Open House was organized for half an hour for PhoenixWay employees. The Open House was Iyer's initiative to provide a common platform for all the employees to interact and know each other better. The initiative had become quite popular and there were formal as well as informal activities organized during the Open House sessions where employees participated with great enthusiasm. Sinha had initiated a Knowledge Sharing Session between Dubey, Nair and her team every two weeks. The purpose was to share the various experiences they had in their professional life and how the learnings could be implemented to continuously improve their quality of delivery to the clients.

Dubey and Nair at PhoenixWay

Dubey had a peculiar style of walking – a characteristic fast pace reflecting a sense of urgency. He dressed smartly and was always cheerful. The way he talked to everyone, it seemed as if he knew one and all at the PhoenixWay office. He was also seen in the cafeteria frequently with different people and often with Sinha whenever he was around.

Dubey used to make sure that he did not miss any networking event organized by PhoenixWay or any industry meet. Whenever any delegation visited PhoenixWay, Dubey would be at the forefront interacting and spending time with them. He always used his personal id for all the internal as well as external official communication. He had a prominent e-signature enclosed in his mail that highlighted his name. The emails sent to the official id would be responded to through his personal id. He had opted for the automatic email forwarding facility from his official id to personal id.

Nominated year after year to represent PhoenixWay at the annual Global Consulting Summit, Dubey had become the face of PhoenixWay for the clients as well as for the industry.

Dubey and Nair met frequently during their meetings with Sinha and also during the fortnightly Knowledge Sharing Session, and other informal occasions such as birthday and festival celebrations at office. Irrespective of the formal or the informal set up, the only conversation Dubey had with her was how much loaded he was with work and how he had to stay back for long hours and also work on weekends. She would often listen to him without reacting much.

Nair and her team used to have frequent meetings to appraise each other of the work status and also to share any bottleneck that they found in the process. Nair's team comprised of Manisha who looked after the external vendors, Abhishek who was in-charge of project delivery, Harish who worked on logistics, and Sunil and Smita who worked on project scheduling and facilities planning. Her team was respected in the organization for high

performance resulting out of their cohesiveness and transparency. In case of any personal emergency, they supported each other unconditionally and were always there to step in each other's place.

During one team meeting, Abhishek remarked:

I never thought Mohit would behave this way. First of all, there were some mistakes found in the proposal that he had prepared and had sent to the Infinity group. Furthermore, instead of owning up the oversight at his end, he blamed the accounts team. He avoided interacting with the client citing poor health. I had a real tough time making amends for Mohit's carelessness and irresponsible actions.

Abhishek's words made Harish and Manisha vent out their feelings. Manisha remarked:

Aryan, my batch mate who works in the IT department has often told me how Mohit is seen talking about others in a belittling way. Also, he is seen indulging in lot of grapevine and spreading incomplete and inaccurate information on internal matters. It has made me extremely cautious of sharing any confidential information these days unlike before.

Harish made his frustration visible. He had this to say:

Whenever I meet him, he always boasts about himself and his achievements. He has been talking about the revenue growth after he joined PhoenixWay and the role he plays in bringing and sustaining the clients. He almost made me feel that we are at his mercy. He keeps on publicizing about how he has to stay back almost daily. His tone is also quite derogatory at times.

Sinha had made an unwritten 'two ring rule' for responding to clients' calls. He used to urge everyone to ensure that the calls are picked at second ring utmost and no calls be missed. Clients were provided alternate numbers. Quite often Nair and her teammates used to receive calls meant for Dubey. There were even some emails from clients saying that they wanted to speak to Dubey but they could not reach him.

As the grievances piled up, Nair tried to maintain a calm demeanour although she was quite anxious and disturbed. She made an attempt to calm her team down:

Folks, you have got an excellent opportunity at PhoenixWay. Focus and dedication to one's work will reap great benefits. Try and avoid getting distracted unnecessarily. A sincere effort with right attitude is the key. You have a long way to go and this place will always value your contribution and help you grow if you give your best.

During one of the Open House sessions, John Verghese, Manager - Marketing and Development, who had recently joined the organization to help Dubey at his work, opened up with Nair and shared his experiences.

Mohit is very sharp and really fast. It takes a lot to match up to his ways. He was quite friendly with me and introduced me to various departments and colleagues when I joined PhoenixWay. However, to my surprise, he does not let me interface with clients directly. All I am asked to do is managing the

database, record keeping and attending the calls when he is not around. There is a lot to learn from him, provided he shares his knowledge. It seemed as if he wanted to hold back information without making us feel that he is being secretive. At the same time, I found that PhoenixWay has a culture of supportive communication and teamwork. Information sharing is an integral part of the work environment here.

During office hours, Dubey used to be seen all over the company premises rushing from one place to another with a pile of documents in his hands. Verghese noted:

Mohit is present in his office only in the evenings and that is when he starts responding to clients' emails. He responds to clients' calls according to his convenience. He cites some reason or the other and enchants the person on the other side through his talks. He expects me to be there but it is not possible to stay back with him every day and every weekend. Also, just to bring to your notice, there are quite a few enquiries unattended...inquiries that can bring reputed clients and hence more revenue.

Meeting on February 20

PhoenixWay was undergoing strategic changes led by Sinha in order to improve its position in the industry. Until about a year ago, PhoenixWay was considered the best but now competition had started catching up. Also, there were a lot of internal process and policy transformations going on. Sinha also had his eyes on the Best Employer Award nomination for PhoenixWay.

Sinha had called a meeting of all the Department Managers along with Iyer at 10 am on February 20, 2017. Each department had presentations about their current work flows and the possible improvements in the system. Dubey made a striking presentation that saw everybody applauding him in awe.

After the presentation, he made a special remark to Sinha:

We need to make our employees believe that we are and always have been a premier consulting firm, catering to a selected set of clients. We shall continue to do so and should not slash our prices or broaden our target segment just to beat the competition. We are not overpriced, on the contrary we should aim for higher pricing strategies.

Sinha was absolutely overwhelmed by Dubey's observation. "Bang on, Mohit! This is the crux of what all I wanted to convey. You are an integral and an indispensable part of our strategy. I am so happy to have you on board," he said.

Amidst the sound of applause, Nair recalled Dubey's words from just a few days before this meeting. He had been talking to her and her team during one of their Knowledge Sharing Sessions in Sinha's absence, and had emphatically said:

We are so overpriced compared to our competitors. Clients are not so dumb. They would compare, analyse and then decide. Why would they prefer us over someone who is 30% cheaper and equally good?

Nair quietly left the meeting as soon as it got over.

Late in the evening, Nair received an email from Sinha addressed to Dubey; a copy had been marked to her and Iyer (Refer Exhibit 6 for the email).

Which Way to Go?

Next day, Nair thought of talking to Sinha about the things that had been troubling her for the past few months. After finishing the day's work, she got up from her chair and went to his office. Sinha was talking to someone on the phone. She gestured through the huge glass door asking if she could come inside. He waved her in. Nair stepped in while Sinha continued his phone call:

"You should talk to Mohit Dubey on this proposal and take his word as final. He is even better than me in these aspects and has a sharp sense with great ability to follow up on a deal." Nair heard this as she pulled out a chair and waited for Sinha's call to get over.

"Yes, Meera, tell me. All set for the conference? Any concerns?"

"Well, not for the conference but for something else. Actually I need to talk to you about my team. They are perturbed..."

"Oh...can we do it later, may be later this week? I also need to talk to you about something important but I have a flight to catch right now," Sinha interrupted as he rushed out of his office.

Nair walked out of Sinha's office and returned to her desk only to find Dubey's email (Refer Exhibit 1 for the mail). Immersed in her thoughts, she took her belongings and left the office. She picked her daughter Pihu from the day care centre and got into the cab in a worrisome state of mind. She would now have to travel to Ahmedabad and it would mean being away from her daughter for three days, also affecting her husband's schedule.

The cab moved at a snail's pace in Bangalore traffic. As Pihu fell asleep in her arms, Nair's mind was replaying the series of events that had occurred over the past few months. She wondered whether talking to Sinha would be of any help. She remembered what Sinha had once told her about Dubey: "You know Meera, I have received certain feedback on Mohit. Some of the colleagues especially some Department Managers call him overconfident and arrogant. I convinced them how wrong they were!"

Nair closed her eyes. Several questions remained unanswered in her mind. She loved PhoenixWay. It was her dream job. What should she do next? Keep silent and continue with her work bearing the effect that Dubey was having on her and her team? She had never paid attention to the emails and phone calls she used to get from head-hunters. Should she now start responding to those leads? She did not want her daughter to suffer the consequences of her actions. Things were certainly quite hazy for Meera Nair.

Exhibit 1: Email from Mohit Dubey to Meera Nair

FROM: "MOHIT DUBEY" <mohitd@PhoenixWay.com>

TO: "MEERA NAIR" <cmngr-opr@PhoenixWay.com>

CC: "GOPALKRISHNAN IYER" <head-adminhr@PhoenixWay.com>, "SHEKHAR SINHA" <mdoffice@PhoenixWay.com>

SENT: TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2017 5:33 PM

SUBJECT: CAMPUS INTERVIEWS AT IIM AHMEDABAD

Dear Meera:

I am unable to take up this responsibility of travelling to Ahmedabad for the company presentation and the subsequent campus interviews at IIM Ahmedabad as I am tied up with the ongoing client negotiations. There are several proposals under discussion and it is important for me to be available in the office. As you know the client demands can be crazy and they need their answers at the next minute! I will choose to stay back. I am sure you will enjoy this opportunity of interacting with the young and bright minds of our country.

Best,

Mohit

Mohit Dubey

Chief Manager, Client Relationship
PhoenixWay
Ext.: 1213

-----On February 21 at 10:56, Gopalkrishnan Iyer head-adminhr@PhoenixWay.com wrote:

Dear Mohit and Meera:

It is that time of the year again when we look to pick the best from the talent pool coming out of the B-schools. We are travelling to IIM Ahmedabad from February 26-28. We start by evening flight on Sunday, February 26 and will be back by first flight on Tuesday, February 28. I would like either of you to accompany me and Shekhar. Please discuss and let me know so that my team can arrange your logistics accordingly.

Good day!

Best regards,
Gopal

Gopalkrishnan Iyer
Head, Administration and Human Resources
PhoenixWay
Ext.: 1321

Exhibit 2: Profiles of Shekhar, Mohit and Meera**Shekhar Sinha (Managing Director, PhoenixWay)**

Shekhar Sinha was a veteran of the consulting industry and joined PhoenixWay in 2010. He had obtained his management degree from IIM Ahmedabad in 1986. He was keen to improve PhoenixWay's industry ranking in terms of gross revenue earned. His knowledge on diverse perspectives of business was incomparable. He was an active member of various industry forums and was also a popular visiting faculty of Strategic Leadership and International Business at leading B-Schools.

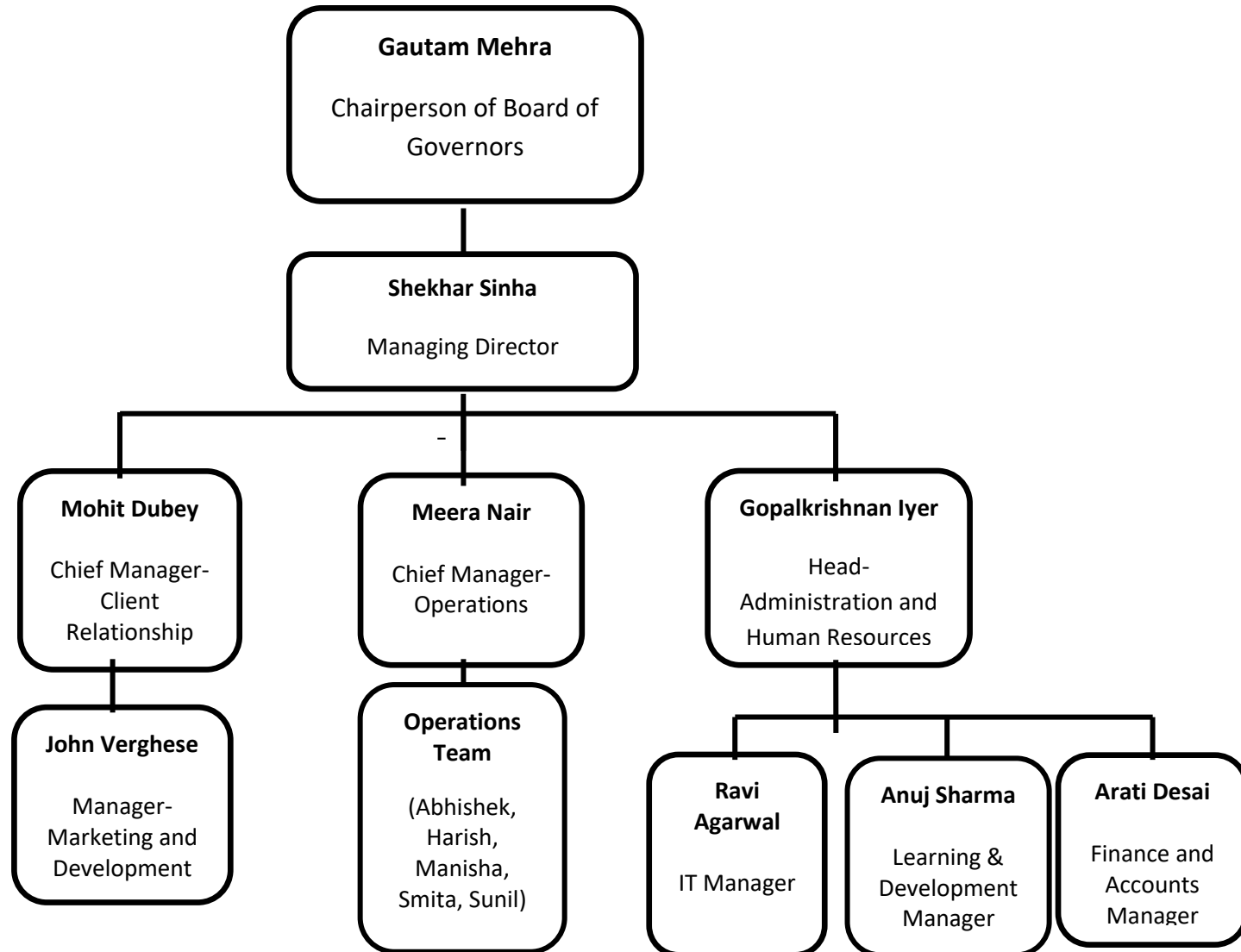
Mohit Dubey (Chief Manger, Client Relationship, PhoenixWay)

Dubey had an excellent academic background with the top-notch IIT Delhi-IIM Ahmedabad degrees. He had a very successful career that had progressed at a dream pace with wide international experiences in investment banking, market research and consulting. He joined PhoenixWay in 2012 and handled the client interface. The client relationships had tremendously improved and revenues had grown by 40% over the years under Dubey. He had become the identity of PhoenixWay for the clients.

Meera Nair (Chief Manager – Operations, PhoenixWay)

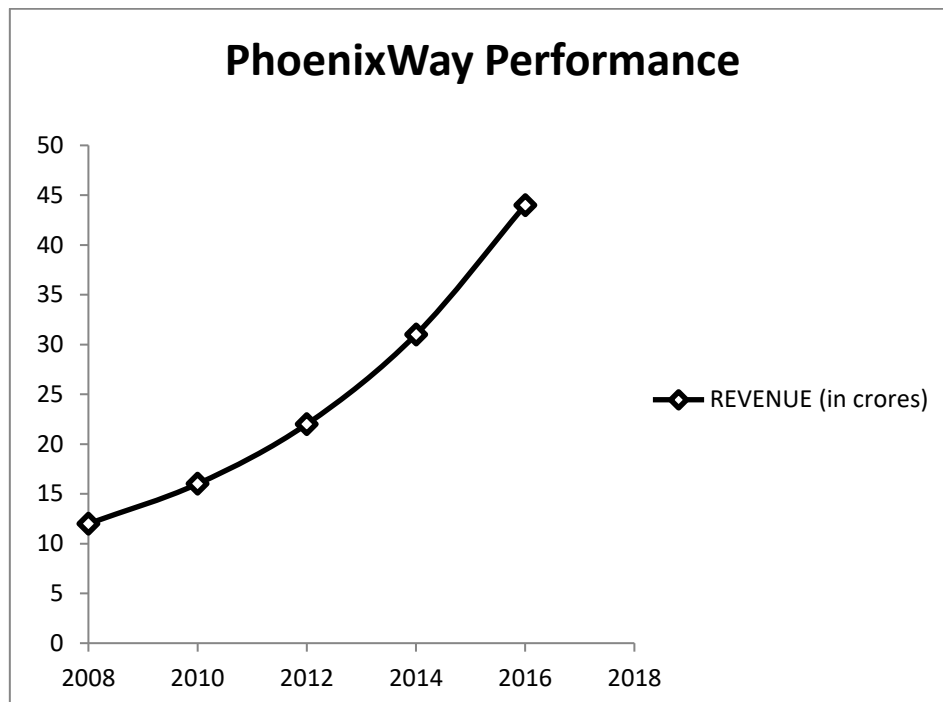
Meera Nair had joined PhoenixWay in 2014. Nair had a degree in Operations Management. Her two-year old daughter Pihu had quickly and happily adapted to the excellent day-care facility at PhoenixWay with latest amenities and devoted caretakers. Pihu was always happy to be under their care even when Nair worked extra hours, which was very frequent. Nair was meticulous and dedicated and looked after the entire Operations at PhoenixWay. She had an eagle eye that helped her team several times when inadvertent errors and oversight were corrected before it was too late.

Exhibit 3: Organizational Structure at PhoenixWay



(Source: Internal Company Documents)

Exhibit 4: Growth of PhoenixWay over the years

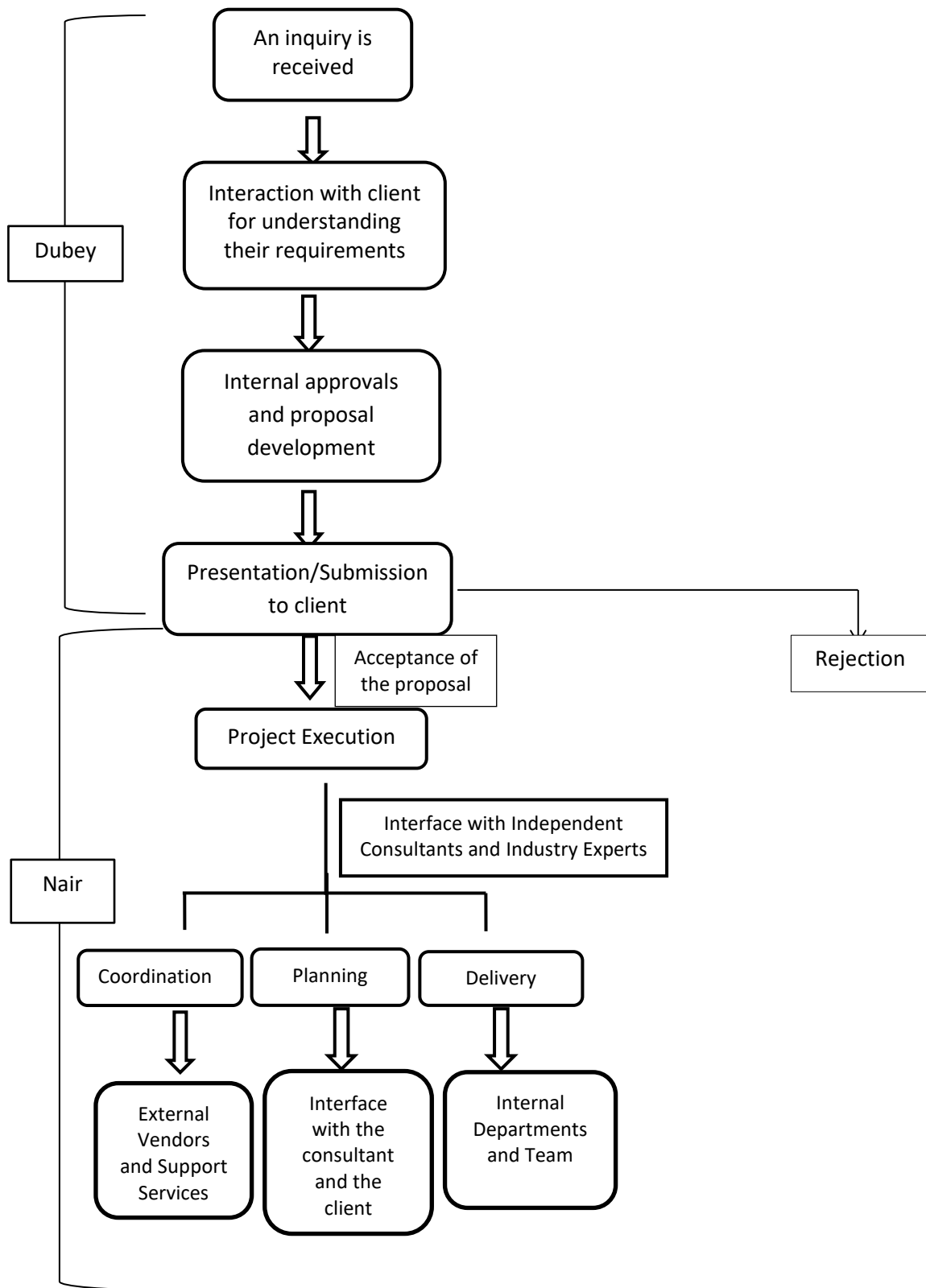


Year	Revenue earned (INR in crore ¹)	Number of Employees
2008	12	10
2010	16	18
2012	22	27
2014	31	39
2016	44	50

Source: Internal Company Documents

¹ 1 crore = 10 million

Exhibit 5: Consulting project process



Source: Internal Company Documents

Exhibit 6: Shekhar's email to Mohit

FROM: "SHEKHAR SINHA" <mdoffice@PhoenixWay.com>

TO: "MOHIT DUBEY" <mohitd@PhoenixWay.com>

CC: "GOPALKRISHNAN A" <head-adminhr@PhoenixWay.com>, "MEERA NAIR" <cmngr-opr@PhoenixWay.com>

SENT: MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2017 11:40 PM

SUBJECT: INFINITY FEEDBACK

Dear Mohit:

Congratulations on the excellent feedback by Infinity people. It is a pleasure and privilege working with you! The talent and skills that you bring to the table are remarkable and fantastic. I would like to have similar qualities in our people at PhoenixWay. You are a great example for them. I appreciate your efforts for this project and your valuable contribution in making it a success. I wish others are inspired by you and emulate your traits. You are the face of PhoenixWay for the clients and I am extremely proud of it. You have set a great performance benchmark with your hard work, efficiency and dedication. PhoenixWay needs more people like you to scale to heights that we aspire to reach.

I wish you great success! Keep up the good work.

Best regards,

Shekhar

-----Forwarded message-----

FROM: "ABHISHEK MISHRA" <projexe-opr@PhoenixWay.com>

DATE: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2017 10:10 AM

SUBJECT: INFINITY FEEDBACK

TO: "SHEKHAR SINHA" <mdoffice@PhoenixWay.com>

CC: "GOPALKRISHNAN IYER" <grphead-hr@PhoenixWay.com>, "MEERA NAIR" <cmngr-opr@PhoenixWay.com>

Dear Sir:

Please find attached the collated feedback report for the Infinity project. The client has appreciated the content of our programme as well as its delivery.

Regards,

Abhishek

Abhishek Mishra
Project Execution In-charge
Operations Team, PhoenixWay
Ext.: 1819