

Tata group crowdsources R&D solutions

VARUN AGGARWAL

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For long, the Tinsplate Company of India was grappling with a problem: it couldn't come up with a safe and inexpensive method to test the leakage in cans of edible oil. The Tata Group company had no R&D team it could turn to for help.

This was when a start-up suggested that Tinsplate make use of a simple ultrasound instead of manually testing each can for leaks. And it worked.

Such engineering solutions, channelled through Tata Innoverse, a crowdsourcing initiative of Tata Sons, are helping smaller

companies of the salt-to-software conglomerate that have no dedicated units for research and development find solutions outside.

For the first time, the group is allowing outsiders to peep in and solve some of the engineering and process-related problems that its various companies have been wrestling with.

"We have posted 15-plus challenges [through Innoverse] and we've got 3,500 plus registered users—a solver community helping us solve these problems. The solutions are coming from universities (including the IITs) and companies outside the Tata Group," Gopichand

Katragadda, Group CTO at Tata Sons, told *BusinessLine*.

Fifteen Tata group companies are so far working with the Group Technology Office to solve their problems through the crowdsourcing approach. They include Tata Steel, Tata Sponge, Titan, Tata Global Beverages, Tata Motors, Rallis and Tata Global Wires.

To ensure that sensitive company information is not leaked while Tata companies post their problems to the world, the group is ensuring that core engineering problems are posted only from smaller group companies that have no R&D budget. The Tata Group otherwise

has an annual R&D budget of \$2.8 billion.

"Core problems for smaller companies and non-core problems for larger companies is a model that we adopted and that is working well for us," Katragadda said.

For the first few challenges, Tata Sons offered prize money of ₹1 lakh to a solver whose solution was selected. Apart from the prize money, the group will allow the solver—an individual, startup or university—to retain the intellectual property and continue to work with Tata companies as a vendor. The prize money is expected to go up to ₹3-21 lakh this year.