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SUNDAY PROFILE

Finding the funny in outsourcing



Robert Durell / Los Angeles Times

THE WORLD IS LUMPY: Sandeep Sood, in his office in Berkeley, is the creator of the online comic strip "Doubtsourcing," which, appropriately enough, is outsourced. He writes the dialogue and a friend in China does the illustrations.

For entrepreneur Sandeep Sood, the misunderstandings of two worlds are fodder for his cartoon strip.

By Michelle Quinn, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
February 10, 2008

Sandeep Sood is globalization in action.

From Berkeley, where he runs a consulting company, he's the middleman between U.S. clients who need software and workers in India who write the code. He's a beneficiary of corporate America's rush to tap relatively cheap skilled foreign labor, profiting as he seamlessly hands off tasks like a baton as the globe turns.



'Doubtsourcing'
[click to enlarge](#)

Or not so seamlessly. The world isn't flat, Sood says. "The world is still round and lumpy."

The miscommunications rooted in cultural and time differences can be frustrating, and amusing. And so a cartoon strip called "Doubtsourcing" was born.

Set mostly in an office in India, "Doubtsourcing" aims to be to the outsourcing world what "Dilbert" has been to the U.S. cubicle set. Making fun of Indian workaholicism in one cartoon, a job candidate receives an offer after boasting that he hasn't "seen the sun for 7.5 months."

In another, a U.S. manager criticizes the India team for being slow and uncreative. An Indian worker says the U.S. firm has changed its business model three times in three months, from online dating to insurance to pornography. "You just need to deal with ambiguity better," the U.S. manager says.

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Sood says that though "there's a lack of humor in the outsourcing industry," he finds it very funny.

Once, on a trip to India, he met three times with an American potential client who refused to tell him what company he was from, no doubt, Sood says, because outsourcing can be so politically charged in the U.S.

In India, the view of the "big bad client" in America is Wizard of Oz-like, Sood says. The desire to please the mysterious boss and avoid conflict leads to problems, he adds, which of course are fodder for "Doubtsourcing."


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By the way, "Doubtsourcing" is outsourced. Sood writes the dialogue and a friend in China illustrates it. Sood started posting the cartoon strip late last year and now has 30,000 subscribers, one-fourth in India.

The strip is hitting a nerve. A recent item about "Doubtsourcing" on the blog TechCrunch led to a [gripe session](#).

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A fan from India e-mailed Sood asking him to give American companies more knocks. There are "numerous instances when the outsourcing company would expect us to be illiterate idiots, whereas we managed to show them a thing or two," the fan wrote. "Other times, we were on time for a call at 4 a.m. while the outsourcing rep was busy changing nappies of his kid."

In December, "Doubtsourcing" was acquired for an undisclosed amount by Fuse+Media Interactive, a company based in India and owned by venture firm Velocity Interactive Group, which is based in Palo Alto. Velocity partner Keyur Patel says he plans to turn "Doubtsourcing" and another creative project Sood worked on with friends called Badmash into animated TV shows, as well as shorts aimed for mobile phones.

The audience will be primarily what Patel calls the Indian diaspora, people with roots in India but living around the world. The animation work, of course, will be done in India. Sood is the creative and technical director.

"This isn't content you can create unless you understand India and the U.S.," Patel says. "You have to be on both sides of the divide."

Straddling it has always been part of Sood's life. His father, a chemical engineer, moved to the U.S. from Uganda. His mother, a loan officer, came from north India. Although the family is Hindu, Sood attended the Christian South Hills Academy in West Covina through middle school. He recalls coming home crying that his family was going to burn in hell for eternity.

It was at UC Berkeley during the dot-com boom that Sood, an economics major, caught the entrepreneurial bug. After graduating in 1998, he worked at PeopleSoft Inc. and other technology firms before setting out on his own.

First he founded an online math education company called LearnTempo for kids from kindergarten to high school. It failed. In 2001, he started DeepSun, building websites for travel agents, massage therapists and construction companies for less than \$500. He barely made the rent on his San Francisco studio apartment and nearly had to close the business when his laptop was stolen from his car while he was surfing.

In 2002, he sold the name DeepSun to Sun Microsystems Inc., which had complained that he was infringing its trademark. Sood declined to disclose the amount he got from Sun but said the money helped him keep the business afloat. The company became Monsoon Co. He has six full-time employees in the U.S. -- he hopes to double that this year -- and 90 workers in three cities in India: Pune, Mumbai and Chandigarh.

Sood, a cuff-link-wearing guy, has contracts with Wells Fargo & Co. and other big names, and with many small start-ups.

"There's no way I would have gotten this off the ground without him and the outsourced team," says Ken Kurtzig, chief executive of iReuse, a website that helps corporations find nonprofits to donate unwanted supplies.

The rap on Indian workers is that they have a can-do attitude but tend to over-promise and balk at using their own judgment, Sood says. At the same time, he adds, many U.S. companies treat them as dispensable cheap labor. It's a point Sood makes in one trenchant cartoon.

An Indian manager is trying to sell a skeptical American on hiring a smiling stick figure drawn on cardboard. "His work is bug free," he says. "He listens well. He doesn't seem to need a break and, oh yeah, he's 100% recyclable."

"Sold," the American says.

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