

Good Business Lab: Designing for Wellbeing

Abstract

This case study engages with the journey of Good Business Lab (GBL), a non-profit registered in Bengaluru in 2017 that today has offices across India, as well as the USA and Latin America. Good Business Lab aims to apply research to steer businesses (primarily in labour-intensive industries such as manufacturing), to invest in the wellbeing of their workers. Through its ability to marry rigorous research techniques to its concerted intent to strike the balance between business and worker, GBL today occupies a notable niche within the Indian social sector ecosystem.

The case study explores the experience of GBL, which now includes almost 100 full-time employees, in designing an organisation to operate at these edges and involving talent across different locations. For a young organisation with a strong research and academic focus, GBL has paid unusually detailed attention to how it works within, how it can sustain itself and, in particular, how it can integrate lessons of the central conceptual strand of its research—wellbeing—into its own organisational precepts and practice.

Keywords: Worker Conditions; Worker Wellbeing; Workplace Wellbeing; Shop Floor Research; Indian Manufacturing Sector; Frontier Assessment (research) Methods

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Origins

We set out five years ago as three friends with a farfetched dream—to align the wellbeing of workers and the bottom line of businesses, and in the process fundamentally change the way that organisations of all kinds in all corners of the world treat their employees. (The founders, Good Business Lab, 2022)

In 2017, a non-profit organisation, Good Business Lab (GBL), was registered in Bengaluru. At the time, it had no clear analogue in the Indian non-profit space. Founded by a trio of friends: Anant Ahuja, Anant Nyshadham and Achyuta Adhvaryu, it was attempting to resolve the seeming contradiction between the wellbeing of workers in some of India's labour-intensive industries (initially textiles and garments manufacturing) and the business interests—primarily profitability, productivity and competitiveness—of the organisations that employed them. To do so, its approach centred on designing and implementing research projects directly on the shop floors of these factories, and using the results of the research to make a case for investment in worker wellbeing. Its tagline summed it all up: “worker wellbeing is good business.”

But its genesis lay farther back in time. In 2007, the international clothing brand Gap Inc. introduced a soft-skilling programme for women workers at its supplier Shahi Exports¹ factories in India, called Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement (P.A.C.E.). The objective of the P.A.C.E. programme was to improve worker wellbeing at garment factories. Shahi Exports was a family business, run by the family of Anant Ahuja (known as Anant A, and within GBL, affectionately, as Anki). In 2012, Anant A, through his brother, met two US-based economics professors from the University of Michigan—Anant Nyshadham (Anant N) and Achyuta Adhvaryu (Good Business Lab, 2022a). The trio, over the course of their discussions, found themselves gravitating to a question: could the P.A.C.E. programme, intended to improve worker wellbeing, also be leading to positive benefits on the business performance of the companies who had invested in the programme?

Their thoughts, discussions and hypotheses fructified into a two-year experiment, where randomised controlled trials were conducted at five of Shahi's factories in Bengaluru. The objective was to ascertain and evaluate the impact of P.A.C.E. on the company's bottom line. Anant N recalls:

The results were startling—Gap Inc.'s P.A.C.E. had massive productivity returns, particularly in the period after the women completed the programme. The rate of return on the investment of training women in soft skills was astronomical to the firm—over 200 (250) percent—even after accounting for the fact that lots of women workers in our sample left [the factory] over the course of the two-year experiment. And it made sense—a productive worker needs teamwork and

¹ One of the biggest finished garment exporters in the country, exporting to various renowned fashion brands. In 2022, Shahi Exports employed over 1,13,000 people, of which 68% (76,840) were women.

effective communication skills to make sure bottlenecks and problems are resolved. (Tagra, 2022)

Those who had participated in P.A.C.E. were found to be 11% more productive than those who hadn't. The net rate of return to the factories studied, through increase in productivity, attendance and retention of workers was found to be 250%, rising to 258% after 20 months of the two-year programme. In terms of benefits to the worker, the study also found that those that had completed P.A.C.E. were 15% more likely to request skill development training, state-sponsored pension, and subsidised health-care benefits; more likely to save in general for their children's education and more aspirational with regard to their children's ultimate educational attainment. (Shahi Exports, 2020)

This research provided grounds to further build upon the initial hypothesis that there was a strong potential business case for investment in worker wellbeing beyond required compliance. In 2017, therefore, the three co-founders registered Good Business Lab as a Section 8 company in India with the mission to lead businesses to improve the lives of their workers, by identifying workers' needs, designing solutions, testing for wellbeing impact and financial returns, and driving the adoption of proven solutions. *GBL wanted to make businesses see business differently.*

Today (2022), it has a team in four locations around the world, including India, USA and Latin America, with around 100 full-time staff. At the end of 2022, it had 16 ongoing research projects (having completed 17 till date), predominantly in India, but also in the USA, Colombia, Argentina, Puerto Rico, China and Thailand (refer to Exhibits 1 and 2). Its journey here, however, started with pointing to a needed shift in mainstream narrative concerning the world of business.

Improving workers' lives through research

Mansi Kabra (Associate Director—Marketing & Transformation at GBL) reflects on this narrative shift that lay at the heart of GBL's work, both externally and internally:

Let us tell you about an old narrative that we believe has lived far beyond its purported lifetime. It says: "The business of business is business, and the only social responsibility businesses have is to increase profits." (*Milton Freidman, 1970*).

While it is not our space to contest that, what we question is whether today, almost five decades since, if the approach to doing business is still the same. Are the channels to make profits still the same? Is the perspective of business people to profits any different in a different world? Have we not found innovative ways of running a business that could proportionately benefit both the business and those who make the business work, the workers? It is this factor of production that is uncared for, and where we believe lies a social as well as a business opportunity (seen in a way), to do good, to do better. (Kabra, 2019)

In its early stage, the three founders all brought different facets of experience and background to the young Good Business Lab. Anant A's management experience and his know-how of the Indian textiles and garment industry provided the all-important access to the shop floors of factories. This access proved to be a significant asset as these shop floors provided the space for many of the nascent GBL's research projects related to worker wellbeing to take shape. Today, outlining his role, he says: "I tend to take much more responsibility over things like finance work, marketing, communications and partnerships. As partners, we talk to a lot of different brands and retailers, who are customers of the company that my family has been running." Anant N and Achyuta, on the other hand, brought to the table their extensive experience as developmental economists and academics, and the ability to conceptualise, design and execute GBL's field-based research projects and bring the rigour to their research practice, a marker that distinguishes GBL today.

Worker conditions and wellbeing in India

GBL's observations on paying close and careful attention to issues of worker wellbeing in India finds echoes throughout the country's vast manufacturing sector. Outside of agriculture, the manufacturing sector was, at the end of 2022, "the largest institutional employer in the country," formally employing an estimated 38.5% of all workers (The Hindu Bureau, 2022).

Within manufacturing, textiles and garments, chemicals, steels, automobiles, footwear, leather and food are some of the largest employers of organised workforce, with textiles and garments by far and away the biggest: directly employing an estimated 4.5 crore people, and a further 6 crore in its "allied sectors" (Jhunjhunwala, 2022). Of this, around 60% are women (reaching around 80% if the estimates of those employed in informal segments of the industry, including home-based work, were to be included). This puts textiles and garments front and centre as the single biggest employer of women in India, a country where in 2021, 81% of women were not engaged in formal paid work (Fotedar et al., 2021).

On the face of it, the Indian manufacturing sector is strictly regulated, and subject to the wide-ranging requirements of the Factories Act, 1948 (amended in 1987), the primary legal antecedent for worker protection (ILO, n.d.). However, in reality, there continue to be regular reports of worker exploitation and contravention of these legal safeguards. These have tended to centre around wages, working hours, hazardous working conditions, lack of social security, violence against women and child labour.

While the Factories Act explicitly states that "no worker shall be required or allowed to work longer than 48 hours a week", there have been widespread instances of workers being required to work 14-16 hours a day, seven days a week, with the withholding of daily wage a common way of enforcing long working hours (Lee, 2021). The India Wage Report by the International Labour Organization (2018) indicates that daily wages in the manufacturing sector have increased steadily since 1993, with the value hovering around Rs. 320 in the organised manufacturing sector. However, the figure again varies widely between the subsectors of manufacturing, between urban and rural areas, as well as in "informal" manufacturing. In textiles and garments, for instance, where much of GBL's early focus was (then expanding to automobiles and food), there are reports of daily wages as low as Rs. 80 a day (just over \$1 a day) (Lee, 2021).

The widespread use of verbal and informal contracts (one government report estimated that over 71% of workers did not have written contracts) also leave workers with little recourse to social security and basic benefits such as paid leave, maternity leave or health insurance. Disputes with employers cannot be effectively pursued without formal documentation, leaving workers extremely vulnerable to exploitation (Varma, 2019). The lack of social security disproportionately harms the female labour force, who are paid on average 22% less than

their male counterparts. Furthermore, women also face persistent and rampant harassment in the workplace, from humiliation to stalking to unwelcome sexual advances (Lee, 2021). However, the fear of retaliation both from the workplace as well as at home and the risk of losing their jobs often stifles any urge to speak out.

Three years into GBL's inception as a formal set-up, the COVID-19 pandemic hit home, further heightening welfare concerns around working hours, social security and wages, and perhaps fundamentally complicating the context of GBL's work. To recover from the severe impact of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns, factories, perhaps under compulsion to preserve solvency, started increasing shift lengths as well as cutting wages. At the same time, some related actions caused further distress and gave cause for worry, in particular, a decision by six Indian states to suspend labour laws in their industries to encourage economic recovery: a decision that may have undone a significant amount of progress made in the previous decades towards worker welfare and pose a long-term threat to worker rights and wellbeing. "It's not only regression, it's a deep slide into a bottomless pit and a race to the bottom of labour standards", labour economist KR Shyam Sundar, a professor at the Xavier School of Management, said in an interview with Thomson Reuters Foundation. "Other states will imitate (the six states)," he added (Fadnavis, 2020).

Against this backdrop, Anant A highlights the importance of the research-based approach that GBL was developing, which helps uncover the reciprocity and synchronicity that is both natural and desirable between business and worker, or labour and capital:

If they [brands and retailers] have a shared mission of building a responsible supply chain, then worker wellbeing is a really important area that needs to be studied as well. There's not enough research guiding the social standards and practices that these companies are implementing in their supply chains.

...

No single intervention is going to solve all issues around worker welfare but this [research-driven] approach really excites me. The labour market here in India is broken—there are issues preventing a lot of potential growth and success, both for the population as well as firms. The same problems affecting companies are also affecting workers. And essentially it's preventing both from advancing. Solving these problems is a win-win situation that is an important development tool but also a business tool. We realised that is really the space we want to work in.

It's very hard for anyone to make the claim that their worker programme is effective and doing what they want it to do because no one is making gold standard research one of their main goals. But by leveraging these professors' [Anant N and Achyuta] skills, we are able to do this. It is about frontier assessment methods, crunching a bunch of numbers, and knowing for real if P.A.C.E. is effective. (Reed, 2017)

Carving out a niche for itself

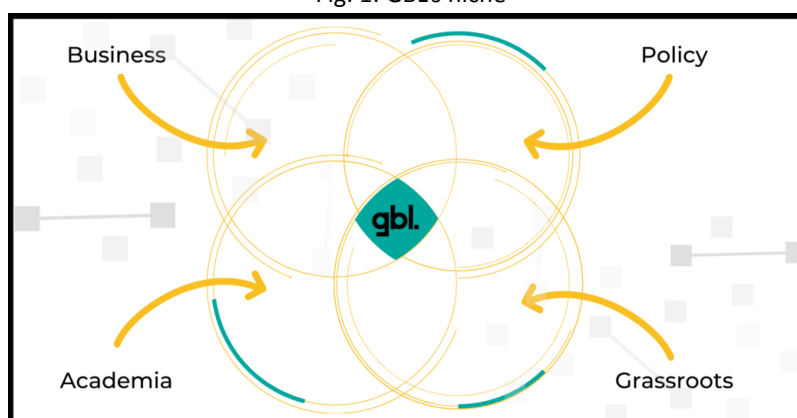
In India, this hybridity of GBL operates at many levels: it is a young social enterprise made of academicians and professionals that speaks to both businesses and workers. Its roots trace to academia but its mandate puts it within a hair's distance of the wider Indian civil society. It partakes of a global ethos but then must peer deep inside the nuts and bolts of the supply chains which lie at the very heart of this global set-up. Its

research tries to trace the fine line which joins the two sides of this very supply chain. The narrative of labour and capital being in opposition makes for a convenient narrative; but trying to look beyond and find the underlying causes and solutions requires constant and demanding digging of details.

GBL also has to keep its research work directly connected to its grassroots stakeholders, for instance: the workers in textile and other factories situated in rural Bengaluru (refer to Exhibit 3 for a field diary extract). A core part of GBL's research methodology is to obtain continuous feedback from its field sites, using direct insights from workers to make their research more actionable and relevant to practitioners. Lavanya Garg (Associate Director—People Operations & Partnerships, and Chief of Staff at GBL) puts it succinctly, saying: "It is easy to get lost in a purely academic world. We want our research to contribute to that world, but not be limited to it."

To translate the learnings it was gathering into meaningful action, representation on platforms involving corporations (specifically, large fashion brands), industry bodies, and the government has been important to it quite early on. Shortly into its inception in 2017, Good Business Lab was represented on a skilling panel by the Indian Ministry of Rural Development, and at the India and Sustainability Standards (ISS 2017) conference organised by the Centre for Responsible Business (Good Business Lab, 2018). Figure 1 shows GBL's own visualisation of the space it was attempting to settle into for itself.

Fig. 1: GBL's niche



Source: Gor, 2021a

Activating the niche

In evaluating P.A.C.E., GBL had found validation for one of its very specific suppositions: that soft skilling could improve worker productivity as well as their wellbeing. As Achyuta recounts, the significance of this was not lost on GBL. In fact, it opened a doorway of possibilities:

Given these surprisingly positive results, my mind drifted to the next natural question. If soft skills were so productive for frontline sewing floor workers, they should be even more valuable for managers, since the "soft" parts of their everyday jobs—interacting with their teams, setting plans to make production targets, dealing with shocks to team morale or health, reading people, etc.—made up a much larger fraction of their overall responsibilities than technical skills. While this seemed self-evident, the next steps were less obvious. Which particular managerial skills mattered the most for productivity? Could a

training that sought to impart those skills actually make a difference in managerial behaviours and ultimately on the productivity of the teams they managed? Or were managers already optimising on these dimensions that suggesting a training programme would have little impact? Or perhaps managers were just so set in their ways of doing things that they would struggle to learn new skills?

Anant (N) and I, along with Jorge Tamayo,² started on the long academic road to answering these questions about five years ago. (Adhvaryu, 2022)

The eventual destination of this journey was a supervisor training programme called STITCH (Supervisor Transformation Into Change Holders—an acronym Achyuta amusingly admits is “tortured, but works great”). STITCH, developed along with local partners, became GBL’s flagship soft-skilling programme.

It focussed on the specific set of soft skills that their research had highlighted was important for productivity but missing in most factory supervisors studied. Detailed evaluation of the effect of STITCH indicated “large and pronounced” positive impacts on supervisor productivity, just as P.A.C.E. had had on factory workers.

If the evaluation of P.A.C.E. had provided the kindling to light up the founders’ idea, STITCH was the firewood and soon many other avenues deserving of exploration started to open up. The organisation has since initiated a total of 34 research projects across a few core focus areas: freeing up rural women to take up paid work, maximising vocational skills of workers, improving the quality of available jobs for low-income workers and the environments in which they work, and improving physical and mental health outcomes for workers through workplace health interventions (Good Business Lab, 2022b).

As these projects sprung and expanded so too did GBL’s partnerships. The University of Michigan, where Anant N and Achyuta are based, is a partner to GBL on several of these projects. Other partners include Indian State governments, international development agencies, fashion retailers, tech companies and other higher education institutions. Refer to Exhibit 2 for an overview of GBL’s projects, both current and past.

With increase in the number of projects GBL also found itself generating a great deal of insight into the nature of worker wellbeing, insights that were not widely available in the mainstream thought and were a result of the shop-floor research methods that GBL had now learnt to effectively harness. GBL soon decided that it was not enough for it to communicate its findings on wellbeing and leave it to businesses to change their practices. It would take a more proactive approach: bringing together its in-house capabilities in design, technology and business understanding to translate its research insights into workplace technologies able to improve and assist the day-to-day functioning of businesses and the way they looked at wellbeing.

Launched in 2021, GBL Ventures is a unit of Good Business Lab to advance the development of in-house technological solutions to worker wellbeing and productivity. Products currently in its design and development pipeline include: a unified HR platform that generates actionable data on various aspects of worker wellbeing; a digital screening and training platform for potential managers and supervisors which automatically recommends the most appropriate training modules for upskilling; and a fintech platform which allows employees to withdraw their salaries on any day of the month to provide workers with greater financial freedom (Good Business Lab, 2022c).

² Assistant Professor of Business Administration, Strategy Unit, Harvard Business School.

Not content to let its research be simply an (admirable) artefact on a bookshelf, there is by now an ingrained impetus to ensure it translates into worker wellbeing in real terms. Activating the multiple openings that any sound research can throw up is as much a part of GBL's identity as the moniker "research organisation," the result of a singular preoccupation and investment within GBL from the start: the honing of its approach to field research.

"The gold standard"

By the end of its first year in 2017, GBL had a team of nine. Be it managerial staff or its research practitioners or indeed its founders, all team members wore several different hats: growing its body of research and building partnerships and relationships with stakeholders, but also building the organisation and laying the early foundations of culture, all in the ad hoc, organic way typical of young set-ups.

This "start-up" phase, however, did not last very long. The organisation today (2022) has grown to over 100 employees. As the number of projects kept growing, the focus on efficiency increased. For instance, looking to utilise less researcher time for organisational processes such as proposal-writing, and instead hiring specialist writers. During this time, GBL also opened up offices in the United States and in Colombia.

However, as a budding research practice, one of its chief priorities over this early phase was bolstering its capacity to design and implement, in Anant A's words, "gold standard" research projects. Tasked with this was GBL's Design vertical: one of the organisation's most important, and critical to meeting its mission objectives.

Today, each GBL research project goes through four stages in its "lifecycle." Regardless of the specifics of the project, these four stages form a common thread underpinning its research approach: design (identify a problem area, undertake qualitative research to understand it from the perspective of all stakeholders, and develop a solution); evaluate (randomised controlled trials to evaluate the impact of the solution and draw causal relationships between various factors); disseminate (create communication strategies and outputs to make research easily understandable and accessible: social media, blog posts, publications and magazines are extensively used for dissemination); and scale up (scaling to other factories and settings by building their proven intervention into tangible tools and solutions that businesses can implement to improve worker wellbeing alongside business outcomes) (Good Business Lab, 2022b).

Arvind Patil, Senior Design Manager at GBL, talks through the organisation's overall approach to designing its research projects:

We use systems thinking approaches to understand the ecosystem and identify the right problem statement, and we use human-centred design approaches to design user-centric solutions. For example, there have been certain projects where we have emphasised women-centred design practices or women-centred design approaches and so on. Many organisations, like Amazon, Ola, Uber or Swiggy, use "service design thinking principles" to design their business propositions. In the development ecosystem, we are trying to incorporate principles of service design in our programmes so that the needs of all stakeholders can be met and the challenges can be addressed through service design principles.

Continuing, Arvind walks through one of GBL's projects, highlighting how the four stages of its approach come together in a real example. The project, called "Digitizing Worker Voice," seeks to bring to prominence the voices of factory workers, which "are often marginalised, especially in low-income settings." Starting from problem identification and qualitative research, the project culminated in a scalable tool called INACHE, currently in use at over 40 factories based in the textiles and garments sector:

The problem statement was designing a grievance management platform for factory workers. It was the first project where we used design research methodologies. We interviewed 30+ factory workers to understand their relationship with the shop floor and how they felt on the shop floor. We tried to map a day in the life of a worker, what the lows and highs were in their lives, and how different stakeholders on the shop floor, such as supervisors, quality checkers, the factory manager or HR staff interacted with the workers. We mapped that ecosystem and tried to understand the different conflict and peace loops (where exactly workers felt comfortable and supported in raising grievances) which existed on the shop floor. Based on this, we came up with a workflow and that workflow was used to design a low-tech grievance management tool called INACHE for factory workers.

This tool was designed to be used by feature phones (non-smartphones), because most workers still use feature phones. Workers were also often not conversant with the SMS interface and so INACHE incorporated a voice-based grievance registration mechanism, so workers could register their queries via recorded voice calls. They had to call on a number, describe the problem they were facing, and that would then reflect on the dashboard of the factory's HR staff. The HR staff would be able to transcribe the recording and categorise the case based on some case metrics we created, and it would then get forwarded to the factory's HR manager, who would decide how the case would be resolved.

The design emphasised anonymity, transparency of process and on keeping the workers updated. The tool would send workers regular updates, for instance that their "case would be resolved in the next three days," and so on. So, it was about removing all uncertainty from the grievance redressal process. That is how we designed the tool, and it is now live in 40+ factories, covering around 75,000 workers.

Within the project, there was also an element of studying how non-monetary incentives could improve the performance of a factory's HR staff: what kind of incentives need to be given to factory HR staff (to encourage them to act on workers' grievances)? We did several workshops with HR staff to develop a set of non-monetary incentive mechanisms. The formal evaluation of that is still underway but anecdotally, what we have seen is that wherever we have implemented these non-monetary incentive mechanisms for HR staff, grievance case resolutions have been prompt and workers have been satisfied with the resolution of their grievance cases in those factories.

Right from the start, GBL's Design vertical had made it a point to collect feedback and capture the experiences of the workers it worked with as part of its research projects. However, in 2021, it decided it needed to go a step further, conceptualising the Design Advisory Committee: hosting representation from the "subject matter" of the research itself. Arvind explains:

In many of our research approaches, the biggest missing piece was how to bring in representatives from the target population into the Design vertical's work. We are trying to onboard worker representatives onto the GBL Design Advisory Committee, where these workers can help us in designing relevant problem statements or in coming up with innovative approaches to understand worker's lived experiences. We are also hosting a series of co-creation workshops with the workers so that the solutions that we are designing remain relevant to the population, and sustainable in nature.

Around a year ago (2021) we felt that there was merit in having a committee working closely with the Design vertical, who could shape the overall research we were doing. A year ago we started discussions, and it took around seven-eight months to formulate what exactly to expect from the committee and who to have on the committee, and we are now in the process of onboarding these representatives from different occupations.

There are two aspects to the Design Advisory Committee. Firstly, we are onboarding experts from the industry who are helping us shape the strategic initiatives that the vertical can take. The other piece is that we want workers to be a part of the co-creation process, part of the research process itself. We have identified certain worker occupations, like workers in the gig economy, garment workers, domestic workers, healthcare workers and so on, and we are onboarding representatives from these occupations. These people will help us in identifying the right problem and validating the research processes that we are planning to use, especially the exploratory research that we do through the Design vertical. The final piece is to do with co-creating the solution, so that throughout the process there will be representation from the communities for which we are designing the solutions. That is what the overall mechanism will be.

The establishment of the Design Advisory Committee marked an important shift in GBL's approach to research and design. It would now proactively emphasise the inclusion of worker representation in all its research, both to help refine the design of these projects, and, on a more strategic level, also steer the work of the Design vertical towards areas where workers themselves, from experience, know that problems lie.

Making its research "Access"ible

In the world of research, dissemination—the last of the four steps in GBL's design lifecycle—is often wrapped up in technical details and jargon, inaccessible to the layman. In GBL's context, the term layman would apply well to their core stakeholder groups: workers as well as business owners, who, GBL hopes, would use its

research insights to change their business and labour practices. Shalin Gor, Marketing and Transformation Manager at GBL, categorically highlights:

While doing research and publishing papers is great, scalable impact can only be achieved when the conversation is extended beyond the policy and academic circles. To contribute real, actionable, value to the global community of “Good Business Leaders” and “Worker Wellbeing Champions,” we have made the task of disseminating complex research narratives into simple content formats—without compromising on the rigour and detail—an equally important part of our mission. (Gor, 2021b)

Mansi corroborates, while also emphasising the difficulty of the task:

At Good Business Lab, we have been increasingly asking ourselves the question: What is the brand of “Economic Research?” What personality does it have? What personality should it have? What emotions, if any, does it elicit? Excitement? Boredom? What value does it add to society? Does society appreciate or even realise its contributions? Should they? Why should they?

While in the medical sciences (for example), research is valued in a time-sensitive manner—in that it elicits a sense of urgency owing to life and death consequences—in other domains, say, economic development, it perhaps has a while to go before it warrants a comparable level of *immediate* attention. This is partly because the time taken for economic research to complete, be written about, and then be released through academic papers is often eclipsed by the speed at which the topics of interest evolve across the landscape. This is not to undermine the topics that *have* stuck and managed to catch global attention—those of minimum wages, universal basic income, social security and medicaid. However, they represent but a humble portion of the growing pie. Additionally, it is difficult to value what one doesn’t understand.

Economic research, much like research in general, is often wrapped in jargon understood only by a privileged few, neatly circumventing the lay people. The wider mission of economic research—to cope better with risks and improve the experience of living for societies at large—is hindered by the fact that civilians and people at the grassroots level, despite being potential beneficiaries of the research results, are unwittingly blocked out from truly understanding and meaningfully contributing to the conversation.

This is a big dilemma. A dilemma which is hindering progress, and a dilemma we are committed to solving for the benefit of the larger research community. To transition “daunting,” “boring,” and similar words out of the vocabulary and replace them with “insightful,” “interesting,” and “relevant” is no easy task. (Kabra, 2021a)

Its attempt to address this challenge has taken the form of a “thought leadership” initiative called GBL Access. Through Access, GBL is looking to make the contents of its own research available to the general public in easily digestible forms, emphasising insights and possible business actions that can be taken as a result. Its debut season, launched in early 2021 and entitled “But what about me? I can’t work from home,” explored how events over the past year of pandemic had exposed and furthered existing vulnerabilities in labour-intensive industries, the migrant workforce, and female labour force participation rates in India, and insights into how to go about the rebuilding process by prioritising the wellbeing of workers (Gor, 2021b).

Apart from Access, it has intentionally built a presence across social media platforms, and has thus far had research featured in multiple newspapers and development sector media platforms such as World Bank Blogs and India Development Review.

Transformation: keeping GBL “fit for purpose”

As it matured in its ability to execute research programmes and communicate them broadly, it started to pay similar attention to what all this meant for the organisation’s own working: a system of working accessible to all and allowing everyone to participate in its evolution. It started reaching out to staff to find areas where challenges were being faced, and to co-create relevant policies to address them through regular feedback from the teams. Anant A elaborates:

We take a design-thinking approach in developing policies. The inspiration for them usually comes out of the challenges we face. It means being really receptive to what's going on and reflecting on our performances and where we're lacking, so that we can say: “Okay, this is a problem that's emerged. What have other companies done who've experienced similar problems?” Then, maybe we'll work with consultants or leadership coaches to get insights, and then those people would bring in the experience that maybe our team doesn't have so that we can develop. Aside from that, we've created a transformation task force, which is meant to support the three of us (co-founders) in implementing or even thinking through a lot of the systems that we're going to need to scale.

With its research projects throwing up several possibilities for actions, collaborations and future research constantly, scale suggested itself naturally to GBL. The “transformation task force” was set up to gain a deeper understanding of itself in the present, and how it would need to change and grow internally to be able to sustain a much larger operation in the near and more distant future. Dia Bangera (Associate Director–Funding & Finance, and Transformation at GBL) elaborates on the work of the task force:

We are trying to understand how GBL currently functions. So, understanding the current processes, the various workstreams, having interviews with the leadership to understand their views on questions like: what are the bottlenecks? What are the pinch points? What works well? What doesn't? This is to identify GBL’s “as-is” state. We will then prioritise (transformation) projects to work on to improve certain systems and processes to make sure that we have the necessary resources and tools to grow from a small to a medium-sized organisation. In doing so, we will ensure that everyone knows what they're

doing and that everything is fit for purpose for this larger organisation (that we are working towards).

The scale the organisation is designing for, in terms of structures, procedures, processes as well as culture, is at least 10 to 20 times its present size. Mansi, speaking in early 2022, further elaborates on the need for a dedicated team to understand and support the transformation:

We just started the transformation (work) this year. We (GBL) were growing geographically, we were growing within sectors and we just felt personally we were not fully prepared, that we needed to improve our systems and processes and streamline better coordination across teams to allow for the kind of growth and innovation we were dreaming about. That was the need to start Transformation (task force).

What comes within transformation? Everything that is required to move an organisation from where it is today to where it needs to be in the future. GBL has achieved tremendous growth over the past few years and has now reached a tipping point where further sustainable growth is ultimately dependent on how well we are able to address our operational liabilities, key being financial sustainability and clear goal setting. I think the initial seed funding from Shahi Exports provided a momentum but to grow beyond our starting ground, we need to fetch for ourselves. So financial transformation is a big part within transformation, where we're trying to put processes in place for budgeting, financing, efficient resource allocation and have a system in place to know which arm of the organisation needs more attention as we grow. And then growth in itself needs to be defined better which is where setting clear goals to guide our growing team becomes uber important. Within transformation, we are working on such systems to set goals and ways to track them so the team is broadly aligned.

Anant A further adds that:

I would say we're really trying to figure out how to go from being a start-up company to a larger organisation, in terms of standardising and developing systems. Some of these systems you can just take off the shelf, and others, you really do need to customise them and adapt them to the culture that we want to retain. So, I think with transformation, we're really in the process of taking up all these pieces, essentially assessing all the aspects of our work and company culture, and understanding what needs to stay and what needs to go as we scale.

An important element of transformation was of course the group of people that would come to make up GBL as it grew. Thus, alongside its long-term strategic view of organisational development, it placed an equal emphasis on better understanding the optimum composition of talent to take it to scale.

The talent within academia that can carry out rigorous qualitative research in the area of worker wellbeing is neither available off-the-shelf nor can so easily be “customised.” Such talent by definition is scarce, and this is what perhaps makes the “transformation” project particularly notable: finally, it is an academic set-up attempting to scale against scarcity and without compromise to its academic standards.

Fortifying scarce talent

As GBL grew rapidly (32 employees by the end of 2019, and then to 100 by the end of 2022—refer to Exhibit 4) it needed to understand in detail the types of backgrounds and the skill sets it required in order to sustain its growth and meet its objectives. Since 2020, it has been in the process of developing an organisation-wide skill matrix, to better understand its pool of talent. Anant A elaborates:

Because we're a research organisation doing a lot of academic work, one way to look at talent is obviously the training that someone comes into the organisation with: what is their academic background? What types of projects have they been able to handle in the past or had the opportunity to work on? So, there's that, which mostly is on paper. Many of our team members, especially on the research side, are economists. We tend to look for and hire people within that field, but a lot of our other verticals have grown as well in the past few years, such as partnerships and marketing, and we've created new verticals like design.

We are doing our best to tap into highly trained and talented candidates from other backgrounds as well, not just economists. And then, one of the things we've been working on for the past two years or so is a skill matrix to really be able to identify, in practice, what are the skills, and what types of talent we want to encourage and promote, and so on. We are in the process, right now, of mapping out the entire kind of skill matrix across the organisation. But I think that's essentially us putting down all our thoughts around what type of ways we want to measure talent and in what direction we want people to develop themselves. So, I think we're still pretty early in that journey.

Despite GBL's growth, the founding leadership and senior management still makes the effort to interview every single person who joins GBL, to ensure a strong culture and value fit. The presence of specific skill sets are prioritised less than motivation to contribute to GBL's work.

GBL places a strong importance on team dynamics and team-building, a necessity for an operation looking to grow rapidly in a specialised professional niche, where quality talent is scarce, expensive, driven and independent-minded. This begins from the hiring stage, where extensive checks are made to understand if and where a candidate fits within a specific team, and whether that person will be able to gel with the existing team.

Assessing a candidate's fit is taken extremely seriously at GBL because the organisation places employee wellbeing at the very centre of its culture. Thus, as Mansi categorically emphasises, finding the right personality is key to ensuring its well-being-centric policies are not taken advantage of:

We focus on not just the intelligence and the intellectual quotient of the people we hire, but also their personalities, soft skills, principles and fit with the

organisation, because we have liberal policies that need to be adhered to responsibly. We believe a lot in worker wellbeing: there are flexible work hours, there's no cap on leaves. And so, for someone who's not self-motivated, or doesn't realise the weight of these policies and the honest and genuine expectations that we're all supposed to live up to, it becomes difficult to manage.

The main characteristics that GBL looks for are the ability to communicate and the ability to adjust to challenging environments. Hence, problem-solving, conflict resolution and negotiation are important skill sets that new hires need to demonstrate.

Following the establishment of a value match and culture fit, another key aspect that GBL focuses on are the expectations of those it is bringing on board, so that a nuanced role can be crafted for them: what are they looking for? How do they want to grow? Once these expectations are understood, GBL's own expectations are discussed, and a mutual agreement is reached on the expected workload, career growth paths and timelines. As a result, talent coming in is able to enter an environment which emphasises their wellbeing and provides a significant level of flexibility for the progression of their careers.

A rounded and expansive space

In its early days, when hiring was still an informal process, the early team relied heavily on their own social networks for recruitment, resulting in, in its own words, "a diversity and inclusion problem." To address this, amongst other steps, GBL worked with Bahujan Economists³ to understand caste discrimination in the workplace and build a framework for affirmative action and workplace safety policies. Its interns are hired under this affirmative action policy, where at least 50% of intake is reserved for people from backgrounds classed as "Scheduled Classes," "Scheduled Tribes" and "Other Backward Classes." Several individuals have converted the internships into full-time roles with GBL thus far, but the organisation is looking to embed inclusivity through a more comprehensive policy that extends beyond internships to full-time and leadership roles.

Having elements of a business, a research practice and a start-up, GBL is a microcosm of different working cultures, where there is space and respect for each kind. There are, therefore, multiple paths and journeys that talent can take within. According to Anant A:

The company is built in a way where, at least on the research side, there's an average expected tenure we have, because a lot of people that join our company, eventually want to go do PhDs. And we encourage it, actually. That's one of the benefits of working at GBL: the other co-founders can write great recommendations and you can get great exposure. So, in some of our teams, it's not even a conversation or a plan to try to retain people. But when we notice that there are people who are really into the work, who have gotten a really good grasp of the management side or the business side of things, and have

³ A collective platform for researchers, scholars, students, and professors belonging to the SC/ST/OBC communities in Economics to collaborate and support each other. Along with an attempt to increase representation in research, the group's objective is also to put forward perspectives that have largely been absent from the discipline. It also provides support to students of marginalised communities in the field of Economics.

decided not to do a PhD, then there are growth paths and opportunities to build that talent out as well.

A consequence of this design, however, is that the research team experiences some of the highest levels of attrition as compared to other verticals at GBL. But as Anant A indicates, this particular form of attrition is a planned phenomenon which is accounted for in the design: the flexibility to leave to do PhDs is an important part of GBLs research practice and of its long-term view of its talent. Allowing prospective candidates the freedom to study further is kept in mind right from the start of the hiring process, in order to encourage candidates to be open from the start about their expectations from GBL and their future academic plans.

Mansi further elaborates on this flexibility provided for people to choose their own path of growth at GBL:

The support that I received is, honestly, full flexibility on how I want to grow or would like to grow. And when I say full flexibility, I mean it in the sense that I've never had Ach, Anant, Anki (Achyuta, Anant N, Anant A) say no to anything I've requested of them, be it training programmes or spending on courses for professional or team development. So for me, my journey started as a Research Manager. I was then contributing to Partnerships for a while, and now I'm doing Marketing and Transformation (Transformation task force). So, that gives you an idea of how flexible they've been with me figuring out where it is that I want to settle.

If you understand the background of our founders, Ach and Anant (Achyuta and Anant N) come from a core research background, so if you seek mentorship in that regard, they are always there. They've written so many recommendation letters for those applying for further studies like PhDs. And Anki—the other Anant (Anant A)—is a bit different in the sense that he comes from a business background. He takes care of the entire execution; he is the CEO. So, I think, the onus falls on each individual to figure out what you want to learn, how you want to learn and to have conversations so that you can together figure out the best way to do it. Is the best way for you to take a course? Is the best way for Anki to tap his network to get you connected to someone? Is the best way to do team training and development?

My point is that for my own growth, the onus falls on me, the responsibility of figuring out how I want to do what I want to do falls on me. And then the process to do that, I can figure out with [the leadership]. When I was in the research space, Ach and Anant were extremely helpful. I used to learn a lot from them. When I moved to the market, I learnt a lot from just brainstorming with Anki. But here's the truth. If you want to grow in a way that's not in the direct sphere of the founders, then the best you can do is figure out what that path is and speak to them if there's space for them to address it.

This admixture of an environment provides a great number of opportunities for employees to remain motivated. The flexibility provided to chart one's own path builds a sense of ownership that allows employees to

make the organisation their own. GBL Ventures (to translate research insights into actions) is another area where the organisation prioritises the involvement of its employees over external consultants, offering them the chance to participate in the unit's innovative projects. According to Anant A:

I think the company itself offers a lot of scope for people to stay engaged. And an example of that is, aside from the fact that we're always looking at different companies and different topics to do research projects on, we're also in the process of taking some of the knowledge that's been created out of our research, and splitting it off into social enterprises and ventures. So I think from that point of view, we let people be involved in these things. So, although there is a lot of structure around people's roles, for example, if there's a new venture that we're working on, and we want to do some background research, before trying to hire an intern or consultant or something to help us, we would say, "Hey, this is something we need some support on, does anyone have free time and would be interested?" So, in that way, you can be working on new things, learning a lot, being part of calls with either our own co-founders or other researchers that we work with, and be engaged in a lot of topics. Then if there's new things emerging, you can always get a foot in the door and start to learn a little bit.

"Operationalising" wellbeing

Growing a workspace where individuals move in and out would mean wellbeing at some point would acquire prominence, even more so by GBL's own external mandate. For GBL, it was inevitable that wellbeing could not remain just an article of an HR policy but a characteristic of its organisational culture and fabric, although being a young organisation helps as there is a lot of room to learn early, adapt and evolve its own cultural vocabulary.

In just one quarter (the last quarter of 2019), the number of employees at GBL grew by over 40% (from 22 to 31 full-time employees). GBL decided that it needed to formalise people-related structures, processes and spaces, and a formal human resources (HR) vertical was needed. The intention was not just to set up a functional unit but to involve the team in the changes that would unfold and craft a set of policies that would help people bring their best selves to work.

To this end, the recognition from the start was that the organisation's HR vertical would have to focus extensively on seeding and nurturing a culture which emphasised the wellbeing of its people, going beyond the boundaries of traditional HR, and aligning with GBL's mission in the outside world. Thus, in 2020, People Operations was formed. A message regularly conveyed to its people is that the organisation is not a space of competition, but one where everyone has room to grow. The spirit of collaboration is highly valued at GBL, and this has been particularly evident in its approach to the design of its human resources vertical, known within as People Operations.

The team at GBL spent three months in early 2020 co-creating the People Operations vertical. In collaboration with its internal design team, organisation-wide interviews and focus group discussions were conducted on: what the team's expectations were from a People Operations function, what the hiring process should be like, and what team retreats and events GBL should engage staff in, among others. A great deal of secondary research was also conducted on best practices of other organisations in the sector. The design of the

new function was based on certain core values of talent management identified during this phase of research: a culture of care, collaboration, team engagement and psychological safety (Good Business Lab, 2021).

Along with the design team, a highly detailed mapping exercise was also undertaken which visualised an employee's entire journey from recruitment to becoming an alumnus of the organisation, identifying key stages and touchpoints, not unlike its own research work to improve the lives of workers. Five-year goals and Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) for the People Operations vertical were informed based on this exercise. (Good Business Lab, 2021)

In addition to individual interviews, a series of group discussions were used to frame the "GBL Culture Handbook" (refer to Exhibit 5): a simple one-pager on "what we do" and "what we don't do," and a guiding document for all other policies that followed. People were asked what aspects of the current culture they'd like to retain and what some aspirational elements would be. For example, it was found that GBL employees greatly appreciated and looked to embody the spirit of being "FRAND"—Flexible, Respectful, Approachable, Nice and Deliberate when giving feedback.

The formation of People Operations with a core wellbeing mandate was nothing if not well-timed, as it was right at the end of those three months that the country was placed into the first nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19. The period which followed altered, perhaps permanently, the narrative around wellbeing in the workplace. For GBL, the testing year of 2020 was also not far into its journey as an organisation.

COVID-19: unshackling from preconceptions

That year, still in its formative stage, with a small team, accelerating growth, and the nature of its work—which included intensive research, grassroots-connected work in some of the rural factory locations it works in, as well as the usual non-profit activities like fundraising and proposal writing—GBL faced serious issues in the workplace in the form of burnout and fatigue. COVID-19 brought it home sharply.

For an organisation that came into being to address the issues of wellbeing in the workplace, this situation was writ large with an inescapable irony. But, listening to the needs of its teams, GBL responded firmly and without delay through the newly formed People Operations vertical. While the scope of the problem was seemingly large, the solutions often lay in seemingly simple actions. These actions in turn laid bare many preconceptions that any working culture is made up of. Recognising this often under-appreciated link between mindsets and wellbeing was an important first step.

For instance, the central thrust of GBL's response was a concerted effort to shift prevailing mindsets around taking leaves. Team members are compulsorily required to take a minimum of 15 days off each year. There is no maximum. Varun Jagannath (Associate Director—Field at GBL) shares:

The problem is that people feel guilty taking leaves. That's the culture that we have grown up in. We would ask: "should I take a leave?" "Can I take leave?" That kind of culture. We're trying to break through saying that taking leave is your right. You don't need to ask someone to take leave. At the end of the day, if you're able to manage your work, take how much ever leave that you want. That's your right. You don't need to feel guilty about taking leaves. And that's something that we have tried and are actively addressing. Trying to build that culture of, okay, take leave, it's not a problem.

Choden Roche, People Operations Senior Associate at GBL, adds further detail:

We believe that the focus of our work should be from within to outside, and with that in mind, we focus on the wellbeing of our team members to a great extent. We have a very flexible leave policy. We have about 54 leaves in a year that people can take. So, the focus is always that we send out reminders to managers and vertical heads saying, “please ask your team members to take their offs.” Apart from personal offs we also have team offs. We do not follow any festival leaves, but we ask people to take leaves when it is relevant to them or if they have any particular festivals or something they believe in. We also have a wellbeing budget which team members can use for things like gym subscriptions, or subscriptions to apps related to meditation or anything that would help with their wellbeing. Even if they want to get a smartwatch that keeps track of their calories or heartbeats or footsteps, they can claim reimbursement up to a certain amount that we have set aside for team members in a year. These are some small ways we try to keep a track of wellbeing within the team.⁴

As GBL was divided into different verticals, the nature of its work meant that different teams came under a lot of pressure at different points of the year. For instance, some points in the year were exceptionally intense for the fundraising team in terms of submitting applications and proposals. At other times, research activities took priority, which led to high workloads for field teams. With an intent to balance these working hours, the organisation introduced a policy of giving vertical heads the discretion to take “team offs,” where the entire team is able to go on leave for a day, perhaps following a particularly intense period of work for that team. In the present (2022), GBL's wellbeing policy gives each vertical the freedom to take 12 “team offs” each year, with the exact timing decided by the vertical head. For example, some verticals take the last Friday of every month off.

Regarding dealing with burnouts in the team, Mansi shares that:

I have tried to adapt a “Scrum”⁵ framework, which is inspired by tech companies, which gives enough touchpoints during the week for the entire team to come together, brainstorm and troubleshoot, even if it is just for 10-15 minutes. It helps people to open up if it's coming from both ways. We communicate quite a bit. I've also, when the pandemic happened, hosted people at home, for example. And the last thing is, when I myself felt burnt out, I shared it with my team. We don't share a dynamic where communication or sharing problems is unidirectional. Through open and candid conversations, we together create an environment of understanding which helps us approach each other as colleagues beyond what our designations may signal. Having that space has been really valuable.

⁴ In addition, GBL works with Mind Clan, a mental health organisation for organisational wellbeing.

⁵ A framework first developed for collaboration in the field of software development, it has since been adapted for use in general project management of small teams (generally less than 10 people). It emphasises close collaboration and regular, face-to-face contact between team members.

Involving employees intimately in the co-creation of workplace policies has resulted in suggestions that have been taken up, and nurtured, to become important parts of the organisation's practice of wellbeing, as Associate Director Lavanya elaborates:

We try to understand what kind of a workplace our people want GBL to be. What's already good about GBL? What's missing? And we keep going back to this process. Most of our policies, in fact, are reviewed by our employees. There's always openness for people to suggest something. So, an example would be that recently we released this wellbeing budget. The idea for that came from an employee. And that idea came from this intervention request form that we have that any employee can fill anonymously and say: "I think GBL should do X because of so-and-so reasons, which would be good for employees for these reasons," and we take that into consideration. We got a request last year during COVID, saying that "GBL should support therapy for its employees, it's good for employee wellbeing," and that's where the entire idea of the wellbeing budget came into picture. So, that's part of us just being deliberative, which is also part of our culture, where we want to both give and receive feedback.

Notably, through these concerted and joint efforts, the concept of workplace wellbeing in GBL has come alive outside the pages of HR policy manuals and guidelines. Slowly but surely, it has become an organic and ingrained aspect of the way the team relates to each other, as well as a part of its more formal structures and processes, such as onboarding and induction. This has in turn enabled wellbeing to acquire a fuller meaning. Mansi highlights the intent behind the young organisation's bold efforts to bring wellbeing to the fore, through, for instance, its flexible leave policy, saying:

That doesn't mean one could take any number of days off but it underlined an understanding in the organisation that whenever you needed to you could, because the organisation trusts that you would do so prioritising the needs and requirements of the time, while taking care of your wellbeing.

The balancing act that such a culture demands remains a constant work-in-progress for GBL. It has learnt when it needs to go "full throttle," but equally, it has learnt to recognise when it is necessary to get its team to pause and "cool off". According to Mansi, these ebbs and flows are communicated in "crystal clear language," so that teams are clear on what is expected from them at all times, and able to plan restorative cooling off periods for themselves.

Wellbeing, therefore, is the common construct around which GBL is systematically trying to shape its working culture. But the challenge for the organisation has been to balance this more rounded and complete sense of wellbeing with the demand of rigour in research and action (in other words, "performance"). It has come full circle for GBL. In some sense, this was the very question that informed its P.A.C.E. research, and its own insights into this question is what eventually grew into the body of knowledge and work that GBL is today.

Coming full-circle: contextualising wellbeing

Reviews are the spaces where these conflicts are first brought to surface systematically and like much of GBL, the verb “design” matters here too. GBL has a rigorous review process, wherein every quarter there are reviews, at least two of which are 360-degree reviews. Hence, feedback is received not only from the manager, but from everyone they work with closely, such as their team members. Every half-year, there is a more extensive performance assessment process, delving deeper into several aspects of productivity and wellbeing, including value match between an individual and GBL, for instance. Lavanya underscores GBL’s view on the connection between performance and wellbeing:

The wellbeing aspect at GBL means respecting the fact that we’re all human beings, and we bring our humanness to work. And if we can view that in a way that basically makes people feel that they can bring their authentic selves to work and be who they are at work, they can also be more productive, which is also at the core of GBL’s mission: when we go to other businesses, we tell them, hey, by humanising worker wellbeing you can be more productive. But, while we are nice and friendly people we don’t want to be polite to the extent where certain critical feedback is not conveyed, because we’re also a high-performance culture. And we constantly try to balance those needs of catering to an employee’s wellbeing, but also demanding what is required in terms of productivity and work outputs.

Towards this end, GBL adopted a key practice of designing conversational spaces where work could be discussed in the context of wellbeing. It uplifted the role of managers: actively supporting them to embody a “coaching style of management” in which they spend a lot of individual time with their team members, with individual monthly development sessions. To build capacity for the coaching management style, GBL organises training and development workshops for managers and has created toolkits internally on effective management tips, tricks and techniques with the emphasis on coaching.

As a routine practice, employees are encouraged either through written or verbal acknowledgements, sometimes with customised letters written for each employee. The team maintains a channel on the communication platform Slack called “Appreciation-on-repeat,” where achievements are shared and which is used to make sure team members get the recognition they deserve. It is in keeping with GBL’s ethos for feedback: appreciation and celebration in the most public of forums, and negative feedback in complete privacy, usually involving just one or two people.

As the organisation leaves its start-up phase and enters its next phase of growth with new team members joining all the time, team managers at GBL are considered “torchbearers of culture,” embodying GBL’s cultural ethos and passing these onwards to new team members. It arranges sensitisation workshops to be held at regular intervals for managers. At these workshops, managers are sensitised to the complex nature of mental health and workplace wellbeing, and trained in building relationships with employees that are open to the transmission of positive and critical feedback; and to the communication and case-by-case management of employees’ wellbeing; while maintaining accountability for outputs and deliverables. Policy-making is also based on a clear principle that every policy is a work in progress and is open to discussion. The message, thus, was clear: wellbeing is, and will continue to remain, at the centre, but concrete commitments of quality and output matter.

The way ahead

Emerging from the ethos of inquiry and intellectual integrity of academia, joining in with the spirit of action of the world of business, but ultimately seeking to enwrap both within the empathy and care to social concerns at large, GBL today is at the cusp of the next big chapter of its story. Over a short and compressed timeframe—a mere five “official” years—it has already brought together the energy of a growing pool of talent across dispersed locations. Through this short period, designing, growing and learning have marked its journey—benefits available to any young set-up, but one which GBL has made every self-conscious attempt to reap handsomely. This measure of its personality may continue to set its drum-beat for the near future, as it continues to focus on resolving the contradictions of business performance and wellbeing on one hand, and team performance and wellbeing on another.

It has arrived at a point where the answer to the latter may enable it to more confidently dig deep into the former. It is actively engaging with the question of how to codify values, attitudes and cultural practices, and how to scaffold these with the right systems, structures and processes for a growing pool of talent to remain aligned. Along the way, GBL is figuring its way through many trade-offs and learning about itself as it gives definition to the intangible and complex space of wellbeing. Speaking in late 2021 as the organisation and its people emerged from the pandemic, Anant A, looking to the future, reflects:

What systems need to be developed? And then how do you best implement them in a way that's inclusive and effective? So, at an organisational level, a lot of that is happening. I think, even with the pandemic and coming out of the past two years, there's this kind of natural reset that happened, in terms of coming into the office and being in the field. And then, also, at Good Business Lab, our focus, our vision, our mission is all about worker wellbeing: we are doing research to find ways for business interests and worker interests' to meet. That's at the core of everything we do, in terms of when we're thinking about how we run the organisation and the policies we developed for our employees. We're keeping that mindset and being a bit experimental with emerging ideas in terms of: what does it mean to have that type of employee-employer relationship? What does it mean to offer flexibility? What type of benefits should we offer? How to maintain parity across the organisation with pay and other things? How to be a good, fair, responsible employer? I think a lot of that is happening while we're scaling. And the scale also applies to other regions. So, whatever we've been able to do here in India, where most of our team is, we're also looking to replicate some of that in Latin America where we're expanding into, and on a much smaller scale in the US as well.

Looking ahead, Marketing and Transformation Manager Shalin summarises well the journey:

If fortunate enough to have survived for this long, which many start-ups are not, an organisation will reach an inflection point like kids reaching school: Has my experience adequately prepared me for the challenges I'm going to face in the next phase of my life? What are some of the interesting connections I'm going to make? What are some of the new things I'm going to pick up?

In April 2022, Good Business Lab will celebrate its fifth year. We've gone from a small team to an exciting workplace with employees across multiple teams and geographies. And although the growth has been rapid, we have worked tirelessly to stay true to our fundamental principle of prioritising the wellbeing of our workforce. There is a huge amount to celebrate, and, equally, a huge amount to think about. To ensure we can celebrate our tenth year, like all organisations, we need to assess our capabilities and transform ourselves to be able to meet the needs of today and thrive tomorrow. This involves identifying what's working well, what needs to be improved, refining our operational infrastructure to meet the demands of growth, and exploring a vision for the future that best suits us. (Gor, 2022)

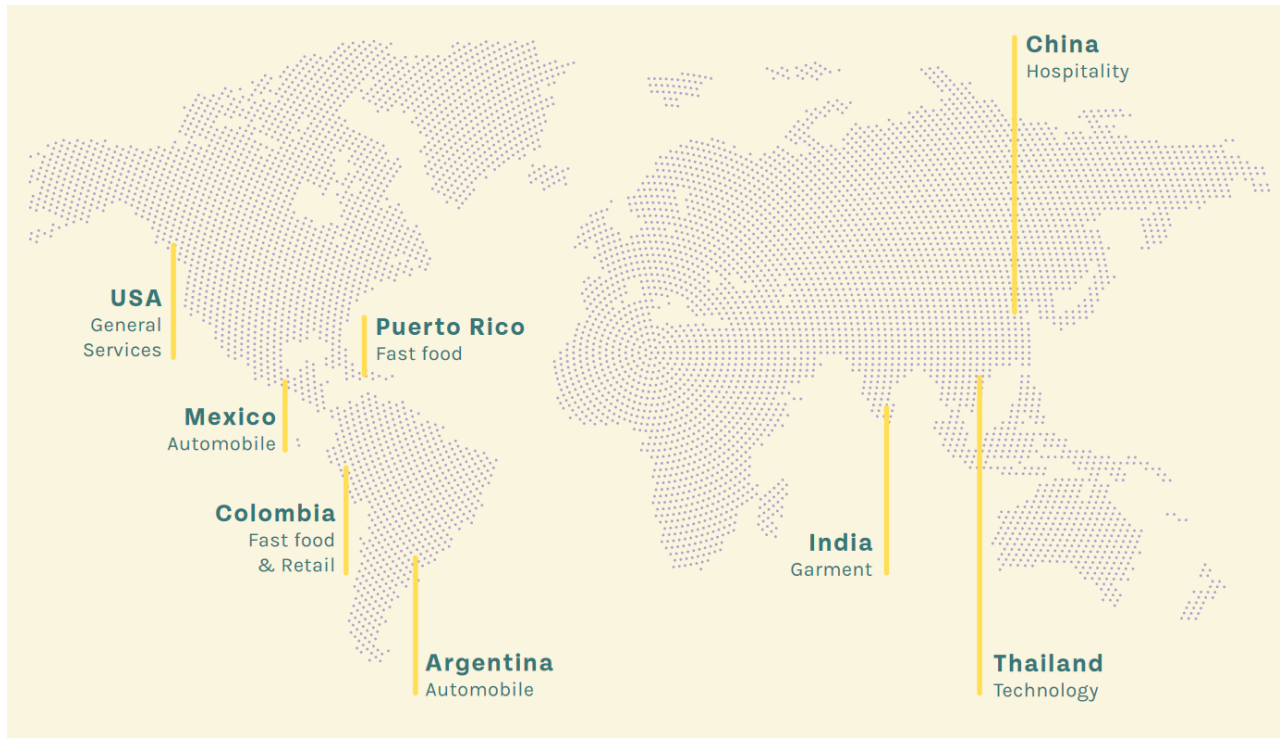
With very little in the way of yardstick peers in the sector, it is an intense learning experience for GBL, in understanding what exactly it stands for when it uses the term wellbeing, and how exactly a complex, hard-to-define concept should manifest in all the various avenues of its day-to-day existence. GBL's road ahead may be instructional for how non-profits in India can make wellbeing functional and integral to how they work, in particular those who share in its hybrid nature of a knowledge-centred yet action-driven set-up. Non-profits today deal with more demands on their work: a shifting talent demographic and an increasingly complicated external environment amongst many others. The establishment of digital tools and media as a way to work is an aid as well as an added source of stress but also offers newer opportunities to think. Against all of this, wellbeing may no longer remain a fringe concept: it may come to inform critically how quite a few civil society entities of tomorrow choose to design their organisations.

Note for readers: *GBL is a relatively young, growing organisation and experimentative in their approach to workplace policies especially pertaining to wellbeing. This case study captures GBL as it was in its early growth stage. Interviews with the GBL team were conducted in early 2022. It has since seen its work grow and its team expand, and it is likely that its policies have undergone further changes. For the most up-to-date information, readers may contact info@goodbusinesslab.org.*

Exhibits

Exhibit 1: GBL's presence worldwide

Fig. 2 GBL's presence worldwide



Source: GBL Annual Report 2021-22

Exhibit 2: GBL's research projects

Table 1 GBL's research projects

Project	Focus area	Location	Reach	Partners	Challenges/Question addressed
Soft skills training for managers	Closing the skill gap	Karnataka	60 factories; 70,000 workers	Options and Solutions, Shahi Exports, University of Michigan, University of Maryland	What stock of soft skills and managerial practices should garment factory supervisors be trained in? What is the impact of this training on worker productivity and the general work environment?

Expressed disappointment on wages reduces the likelihood of employees quitting	Improving work environment	Karnataka	12 factory units; 2,000 workers	University of Michigan, University of Hawaii	In the event of a disappointing wage hike, did enabling voice impact turnover and absenteeism?
(Mis)information and Anxiety: Experimental Evidence from a COVID-19 Information Campaign	Building holistic health	India	914 workers	Shahi Exports	An experiment to explore whether information on COVID-19 can be delivered without negative consequences to mental health?
No Line Left Behind: Assortative Matching Inside the Firm	Improving work environment	Karnataka	N/A	Harvard Business School, University of Michigan	How are teams determined within the firm? What team composition maximises productivity, and what other concerns or constraints might intervene to determine team composition in practice?
Absenteeism, Productivity, and Relational Contracts Inside the Firm	Improving work environment	Karnataka	N/A	Boston College; Harvard Business School; University of Michigan	The form and function of relational contracts - informal agreements based on trust, with implicit terms that overcome enforcement problems - with firms
Evaluation of WOVO ⁶ by Labour Solutions	Improving work environment	Delhi	2 factories; 7000+ garment workers	The Children's Place, Shahi Exports, Labour Solutions (formerly WPO)	Will workers be open to sending an SMS or downloading a mobile application to talk to their managers? Is there a business case to this?

⁶ A worker engagement technology developed by Labor Solutions.

How To Screen For or Train A Good Manager?	Closing the skill gap	Karnataka	41 factories; 70,000 workers	University of Michigan	Identification and training of workers to be good managers, particularly for low-margin, labour-intensive manufacturing firms in developing countries.
Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) of Workers	Unlocking female labour	Bengaluru, Karnataka	4 factories; 9,000 workers	Shahi Exports, Family Planning Association of India (FPAI), United Nations Foundation	What role can major employers of women, such as garment factories, play in improving access to SRH services? Can providing a safe space in factories break the taboo around this topic and promote positive health seeking behaviours?
Rural Training Centres to Unlock Female Labour	Closing the skill gap	Rural Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh	240 villages; 4,000 women	Boston College, Ministry of Rural Development, India, Shahi Exports, University of Michigan	Will more rural women move to cities for work if they have the required skills and an assured job? How will this affect their decisions about work, family and migration?
Soft Skills And Their Hard Business Impacts	Closing the skill gap	Bengaluru, Karnataka	5 factories, 2,700 female garment workers	Yale University, Private Enterprise Development in Low-Income Countries (PEDL), Shahi Exports, University of Michigan, Gap Inc., Massachusetts Institute of Technology	How can we improve women's confidence and communication at the workplace? Can businesses benefit from such investments?
Urban Migrant Support Centre For Formal and Informal Sector Workers	Improving work environment	Urban Bengaluru	1,069 workers	Shahi Exports	Can we help migrants realise their full potential with the help of a Migrant Support Centre?

Menstrual Hygiene Management at Workplace	Building holistic health	National Capital Region, India	2 factories; 800 female workers	University of Michigan, University of Hawaii, Shahi Exports	Understand the impact of low take-up of safe menstrual hygiene products at the workplace.
Lighting on the factory floor	Improving work environment	Bengaluru, Karnataka	16 factories; 15,000 garment workers	Department for International Development, UK Government, University of Michigan, Yale University, Private Enterprise Development in Low-Income Countries (PEDL), Shahi Exports	What incentive can we give businesses to make the physical work environment more comfortable for workers?
Management of Urban Hostels for Migrants	Improving work environment	Karnataka	1,300 workers	N/A	Improving living conditions may increase subjective wellbeing. However, this is not always the case. For instance, increases in subjective wellbeing can erode over time. Furthermore, subjective wellbeing is often determined by expectation-based reference points. It is unclear whether improved living conditions, without the right expectations, can indeed improve worker satisfaction, and in turn, workplace outcomes. How do improved living conditions in hostels affect migrant workers' satisfaction and turnover?
Addressing Barriers to Female Labour	Unlocking female labour	Rural Karnataka	4 villages; 1,200 women	Shahi Exports, University of Michigan, Bhaane	Can we increase the labour force participation of women if we offer flexible

Force Participation					work from home opportunities?
Impact of the digital remittance training on female migrants	Unlocking female labour	Bengaluru, Karnataka	19 migrant hostels; 1,400 women	University of Michigan, Shahi Exports, IDinsight	If we provide training opportunities for practice, do workers start using these digital payments to send money home? How does this affect their other financial behaviours? Is having more personalised training more effective than a classroom training format?
Loneliness Among Young Migrants	Unlocking female labour	Karnataka	2,000 workers	University of Michigan, Shahi Exports	Can we improve the retention of migrant workers if we introduce policies to reduce loneliness and social isolation?
Encouraging Workers Who Need Glasses to Buy & Wear Them	Building holistic health	Karnataka	10 factories; 2,000 workers	Shahi Exports, VisionSpring, Queen's University Belfast, United States Agency for International Development, Clearly	What kind of easy to implement pricing of glasses or monitoring system can ensure that workers in garment factories purchase glasses and use them regularly in the workplace? Would providing free glasses to workers (thereby overcoming price barriers) positively impact productivity of workers, attrition from their jobs, job satisfaction and quality of life?

Source: Good Business Lab, 2022d

Exhibit 3: Bringing a gender lens to research: field diaries from a trip to Bagalkot, Karnataka

The following is a field diary written by a GBL team member:

It's been 20 minutes since we arrived in Lokapur village.

We're silent observers of an important meeting. The Panchayat Development Officer is introducing us to key members of the Lokapur Village Panchayat. He explains that four of us from Good Business Lab are here to conduct field research in a few villages, and scope for new projects to benefit, especially, the women of these villages.

Not too far from this village, we are working with government-sponsored private firm-run rural training centres to understand whether more women will migrate to cities for work if they are trained in the requisite skills and assured of a job. But in the present village, we want to understand whether more women will stay and choose to work if work comes to them in the form of home-based employment.

Encouraging and hopeful, the all-men assembly share their consent for our fieldwork. They see potential in their women, and don't see why they wouldn't want to work.



We entered Lokapur in search of women to talk to, preferably in the age group of 18–35 years. And we found quite a few. We spoke to them one by one.

All my teammates spoke Kannada. I spoke only a little. But gestures come in handy for communication — something you realise when your mind is not preoccupied with finding the right words to say. It works the other

way too — you can understand so much from observing someone; their body language. While no expert, I felt that the limited comprehension of Kannada, coupled with the intuitive understanding of gestures built over a lifetime of human interactions, was framing a roughly accurate image of the learnings in my mind — something I'd later confirm with the team. I remember thinking that we were being observed too; and there was a strange sense of comfort in knowing that the “fieldwork”, in some way, was mutual.

Through our first day of interviews, we learned that most women in the Lokapur village in the Bagalkot district of Northern Karnataka worked in their family's agricultural fields and seldom left the village for work. A few had access to sewing machines and had acquired basic skills in stitching, which came in handy to serve the scattered demand for blouses in the village.

We met a lady who taught herself how to stitch by borrowing a relative's phone and learning on YouTube. She had made many products just to practise her new skills. Her family was supportive and encouraging of her interests, but none knew how the skill could be properly monetized. As she spoke to us, she brought out her creations one after another, from a big bag in which she seemed to have treasured them, hidden from the world. When asked if she would like to sell them, she smiled and said, “why not?”

Women were interested in undertaking paid work outside their households and family farms, at least the majority of those who we spoke to that day. But we were not sure if it was representative of the region. We had to explore more.

With that, we called it a day. We wrapped up the interviews and distributed sweets to the women we met, as a token of our appreciation. Goodbyes take time, as they should. Venkatesh Ji, a local who drove us around, was disappointed that he would not be able to show us the famous Badami caves, a feature of the region he is proud of. But hopeful and excited, we told him that tomorrow is another day!

Tomorrow came in 12 hours and became today.

We started the day by fulfilling Venkatesh Ji's wish and found ourselves surrounded by the magnificent beauty of Badami caves. Rowdy Rathore — a Bollywood film — was shot at this venue, we were informed. Venkatesh ji was clearly a fan!



Fieldwork, especially in rural hinterlands, is rewarding that way. It offers an opportunity to see unexplored landscapes and little-known monuments that tell us as much about the place as its people. A great start to the day, it set the tone for the interviews that followed.

These caves weren't built overnight, nor were the travails and tribulations of people that we had come here to understand. We needed to be patient, and give people time to open up and share.

With that thought, we reached Adgal.

It was difficult to find women to talk to here. Some were hesitant, some didn't have the time, some were sceptical, and some were just not interested. Aware of our positionality as outsiders, we decided to stay there for some time and make ourselves familiar with the quintessential crowd that hung out at the chai shop. The personal connections we had built in the previous few days over many *chais* helped, and so did our affinity to mingle with the children. One excited young girl coaxed her mother to interview with us, offering to answer, on her mother's behalf, the questions the mother hesitated to answer. And so, the interviews started again.

We learned how most women in this village could stitch. Back in 2017, an NGO had provided training in basic stitching for six months to a handful of women. These women went on to become part of self-help groups (SHGs)—some even formed their own—and coached many more women. Unfortunately, the lack of employment opportunities in nearby districts discouraged some of them from continuing to use their skill. But their basic skills were still strong.

My interaction with one woman from this village was particularly memorable. I can't recall the conversation with Kavita Ji without feeling goosebumps, for the memory espouses excitement and awe. Kavita ji learnt how to stitch at the age of 16 and started earning by the age of 20, making blouses. Though her husband

expected her to help in the fields, she realised and argued that she could contribute more (financially) by staying at home and stitching. She lost her husband at a young age, and tailoring became her only solace. She taught herself to stitch more than just blouses and started selling tote bags, pouches, and slings bags (as popularised by the hit television reality show Big Boss) among others because she saw the potential of a growing market for these products. Today, over 50 years old, Kavita ji has started three SHGs and travelled to more than 15 states across India to sell her products. Her group even made masks and PPE kits during the first wave of COVID-19. Struggling to keep up with the demand, they stitched day and night to fulfil as many orders as they could.

She jovially shared how it only took a small loan to start her business, but the rest just fell in place — the Karnataka State government subsidised the loan, she got linked to trade fairs India-wide through government officials and the friends she made at the fair, and the profits they made enabled them to eventually start lending money to other women. Today, her SHG provides loans to women who want to take the entrepreneurial plunge from the comfort of their village.

Life comes full circle, doesn't it?

At the end of our interviews with the women of the two villages, we realised that the all-male panchayat we'd spoken to on the first day was not wrong. On average, women in these villages wanted to work outside of their homes and farms, and if provided the opportunity, they wouldn't shy away from taking it up, as some of them had demonstrated. However, our interviews revealed a gap in the men's understanding — of the role they played in making this shared dream a reality. While the men may not necessarily be stopping women from taking up opportunities, they weren't doing anything to help them either. They seemed to be unaware that for the women in their families to explore their interests, take up paid work, or become entrepreneurs, the men would have to actively contribute in sharing the burden in the household and in the family farms/business.

Not participating in Village Panchayat meetings precludes women from playing a key role in village-level planning and decision-making. Representation is important — of women in such meetings and of men in household chores. Becoming passive beneficiaries of others' decisions, even if noble, doesn't invigorate the spirit as much as active participation in a process, end to end. After all, empowerment isn't given, it's earned.

Women should feel comfortable expressing themselves, not necessarily in response to a question, but out of sheer desire, if they so will. And we learnt, through inquiring, that most of them wanted to take up paid work, and earn money. We were happy to know this. It was a good start.

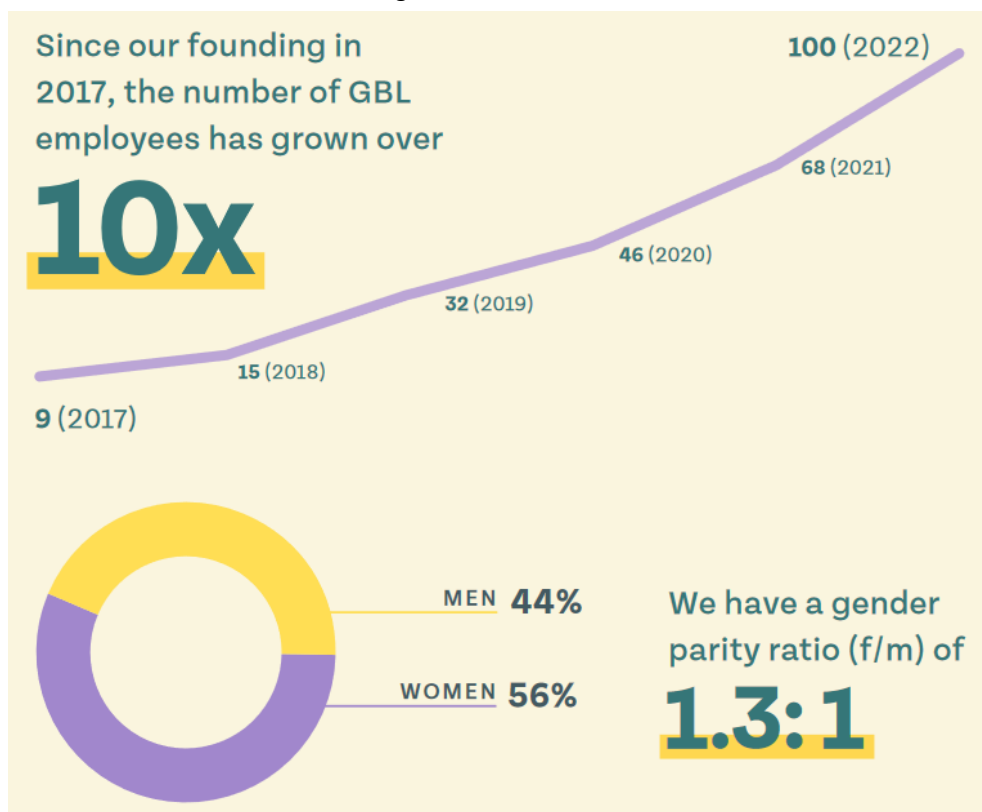
This fieldwork reminded us that staying in touch with the communities we hope to serve is most important. In the sector we work, solutions evolve and methodologies to understand problems evolve, but often we forget that the problems on ground evolve too. Investing time and effort in maintaining relationships with the communities enables us to understand the current problems they face so that our proposed solutions aren't ill-suited, outdated or impractical.

This was the first rural exploratory fieldwork we undertook after the pandemic, and the experience led to a lot of reflection. Though preliminary, our learnings are promising and affirm our interest to work in this space

— to understand and address the barriers to female labour force participation and empowerment in rural areas.
(Kabra, 2021b)

Exhibit 4: GBL team trends

Fig. 2: GBL team trends



Source: GBL Annual Report 2021-22

Exhibit 5: GBL Cultural Handbook

Fig. 3: GBL Cultural Handbook

preface

We are all researchers and designers, using different tools and techniques, donning different hats and innovating to show and spread the word that worker wellbeing is good business.

As with everything we do at GBL, this document is a continuous work in progress. It's a living, breathing entity that should reflect change as change comes, in whatever suitable form, and from whoever;

Last updated: 13th January 2020.

In August 2018, when GBL was 13 people, for the first time we all went on a team retreat. This was in Coorg, Karnataka, India. There Ach, Anant, and Anki shared their vision for GBL.



As we grew, by 110% in 2019, what followed were a bunch of conversations around how we do things at GBL to achieve this vision. And how we ideally should do things at GBL. These were documented in March, October, and November. Needless to add, there were many informal ones too. This culture code attempts to put all of that together.

culture

What gives us the best chance at achieving our shared goal. What makes us come together and work harmoniously. What makes GBL a safe, healthy, and nurturing workspace that brings out the best in all of us. A place where we all feel comfortable to bring our quirks to work. A place where we are always in the flow of work, together.



good business lab

what we do

- ✓ Responsible work.
- ✓ Work hierarchy but no treatment hierarchy.
* Be a FRAND - flexible, respectful, approachable, nice, deliberate when giving feedback.
- ✓ Have grit.
- ✓ Communicate with each other in highs and lows.
- ✓ Collaboration > competition
- Listen, question, discuss openly, seek help, and speak up.
- Be inclusive, value different perspectives, give credit, recognize good work, treat all =
- Assume best intent.
* Intentions > Actions > Spoken Words
* Person > Outcomes
- ✓ Be comfortable and peaceful in VUCA (vulnerable, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world.
- ✓ Post Its, plants, music, meditation, doodles, celebrations, self-care. Ketchup and jam together :) (non-exhaustive, non-binding).

what we don't do

- ✗ Overwork, or work on vacations.
- ✗ Stifle creativity and new ideas.
- ✗ Let our ego rule.
- ✗ Talk over each other.
- ✗ Keep people waiting.
- ✗ Give people a hard time.
- ✗ Take things personally.

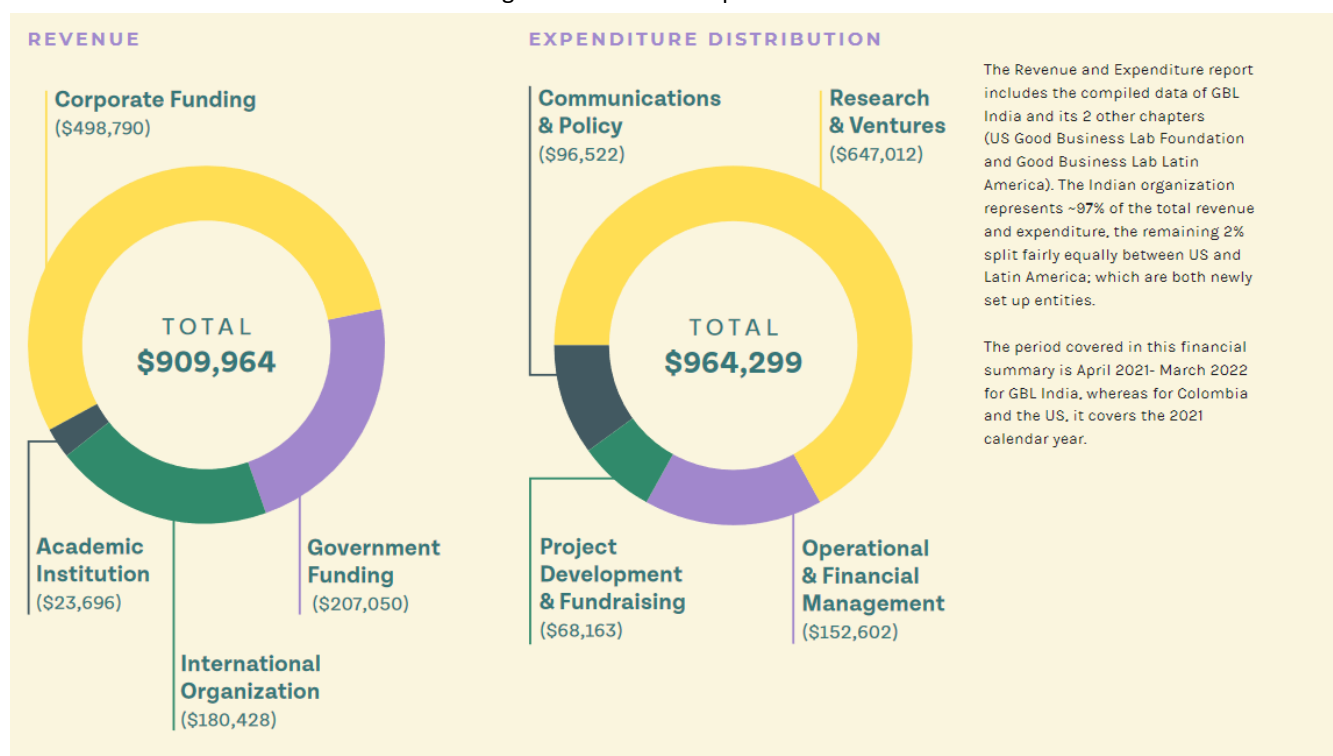
disclaimer

Apart from internal discussions, this document draws from an anonymous culture form we circulated in our social network asking people what they like/don't like about their company culture and the following external companies' policies: Buffer and Humaan.

Source: GBL Internal, 2021

Exhibit 6: GBL Financial Report, 2021-2022

Fig. 4: GBL financial report 2021-22⁷



Source: GBL Annual Report 2021-22

⁷ The 2022 average USD:INR exchange rate was 78.6048. Total revenue and expenditure figures are thus approximately INR 7.15 crore and INR 7.58 crore respectively.

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