



Case Study: Hindustan Lever Limited

Overview

Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL), a leader in the fast-moving consumer goods business, is among the top five exporters in India.¹⁵ HLL's distribution network, with more than 3,400 distributors and 16 million outlets, markets more than a thousand products manufactured in more than a hundred plants across India.

The company's HIV and AIDS program, initiated in 2002, focuses on protecting the health of its skilled young workforce. Its factories have HIV and AIDS awareness initiatives built into their health and safety training.

The program also extends beyond the workplace, spreading awareness about HIV and AIDS through two vehicles: Project Sanjivini, which provides medical care to the poor in remote villages of eastern India, and Project Shakti, which focuses on microcredit, training, and empowerment of women. Here HLL makes good use of its expertise in distribu-

15. The information in the HLL case study is based on HLL's response to a questionnaire sent to the company by email; a personal interview with the company's vice president for medical and occupational health at Mumbai; telephone conversations with the medical officers of the company's northern and southern regions; and HLL's 2005 annual report (HLL 2006). This information is current as of September 2006.

tion and management to work with rural entrepreneurs in spreading awareness.

Business background

HLL is a multinational company 51 percent owned by the Anglo-Dutch company Unilever. Its product portfolio features household and personal care products—including such leading household brands in India as Surf—as well as foods and beverages. The company distributes nearly a thousand products through its network of 4 warehouses, more than 40 agents, 7,500 wholesalers, and many large institutional customers. It also sources raw materials, intermediates, and packaging materials from more than 2,000 suppliers. Net sales in 2005 totaled US\$2.2 billion.

Since the 1980s HLL has directed most of its investments to designated backward areas and zero-industry districts, helping to revive several sick industries and develop local entrepreneurship. The company also focuses on a range of community support activities, including water management, empowerment of women, and health and hygiene education.

Why do something about HIV and AIDS?

As a subsidiary of Unilever, HLL is committed to providing a safe and healthy working environment for all employees in accordance with both Unilever standards on occupational health and national and international public health regulations and requirements relating to HIV and AIDS. This commitment is reflected in the company's HIV and AIDS policy (box 3).

Box 3. The HIV and AIDS policy of HLL

In 2004 HLL formulated an HIV and AIDS policy that assures employees of a nondiscriminatory work environment and assistance in seeking appropriate treatment that is currently available. The overarching goal is to protect employees' health. The policy was drafted by HLL's Occupational Health Division under the Unilever HIV and AIDS guidelines and communicated to all employees as well as to supply chain partners, including suppliers and distributors.

Further impetus to strengthen HIV and AIDS awareness programs across all units came from the company's belief that the epidemic poses formidable challenges to development and social progress in India. The primary goals of HLL's program are to reduce absenteeism and health costs and increase productivity and life expectancy.

The program

HLL launched its HIV and AIDS initiative in 2002 in the units in its southern region. In 2004 it extended the initiative to its eastern and western regions, and in early 2005 to its northern region.

The basic approach in all HLL units includes reaching out to all employees and business partners through HIV and AIDS awareness programs and educating people living with HIV. But to ensure commitment from those implementing

To succeed requires the highest standards of corporate behavior toward our employees, consumers, and the societies and the world in which we live. As a part of this corporate behavior HLL is strongly committed to ensure appropriate workplace prevention and control of HIV and AIDS, and we will share this expertise across the supply chain and communities among which we operate.

—Douglas Baillie, Chief Executive Officer
HLL, India and Group Vice President,
South Asia, Unilever.

the program, the company allows each unit to improve or modify the program according to local needs.

In areas with a high national prevalence of HIV, such as those in the western and southern states, HLL units support comprehensive workplace programs that cover nondiscrimination, prevention education, access to counseling and testing, and care, support, and treatment. Units in areas less affected by the epidemic support community initiatives in HIV and AIDS education and awareness along with other health issues. Some HLL units have established voluntary blood testing for HIV antibodies. Many units distribute free condoms at strategic locations.

The HIV and AIDS program is spearheaded by HLL's occupational health team and Human Resources Department and implemented through its unit medical officers. All HLL units have occupational health centers with basic health facilities to treat patients with support from government-designated medical institutions.

HLL also makes continual efforts to build the skills of medical staff in different units. In collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry and the ILO, it has provided training for company physicians on issues relating to HIV and AIDS. In addition, the Confederation of Indian Industry and the National AIDS Control Organization conducted a "train the trainers" workshop for the medical staff. This workshop included discussions on the development and progression of HIV infection, disease monitoring including clinical criteria based on WHO specifications, and the latest diagnostic techniques. The company's medical staff has also received training in antiretroviral therapy and drug administration.

To ensure the success of the program at the unit level, each HLL unit integrates shop floor employees and managers into the core team, made up of the unit head, human resource personnel, shop floor manager, and a workforce representative. This core team is sensitized to HIV and AIDS issues at the beginning of the unit's program. The team participates in the

quarterly review of the program undertaken in each unit, meeting with other partners if needed.

Awareness and prevention activities at the workplace

Southern and western regions

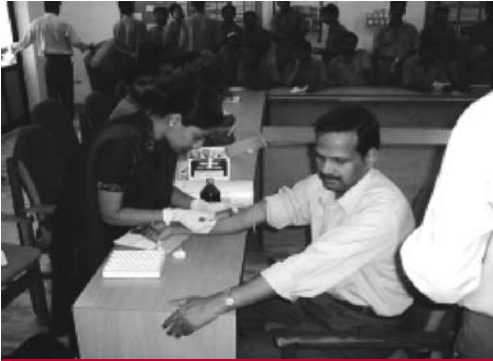
HLL's workplace program in the southern and western regions consists of group awareness programs, training of peer educators, and sensitization of general employees. Units conduct programs in both English and local languages in collaboration with district health authorities, local AIDS cells (government bodies responsible for HIV prevention and control activities), and voluntary organizations (picture 11).



Picture 11. Session being conducted at the Mangalore unit by the doctor who is the officer in charge of the local voluntary counseling and testing center

The units also conduct awareness programs for truckers and contract workers through posters, audiovisual sessions, mass education activities, information booklets in regional languages, and interactions with neighboring industries.

Since HLL's southern region has had a few reported cases of HIV infection, the company introduced voluntary blood testing in 25 units in the region. Managers lead the way in the testing to set an example for others (pictures 12 and 13). While the company keeps an aggregate record of these blood tests at the unit level, it maintains a high level of confidentiality for individual employees and contract workers.



Picture 12. Mangalore factory manager A.T. Krishnan giving a blood sample for an HIV test



Picture 13. Employees queuing up to give blood samples for HIV testing at the Mangalore factory

The company allows paid leave for employees requiring medical attention for HIV or AIDS. More important, it also provides support and counseling to their family during the treatment period.

Northern region

HLL's northern region, whose eight units together are the largest supplier of HLL products across India, received support from the ILO for its HIV and AIDS initiative. The program informed top management about the HIV situation in India and educated employees about how to reduce risky behavior and contribute to a discrimination free work environment.

In addition, an initial sensitization session with the ILO briefed all unit heads and human resource managers on how to implement an HIV and AIDS program.

The northern region also sought ILO's technical assistance to reach out to other companies within the group and to supply chain partners. HLL has signed a memorandum of understanding with the ILO on the plan for implementing the HIV and AIDS awareness program. And NGOs trained by the ILO are conducting a knowledge, attitude, beliefs,

and practices (KABP) survey in all northern regional units under a time-bound action plan.

Interventions for the community

In the southern region HLL implements focused awareness programs and promotes and distributes condoms among high-risk groups in the community. At the Tea Estate Division in Valparai, Tamil Nadu, for example, the company initiated a voluntary screening program for HIV and conducts special HIV and AIDS awareness programs for high-risk groups. The program also includes screening for all pregnant women at the end of their second trimester and in routine surgical cases among company employees.

The eastern region, in Assam, reports having had no cases of HIV. But units in the region hold training classes on HIV and AIDS awareness and also provide general medical care. The HLL factory in Doom Dooma, Assam, has formed local partnerships to provide basic medical services in remote villages that lack access to modern health facilities. This is done through an HLL-funded medical project, Sanjivini, through which the company supplied two ambulances. The project holds Sanjivini camps, where the vans visit remote villages and provide basic medical services (picture 14). This project aims to reach out to 70,000 people in remote villages. The project also conducts a range of health awareness programs in association with local district authori-



Picture 14. A Sanjivini camp in progress

Box 4. Reaching rural villages through Project Shakti

In 2001 HLL initiated Project Shakti in Nalgonda district, Andhra Pradesh, to provide microcredit and to train women to become direct-to-home distributors through self-help groups in rural areas. As an extension of this project, HLL set up Internet kiosks—commonly referred to as “iShakti”—in these rural areas to disseminate information in local languages, including material on health education.

Today Project Shakti has spread to 15 Indian states, reaching 85,000 villages in 385 districts through 20,000 female entrepreneurs, or “Shakti ammas.” The distribution network formed by these female entrepreneurs could in the future distribute condoms in rural areas. HLL estimates that by 2010 the network will grow to around 100,000 trained women covering 50,000 villages.

ties. The company hopes to use Sanjivini to spread knowledge about HIV and AIDS to these remote communities.

Another HLL-funded initiative, Project Shakti, distributes health information in rural areas. And it holds promise for playing a far larger role in the future (box 4).

Partnerships

Each HLL unit relies on partnerships to implement the company’s HIV and AIDS and health programs. Partners include:

- Medical college hospitals, for clinical expertise.
- The Confederation of Indian Industry, the ILO, and the National AIDS Control Organization, for training support.
- Community opinion leaders.

- Local NGOs.
- Public health officials.
- Neighboring industries.

These partnerships ensure local and government involvement. Moreover, by integrating HLL's HIV and AIDS initiative with local organizations and with the company's overall health program, they help the company gain credibility with its employee base and the general community.

Funding

Since occupational health is a priority for HLL, the corporate budget for HIV and AIDS initiatives is flexible. That allows units to function with some independence. It also makes it possible to give units support for unbudgeted expenses on short notice if needed.

Given our large workforce, it does not make business sense for us to engage in a group medical policy or similar insurance or medical schemes. It is better to provide complete care and treatment for the needy may it be for HIV and AIDS or any other ailment.

—Dr. T. Rajgopal, Vice President,
Medical and Occupational Health, HLL

Lessons learned

The program has several observations about the key factors in its success and its key challenges.

Key success factors

- *Management-led initiative.* HLL's management-led initiative has been a critical factor in ensuring sustainability of the HIV and AIDS program to date.
- *Commitment at all levels.* Allowing each unit to develop initiatives and providing budgetary support as needed ensure commitment to the program at all levels.

Key challenges

- *Overcoming stigma.* Employees initially were reluctant to take condoms, though distributed at no cost, because of the stigma attached to the use of condoms. Repeated awareness programs helped to overcome this resistance. The company also faced initial difficulty in gaining acceptance of voluntary testing. Repeated sessions again helped, convincing stakeholders of the importance of testing. Unit heads, managers, and officers also helped by leading the way at the voluntary testing sessions.

Future plans

HLL wishes to further extend its HIV and AIDS program through its distribution network. It would also like to improve health care in rural areas through its strong network of female entrepreneurs, known as “Shakti

mmas.” Before the program is expanded, it will be important to evaluate its effectiveness.

