



Private sector CEOs shun offer to take over reins at BSNL, MTNL

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New Delhi : The government's hopes of roping in private sector professional managerial talent to revive the fortunes of state-run telcos BSNL and MTNL have been dashed. A panel set up under National Knowledge Commission head Sam Pitroda to appoint chairmen and managing directors (CMD) for both BSNL and MTNL considered at least three top executives from the private sector with experience in the IT and communications sector. But all of them are learnt to have turned down the offer.

Among those the panel was considering included Ravi Venkatesan, former chairman Microsoft (India), Arun Seth, chairman, British Telecom (India) and N Srinath, MD and CEO Tata Teleservices. The panel, which includes Infosys founder and now Unique Identification Authority of India Chairman Nandan Nilekani, has had to remain content with professionals from the public sector and the government.

Seth, Venkatesan and Srinath are learnt to have expressed reluctance at the idea. The panel was keen to infuse some fresh blood into the two government owned telecom companies that are slowly losing out to private companies. Pitroda, in his report on turning around BSNL and MTNL, had recommended hiring from the private sector.

"It is always necessary to be open to new ideas. Look at British Telecom. Till the 1980s, it used to be a nationalised company. Post privatisation, its share in the domestic market in United Kingdom may have shrunk, but the company has made inroads into many other countriesworld," said an official close to the development.

But the private sector professionals fear that the "system" or in other words, the bureaucracy, union activities in the PSUs and political interference, will thwart any attempt at changing the organisation. One of the prospective private sector CEO, who did not wish to be quoted said, "It is the system and the processes that need to be redefined and changed. Merely changing people at the helm will not work."

The other members in the panel are Cabinet Secretary KM Chandrasekhar and Principal Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office TKA Nair. The government is now expected to finalise the appointments for CMDs to the two firms by the month end. The post of BSNL CMD has been vacant for over six months since August 2010. Its last full time CMD was Kuldeep Goel who retired in July last year. Currently, DoT Member (Services) has the additional charge of BSNL CMD.

Similarly, the post of MTNL chairman and managing director has been vacant since January last year when its CMD RSP Sinha resigned. At present, MTNL technical director Kuldip Singh holds additional charge of the post.

The process for appointing CMDs for the two telcos has been long drawn. An earlier selection panel had also selected candidates, but the list was later scrapped.