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Picture this. All-glass mid-scrappers across sprawling campuses with fancy flora and the swish set zipping in and out of golden barred swing doors. Or, say, 5,000 suits chomping on more than they can chew as clients queue up by the hordes to get a fix on some of their most pressing dilemmas.

Grant Thornton India (GTI) would have none of those. Instead, the Connaught Circus headquarters of India's fifth largest audit and advisory firm, in the heart of Delhi, wears a spartan look. Plaster peels off the walls of a narrow flight of stairs leading up to the second floor office. The innards of the workplace, not more than 4,000 sq.ft., wears a SOHO look. It ain't the Big Four (E&Y, PwC, KPMG and Deloitte).

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Welcome to the 'Category of One', as Grant Thornton worldwide would like to term itself. That said, the 1,000-odd people across the decade-old firm's 10 locations in India would like to distinguish themselves by slightly rephrasing that Big Four label to the 'Other Four'.

While it's true that all the full-service firms compete for businesses, perhaps the suite of specialisation in GTI brings it into the first-among-equals band. And servicing privately held businesses being the main thrust of the firm's global strategy, the firm's accountants and consultants look at longer-term relationships to take Indian owner-managers global.

According to Vishesh Chander Chandlok, the firm's national managing partner, that requires a personal touch, a good rapport with the Indian owner managers, "impossible to achieve in the factory-like precincts of the Big Four firms." By his own admission, Vishesh or VCC, as he's fondly referred to by other partners, holds GTI to be more profitable than some of the larger firms because of its low overheads. "Our fees are much lower (15-20 % on average) compared to the larger firms and we don't spend on fancy offices and flashy offsites," says Chandlok, pretty much summing up the picture.

In line with regulation and the operating structures that work in the profession, like any large firm, GTI too has an understanding with the 75-year-old Walker Chandlok & Co, a chartered accountancy firm that was started by Chandlok's grandfather. So when GTI's clients have audit needs, the work goes to Walker Chandlok & Co, and vice-versa for tax and advisory needs of the latter's clients.

Regulation still forbids multinational advisory firms from auditing Indian companies. While Chandlok's father, Vinod Chandlok, sits as the chairman of the group, Chandlok is hands-on operationally and spearheads all brandbuilding efforts. "With Walker Chandlok, GTI has a 'best friend's' arrangement," he chuckles. Chandlok Sr is in a pure auditor mould even today. It was left to his son to bring up the GT brand from scratch in India. And the UK-educated accountant with a longish drawl has not let him down.

With a clear mandate to serve mid-market (Rs 500 crore-10,000 crore) owner-manager clients who have a pring to go global, Chandlok is well on his way to solve the middle riddle. In his late-30s, Chandlok traverses five service lines-international audit, business risk, tax, corporate finance and business advisory.

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