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BANGALORE

EVEN as government officials and IIM directors review the failure of the ambitious online entrance exams, rival education software vendors and officials from India's ministry of human resource development are questioning if Prometric's selection was done on fair grounds and with adequate risk assessment.

US-based education testing company Prometric was awarded a \$40 million contract for hosting and managing the common admission test (CAT) online, for the first time ever. Several IIM officials apart from executives at rival bidders Pearson VUE, Aptech and Eduquity Career Technologies said the selection of Prometric did not assess the potential risks involved in conducting such complex process online and on such a large scale.

BACK IN TROUBLE

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Top officials from the human resource ministry met IIM directors on Wednesday to discuss the reasons for the online CAT 2009 fiasco. "The ministry has asked the CAT committee to take adequate steps to ensure that the interests of all candidates are protected," an official in the HRD ministry said. The official added that the ministry had asked the CAT committee to submit a report on the steps it will take to ensure that the exam is free of glitches. The outsourcing of the \$40-million contract to Prometric to conduct the first online CAT in association with Delhi-based NIIT has come under criticism from many IIM officials.

"Prometric has this responsibility to ensure that this year's test is conducted well. The contract will be reviewed as every contract has an exit clause," said an IIM director. "Our trust has been betrayed", said one of the officials who did not wish to be named. A few IIM officials said the tender for conducting the exams for admission to IIMs was given to Prometric based on the latter's brand value and the good relationship it had developed with IIMs. "They have been doing this work for donkey's years," said an IIM official.

People familiar with the contract process said Pearson VUE, Eduquity Career Technologies and Aptech, who

were also chasing the contract, had recommended that IIMs keep a longer window period of 20-30 days instead of the 10 days at present as the risks in conducting these tests were very high.

"But Prometric had assured the IIM officials that they could conduct the exam in 10 days," said a person familiar with the bidding process. "They also offered to do the job at a lower price compared to other bidders," he said. Some vendors had recommended models similar to the online graduate management admission test (GMAT), which takes such exams round the year. Some IIM officials said that they were under the impression that Prometric would conduct the exam the way it organises it in the US, but its partner NIIT used the franchise model to conduct the examination.

"The relationship between NIIT and the local guys who the company sublet the contract to is messy," said a person familiar with the contract. "Not only virus attacks, but the way it was executed was also problematic. The staff were untrained and the infrastructure inadequate," said another official.

Even as the high-level deliberations continue, IIM officials are of the view that CAT should continue in the current online format. Printing costs and the deployment of faculty to conduct these tests can be avoided, they say. "However, we need more mock drills, provide more training and make sure such chaos does not happen again," said an IIM official. IIMs and Prometric are in the process of identifying candidates who had problem in taking the tests. "We will contact them to reschedule the examination," he said. "If the tests take place in January, we won't have any problem in completing the admission process by April 15," said an IIM official who handles the admission process. "Then, we can shortlist the candidates by June", he added.

Some officials claimed that nearly 20,000 of the 2.41 lakh candidates across India had their exams rescheduled after problems erupted, mainly virus attacks. As per CAT committee officials, about 24,000 students did not show up for the test and around 2,000 candidates are yet to be tested.

Prometric India managing director Soumitra Roy on Thursday said that more than 2.15 lakh candidates have successfully completed the 2009 CAT test. Over the course of 11 days, tests were administered on 17,000 computers in 361 temporary testing labs at 104 centres in 32 cities throughout India.

"Never have so many candidates successfully completed a computer-based test in such a short time," he said. Prometric said they deeply regret that some candidates encountered difficulties and need to reschedule or retake the test. Prometric said there were difficulties on the first days of the test.