

Attracting and retaining women employees

“We are a fair Organisation. We do not discriminate on the basis of gender,” remarked a senior executive of a large Organisation from the core sector of the economy. He was referring to the fact that in a recent employee survey an overwhelming number of employees had affirmed the statement, “We are treated fairly regardless of our gender.”

In the enthusiasm over the response he and his colleagues missed the fact that an overwhelming number of employees in the Organisation were men, in fact women were less than five per cent of the population. What was interesting was that amongst the few women who were there most agreed that there was no discrimination on the basis of gender.

This Organisation is not an exception. A CII study of 149 Companies showed the incidence of working women across companies at 6 per cent.

The CII study prompted me to talk to HR Managers, CEOs and women employees to understand why there are so few women in employment. Anecdotal evidence based on these meetings seems to suggest that most Organisations do not consciously discriminate between men and women. Then why are there so few women in most Organisations, particularly in managerial positions?

While this is not meant to be a research article I quickly scouted the net for some quick numbers.

At birth the ratio of female to male is 9.3 to 10, according to census of India, 2001. In a population where the women do not face discrimination, Nobel economist Amartya Sen puts the sex ratio at about 10.5 women to 10 men. As the girl child grows up the chances of her education is less than boys. Of the 6 to 11 year-old children not in school, 60% are girls. Also, only 39 % of females (compared to 64% of males) above the age of 7 are literate.

Thus, through a process of continuous elimination through the long years of education when it comes to employment only 18 per cent of the formal sector jobs are filled by women.

However, this is three times higher than what the CII study actually found across 149 Companies. While there would be good reasons for this (more number of BPOs and ITES companies would push the percentage of women employees up) I am left with the disturbing thought:

“Does the process of elimination of women which starts at birth, followed by the education process continues after her entry into employment in the formal sector?” Does

that explain why the CII study could find only 6 percent of women (4 per cent in senior management) amongst the surveyed companies?

Almost all of us who started working after doing a professional course (like I did mine from Tata Institute of Social Sciences) know of women batch mates who have opted out of a full time job. A frequent reason is taking a break to raise a family. (I am yet to come across any man who gives the same reason). I do not have numbers of such talented women opting out of full time jobs, but I am convinced that this is a growing number. Indeed, in my profession I know of at least 40 women who are doing part time consulting assignments.

When I speak to senior executives from Industry I do sense an appreciation for women employees. In fact, the number of women employees is comparable (and in some cases more) in sectors like BPOs and ITES. Women candidates in new industries like retail (and even older ones like retail banking) are rarely being asked about when they plan to get married or start a family. When an Organisation like ICICI or HSBC announces the name of a woman as the CEO they encourage many more talented women to apply for jobs. However, acceptability of women in service industries also reflects our subtle biases. The CII study, for example, also measures that in half the organisations, women are not preferred in some functions, such as manufacturing/ production etc. the main reasons behind this being security concerns for women and perceptions that women would “not be competent enough” for these positions. “ Our operations are in far flung locations which are not conducive for women. We have to take cognizance of societal and cultural realities in those places. One untoward incident can ruin our image,” explained a senior executive of a Conglomerate.

This is hopefully changing. In two large Groups in the core sector I interacted with recently, the Owner/ Chairman is driving the affirmative action agenda in gender – with clear goals and monitoring of career growth of women employees.

A few months ago I was in one of the most backward districts in Orissa where a large plant is being rapidly commissioned by an aggressively growing Organisation. I was pleasantly surprised to know that amongst the engineers being recruited 30 per cent were women. In the evening we called a random section of women engineers for a focus group discussion. Most, I found joined this site for the core sector/ commissioning experience which leverages their core engineering skills. Interestingly, most women engineers were from Orissa or had parents in Orissa. My question on what will make them stay in the Organisation elicited the usual response – learning, growth and compensation – not different from responses I get from male engineers elsewhere. “Why would you leave the Organisation?” I asked. The number one reason by far was “Marriage” None of the male engineers I interact with gives marriage as a reason for changing jobs.

Thus, the reason we have less number of women in the workforce is because lesser number of women are available for employment, and we are not retaining the numbers who do join formal employment.

Attracting and retaining women in the workforce is important for a variety of reasons. In spite of our large young population, it is now acknowledged that we are short of critical talent in almost all sectors. By one estimate only about 10% of Indian students with generalist degrees in the arts and humanities are suitable, compared with 25% of all Indian engineering graduates. The graduates' different levels of skill reflect the varying quality among India's universities. While the best Institutes may produce very good recruits, a vast majority of them are below expectations for most recruiters. Nasscom in a report said the outsourcing industry was expected to face a shortage of 262,000 professionals by 2012. A major part of the requirement is coming from the Services sector which accounted for 57 per cent of real GDP in 2004-5. The demand for women employees will grow with the continued growth of this sector.

Organisations, particularly those who want to build their employer brands (and therefore attract better talent), are taking proactive steps to address this issue. Crèche and playground facilities for employee's children have been introduced by some organizations (Texas Instruments, Honeywell Technology etc) This is a big help, particularly for women. In US where 62 percent of adult women participate in the workforce, 54 percent of children use day care facilities. In India, day care facilities is almost non-existent and very few Organisations provide crèches.

The Employee Assistance Programmes globally is a multi billion-dollar industry which uses specialized service providers to help Organisations address issues of work life balance, among other things. Some of these service providers are now available in India. Organisations like Texas Instruments have introduced counseling services for employees, a practice which was limited earlier to manufacturing organizations tackling absenteeism & alcoholism in blue collared employees.

Similarly, flexible timings are a norm in IT industry. Sabbaticals, Paternity Leave, Flexi time, telecommuting, extended maternity leave and concierge services are a norm in most good companies today. Sasken, for example, has a hibernation leave which is a paid leave of 8 weeks for 2 years of service, recognizing the intense work that most employees have to put in.

The women engineers in Orissa whom I met may seem to be reconciled to gender expectations when it comes to marriage and raising a family, however, one of them captured a collective yearning when she said, "My name should have its own identity, apart from my father and my husband." This requires change in mindsets in society, particularly among men. This mindset is exemplified by the reason given by the former CEO of Progeon, Akshaya Bhargava, who relocated to join his wife in London. "In dual career families one has to make some compromises," he said.

There is enough evidence to suggest that government, society and organizations start taking the issue of work-family balance seriously, particularly if we want to attract and retain talented women in the workforce. Compared to 46 per cent women managers in US

in India it is a dismal 4 per cent. Even in Asian developed economies like Japan, more than 55 per cent of adult women participate in the work force. While the Government has made a beginning by introducing schemes like free education for the girl child, it is my belief that more women will join and stay in full time employment only if we recognize the unique needs of women in our society. Organisations like Honeywell Technology Solutions tells us that there are significant business benefits in the form of lower attrition, more loyalty, increased referrals and more mature expectations when you succeed in attracting and retaining more women employees.

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