



HCL TECHNOLOGIES Women staff at the company are trained on an AI-driven, structured mentoring platform under a senior mentor to prepare them for leadership roles

INDIA INC
Making workplaces more inclusive and equitable



ZOMATO The food aggregator firm believes that being diverse makes a workplace more innovative. In addition to automatically-approved leaves, the company also offers 'wellness' leaves where women can focus on mental health



THE HAPPINESS ISSUE

DRIVE FOR GENDER DIVERSITY

Indian firms are striving for more **diversity, equity and inclusion at the workplace**, both to expand the talent pool as well as to plug the leaky pipeline

By M.G. ARUN & SONAL KHETARPAL

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diverse workplace is not just a better workplace but also an attractive one. It is this wisdom, as enunciated by their chief sustainability officer, Anjali Ravi Kumar, that has become a guiding principle at food aggregator major Zomato. "Diverse companies are also more innovative," she adds. And at Zomato, that change begins at the very top, with the board of directors. Four out of its seven directors are women—Namita Gupta, founder, Airveda Technologies; Gunjan Tilak Raj Soni, CEO, Zalora Group; Aparna Popat Ved, a badminton player who has represented India at international forums; and Sutapa Banerjee, a banking veteran.

Zomato exemplifies an encouraging trend in India Inc. According to data by primeinfobase.com, from a mere 5 per cent a decade ago, women now occupy 20 per cent of all board positions in companies listed on the National Stock Exchange. This significant shift could be attributed partly to market regulator SEBI mandating that all listed firms have at least one woman on their boards as an independent director, and partly to fulfil the DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) objectives of companies. "When the SEBI mandate was introduced in 2013," says Pranav Haldea, MD, Prime Database Group, "it was treated more as a need for compliance and, usually, close female relatives were given board positions. However, over time, while most companies still continue to view it as such, several companies have realised the benefits of diversity." As of December 15, a substantial 45 per cent, or 997 of 2,217 NSE-listed companies, have more than one woman director on their boards.



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DEI is something of a mission at Axis Bank as well, where women constituted 25.7 per cent of the total employees in 2022-23. However, realising that a majority of these women held junior level positions, with the representation healthy in HR and communications roles but scanty in the finance, sales and technology divisions, the bank is making a conscious move towards "inclusion in every team". And so, the bank's MD & CEO Amitabh Chaudhry sent out an e-mail to all employees on Women's Day, enjoining that "I [also] invite all managers to actively mentor women in your teams. My own experience as a mentor to women leaders is that this process does not just build the women employee and drive her success, it equally transforms us as leaders.... I am certain that I will have your support in ensuring that there are women in every team".

To implement this vision, the bank's DEI Council is working in mission mode. Regular sessions are conducted with team managers across functions that have low or no diversity in their teams, and support and guidance extended in their journey to achieve inclusion. "The idea," says Harish Iyer, the DEI head at the bank, "is to make sure that inclusion does not remain an HR initiative but a business one, led by every manager, ensuring that every team becomes diverse. We want to be able to say that in every decision and at every seat at the table, there is a woman involved."

THE HIRING REVOLUTION

Typically, companies in India embark on their journey towards a more inclusive workplace by realigning their hiring strategies. Consulting and auditing firm Deloitte, for instance, ensures that women are hired across roles and hierarchies by incentivising its talent acquisition consultants. They are mandated to ensure that they receive an equal proportion of women's resumes for every position. And



AXIS BANK Moving consciously towards "inclusion in every team", regular sessions are conducted with managers of teams that have low diversity

MANDAR DEODHAR

HAPPINESS QUOTIENT

➤ From 5 per cent a decade ago, women now occupy 20 per cent of board positions in NSE-listed companies; 45 per cent of these companies have more than one woman director on their boards

➤ Overall, the share of working women has increased to 37 per cent in FY23 from 23.3 per cent in FY18 (Periodic Labour Force Survey Report 2022-23)

➤ Whether in hiring or retaining talent, Indian firms are going all-out to attain their DEI objectives

➤ Companies are changing hiring strategies to include more women and trans people, with an emphasis on skills over experience

➤ To help women balance work and life, corporates are launching initiatives such as childcare support, hybrid/flexible working

➤ They are devising special policies and professional development programmes to ensure the advancement of women in the workplace and training them for leadership roles

to prevent it from degenerating into just a tick-the-check-box exercise, recruitment consultants are incentivised with a higher percentage payout each time a woman is hired from the pool of resumes.

The hiring strategy is a little different at Axis Bank, where the effort has been to move away from the monolithic approach to hiring to look at "places where the sun doesn't shine bright", as DEI head Iyer says. It began after a candidate sent in a unique resume, where she highlighted various facets of her homemaker experience that could come in handy in a corporate environment. "This made us rethink our hiring strategy where we moved away from the tried-and-tested template-based hiring to a more skills-based hiring, where we accorded value to life-taught and homegrown skills that are equally vital in a corporate landscape," says Iyer. In January 2022, the bank launched its 'HouseWorkIsWork' initiative with 15 positions for individu-

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als, including homemakers, men and trans persons, who had stepped out of the employment to rejoin the workforce. The bank received more than 3,437 applications and ended up hiring 22 women. A similar wisdom prevails at Zomato as well. "We value people based on their potential, capability, skills and diversity of their experience, not just the years of experience," says Kumar.

However, even as companies widen their talent pool by hiring a more diverse workforce, they are working equally hard to retain that talent, especially of the women employees, as they are the first to quit their jobs when faced with a family emergency. "It is critical to view women through the lens of skills and ambition rather than stereotyping them on the basis of their life stage," says Iyer of Axis Bank. "And that is where equity is essential because everyone is different and is more than just the role they play in their life stage."

More and more companies are introducing either work-life enabling initiatives such as child care support, hybrid/ flexible working, physical and emotional well-being of women or strategic enabling measures such as formal mentoring and professional development programmes to support the advancement of women at the workplace, says Dr Saundarya Rajesh, founder-president of DEI consulting firm Avtar Group. Zomato, for instance, has an equal parenting policy that offers six months' leave to both parents. It is applicable even to those couples who choose to adopt a child, as well as to same-sex couples.

Not just that, when Zomato employee Swapna Joshi (*name changed*), 32, who has been with the company for eight years, returned from her six-month maternity leave, she was sent to the company's return-to-work programme for mothers. "The programme guided me on aspects that I needed to focus on more—physical and mental

health, being financially responsible and so on—and even involved my partner in the process to help both of us understand and adjust to parenthood effectively," she says. It involved one-on-one sessions with counsellors, whom Joshi still takes guidance from to tackle the challenges of being a working mother. "These have helped me balance work, motherhood and household responsibilities," adds Joshi.

Zomato also has a period (menstrual) leave policy, which grants 10 days of leave a year to women staff and transgenders. Women are encouraged to notify colleagues about their period leaves, without feeling inhibited about it. "There was uncertainty among women staff about taking the period leave, until co-founders began taking it too," says Kumar. The company extends maternity and menstrual leaves even to its delivery partners. You are also entitled to 'wellness' leaves at Zomato, allowing you to focus on your mental health or going for rejuvenation therapy, as opposed to a medical leave. Its employee insurance policy also cov-

ers gender reassignment surgeries (surgeries conducted to change the gender of a person as desired by him/her).

PLUGGING THE LEAKY PIPELINE

The phenomenon of a leaky pipeline—where women drop out of the workforce on account of marriage, childbirth or having to look after ageing parents—is a significant reason why you typically find fewer women at the top of the organisational pyramid. To rectify this anomaly as well as to create more women leaders, companies are framing policies to train more women to take up leadership roles. IT major HCL Technologies, for instance, has devised two sets of training programmes for women, one for leadership and the other technical. It has four career development programmes: Ascend, which aims to build a robust women leadership pipeline; Stepping Stones, which focuses on equipping women in mid-management roles with the right skills and competencies needed for career growth; Prelude, which trains

women for their next-level roles; and Decode, which provides opportunities for engaging conversations between women staff and their managers.

Women employees at HCL Tech are exposed to top-notch learning material that includes Harvard Business School case studies. "Our staff can choose whichever course they want, at their

structured mentoring portal where staff can register and outline their aspirations, following which they are connected with the right mentor, who is, typically, a senior leader, say, someone of the level of vice president or higher. Those who get trained and become leaders are then encouraged to mentor the younger staff in turn. Programmes that have heavy

"Firms will fail to fulfil their DEI agenda if the leadership is not committed to the idea and build a culture of allyship and advocacy"

Saundarya Rajesh, Founder-president, Avtar Group

own pace," says Chandini Kamal, global head, DEI. "This helps women in other time zones learn as per their choice of time, say, after finishing all household chores." In addition to providing learning material, peer coaching too is offered, so that the staff stays abreast of the latest developments in their fields.

The company also has an AI-driven,

technical content, like Prelude, aim to help women become "solution architects", for which HCL works with training academies. "We have seen amazing retention rate in this particular cohort," says Kamal. "We also track their growth in their journeys and whether they have received the right change of role."

The firm also has networking and



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advocacy platforms where women leaders from among HCL Tech's clients are invited to address the company's women staff, the idea being to share the success stories of women leaders. "Women staff could be limited by their own inhibitions because they come from different backgrounds. These sessions help them look up to their role models and be inspired," says Kamal.

Deloitte does something similar. To help women manage the challenges they face at various life and professional stages, the company has developed tailored outreach programmes, says Saraswathi Kasturirangan, partner at Deloitte India. "The idea is that women, regardless of their position, have the opportunity to connect with seniors who they can relate to and discuss their challenges with, providing them with a push in their journey." The company has a programme called DRIWE, or Deloitte Redefines Impact for Women Excellence, for women at the middle management level, where a women-only cohort of Deloitte's senior leaders imparts practical guidance on managing home and work, and on prioritising tasks. At the senior manager and director levels, there is a sponsorship programme in which a senior partner adopts a woman leader to prepare her for the board position. It is not lost on Kasturirangan how important that is, since despite the fact that Deloitte boasts an overall diversity rate of 38 per cent, women in leadership positions constitute only 16 per cent of the workforce. "There is a need to move the needle there."

For, as Rajesh of Avtar Group says, "Unless the leadership is committed to gender diversity and focuses on building a culture of allyship and advocacy within the firm, companies will find it difficult to fulfil their diversity agenda". At the same time, they need to guard against adopting diversity for the sake of diversity, sacrificing meritocracy in the process. ■