

STARTING OVER

WOMEN RE-ENTERING THE WORKPLACE AT TECH MAHINDRA

INTRODUCTION

India has many women in leading positions in the corporate and political world. Internationally well known for their achievements and contributions in business are for example Indra Nooyi (Pepsi Cola) and Chanda Kochhar (ICICI).

Indian women have made significant progress in all areas of the corporate world in the last decades according to [Business Today](#). Diversity and women leadership initiatives by many corporations have aimed at creating and sustaining talent within. Equally, SMEs and family businesses have followed this trend, where today a significant proportion of the executive positions are held by women. Business Today partly attributes this trend to globalization, which has given more visibility and opportunity to today's women.

Overall however Indian women comprise just 3% of all legislative, management and senior official positions¹. Women in India are estimated to be 31.2% of all economically active individuals where they earn 62% of men's salary for equal work. According to Gender Diversity Benchmark, 2011, India has the lowest national female labour force and the worst leaking pipeline for junior to middle level position women.

A recent study on Indian women in the workplace by the Center for Talent Innovation looks at women in a number of larger corporations across the country and specifically investigates the different aspects of managing a career break. "On-Ramps and Up-Ramps India" (S. A. Hewlett, L. Sherbin, T. Gonsalves, C. Fredman, April 2013, www.worklifepolicy.org²) concludes that after taking a career break Indian women go back to work (on-ramp) with much greater ease than their counterparts in the US., Germany and Japan. However, they seem to find it more difficult to regain their career momentum (up-ramp).

WOMEN IN THE INDIAN IT INDUSTRY

One of the largest and fastest growing business sectors in India is the Information and Telecommunications services industry. The IT industry in India is the employer of choice for men and women alike. A stunning 45-46% of students on campus in engineering and management studies are women and 34-35% of entrance level employees in IT companies are female. A look at the senior level positions in the Indian IT industry however, shows a very different picture. Again women are few and far between. The question is why are there so few senior women leaders despite the promising high level of first time employees?

In India study and work are dominant factors in a women's career between the age of 24 to 26 years. Her priorities then change to the family context being dominant between the age of

¹ [Catalyst](#), *Catalyst Quick Take: Women in the Labour Force in India*. New York, 2012.

² [Center for Talent Innovation Press Release](#), Bangalore, India, 13 April 2013

27 to 32 years. Due to social economic factors, pressure of in-laws and family obligations the industry observes a relatively high drop out of women between the age of 26 to 29 years. Around the age of 32 to 33 years many women have the wish to re-enter the corporate world, but feel hampered by the loss of momentum and a perceived lack of latest technology knowledge.

TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

During my travels to Bangalore, India, in March 2013 I met with executives of [Tech Mahindra](#) and inquired about any specific measures they had taken to hire and retain female talent in the organisation. Tech Mahindra is part of the USD 15.9 billion Mahindra Group, one of the top 10 business houses based in India. Tech Mahindra is a leading global systems integrator and business transformation consulting organization, focused primarily on the telecommunications industry. The company has grown significant in the past decades through acquisitions and diversification. In 2009 Tech Mahindra expanded its IT portfolio by acquiring the global business and information technology services company Satyam Computer Services. The merger completed in June 2013 creating a technology services powerhouse with revenues of USD 2.7 Billion and a team of 84,000+ professionals servicing 540 plus customers spread across 46 countries.

The Executive Vice Chairman, Vineet Nayyar, and the Managing Director, C.P. Gurnani, the driving forces behind the company's impressive growth, are well aware that tapping into global markets and managing an international workforce poses specific challenges.

One of the main diversity challenges is rooted in the make-up of the company's workforce. Overall about 80% of the workforce is based in India and less than 7% of employees are of non-Indian origin. Many employees of the India based workforce have never left the country and have no experience of global diversity and different cultural sensitivities. Furthermore, in a country as large and diverse as India cultural differences amongst the local workforce also play a role. The growth of the last years has prompted many employees to move from one state to another for work reasons.

I had the opportunity to discuss the company's approach to diversity with senior members of the organisation. While Tech Mahindra is addressing diversity from several angles, a company-wide drive to get women back into the workplace after a career break is seen as an important element of the overall diversity initiative.

WHAT WOMEN WANT

Tech Mahindra conducted an in-house HR study in 2006 which, amongst others, found a significantly lower attrition rate for women than for men. The study further observed that women were mostly leaving the company for very specific reasons usually related to a change in household circumstances, e.g. the relocation of spouse or partner to another city, maternity leave or parental care obligations. However, the study findings did nothing to explain the difference between the high number of women joiners after university and the low numbers of women in senior management positions. Clearly some other reasons than those addressed by the study's questionnaire must be behind women resigning and in particular not re-joining the company after a career break.

In order to better understand the reasons behind women leaving the company and the

barriers for them to re-join Tech Mahindra decided to conduct a more detailed survey and several one-on-one interviews. These interviews revealed several factors, which have been confirmed also throughout the industry:

- Many women feel significantly undervalued in their day-to-day work by their male colleagues
- Women were frequently perceived as a burden rather than an asset to a team, because their male colleagues believed they were not willing to work late. Women countered that they are frequently depending on company and public transport and usually work from 9 am - 6 pm, while men were coming with their own transport, often arriving late and in addition taking frequent breaks, going off on personal errands and then making up for lost time by staying longer in the office. Women said they were no less committed and frequently working from home or attending conference calls after office hours, however, they were unable to attend meetings in person after 7pm.
- Many women do feel out of touch with their profession after a career break. Women wanting to return to a corporate career in the technology sector often are afraid that their skills and knowledge may be dated and that they missed out knowing about the latest technology developments.

Clearly, if female talent was going to join the organisation in order to stay and rise to senior positions, a broader strategy was required than just hiring capable women. Tech Mahindra decided to develop a tailored approach, aptly named “Starting Over”, to bringing women back into the workforce after a career break.

STARTING OVER

Starting-Over is a HR initiative of Tech Mahindra helping career minded women past family duties who want to rejoin the corporate world. The initiative is driven by the chairman and the managing director, and supported and managed by a council of leadership. Speaking with Hari Thalapalli in April 2013, then in the capacity of Chief Marketing and Chief People Officer (he is now Chief Marketing Officer and Global Head of Business Consulting), he said the company sees it as a cultural obligation and as an organizational necessity to have women and men in the workforce. In his view women leaders tend to be more flexible and get a higher Associate Delight Index in their teams. Teams with a higher percentage of women also report a better work-life management.

Thalapalli further said that “The DNA of Mahindra Group is made up of people who show non-limited thinking, bring alternative perspectives, are able to drive positive change and look at issues in a holistic fashion.” Women are an important part of this equation.

Starting Over is an open invitation to highly talented women to rekindle their careers at Tech Mahindra. The program allows women to gradually phase into full-time or part-time employment again. The company deliberately has set up a four-step reintegration process, which addresses women’s fears and issues when joining after a break.

- Step 1. Orientation program with the opportunity to test the work environment
- Step 2. One month as a part-time employee with a schedule of two days a week
- Step 3. Six month work contract, either full-time or part-time
- Step 4. Long term contract for full-time or part-time work

The four-step program is mandatory and designed to allow women to settle in slowly and to manage the associated changes and new routines in their home life. Full-time employment as well as various levels of part-time work are possible. A definite advantage is the size and skill base of Tech Mahindra's employee pool, which allows the company to flexibly assign women and men to priority and non-priority projects as required. Further Tech Mahindra makes use of latest technology developments, which have resulted in a more virtual world that is less dependent on presenteeism. This results in a greater span of control for women and men who in Tech Mahindra both make use of the flexible working opportunities.

SUPPORTING MEASURES

Starting Over is complimented by several supporting programs which go beyond the issues of women re-joining after a career break. Rather they address the wider diversity issues related to the many mergers and acquisitions and the internal culture.

CHILD CARE

In addition to the female reintegration program Tech Mahindra offers child care facilities for 3 months to 3 years and after school care for children. Care facilities are usually on campus, but in smaller office locations they are offsite and in cooperation with other like-minded companies. This is an important aspect in India's society, where pregnancy leave is legally set as three months, however, women usually take up to three years unpaid leave until their child goes into pre-school. The main reason is a lack of qualified and trusted child care for the early ages. If there are no parents or other trusted family members able to look after the young child, the mother will stay at home. By the time the first child is three years a second child may have arrived and the leave extends to 5-6 years.

Thus child care facilities on campus or nearby, where a mothers or fathers can frequently and unannounced check on their children, provides a very welcome alternative and allows a worry free participation of parents in the workforce.

MENTORING PROGRAM

A mentoring program is open to all employees offering career mentoring and fast track employee mentoring. Mentors are asked to take both roles over time. Being a mentor and a mentee allows to give back and stay involved.

NOT FOR WOMEN ONLY

Tech Mahindra admits that there was a steep learning curve with respect to managing increased diversity. Speaking to Padma Parthasarathy, Senior Vice President & Consultant, she smiled while remembering one of the very first leadership meetings which she attended in 2006. The conference gifts were men's t-shirts and men's shirts clearly showing the low percentage of women at that level. However, even at that conference, one of the key items discussed was how to attract more women into the organization at all levels.

At the first annual conference that Tech Mahindra conducted on Diversity, the attendees were mostly women, with very few men in sight. As statistics show, 80% of men in leadership positions have a non-working spouse at home and therefore miss the understanding of the

pressures and needs for a family with two earners. Noting the lack of male participation and involvement senior women in the organization made the case for change and the 2nd annual conference on Diversity was named “Not for Women only” with topics and discussions centering around women in leadership. The Diversity conference continues to be held once a year.

COUNSELING

Many women throughout the organization complain about male team members being insensitive to the needs of female colleagues. In such cases the company invokes a counsellor to work with the men and women in question addressing the issues where they occur. Often based on own experience the counsellor better understands local issues and context than an outside consultant would.

HARASSMENT POLICY

Tech Mahindra maintains a zero-tolerance Harassment policy. A Harassment Council is in operation since 2009 and reports to the board on a quarterly basis.

CONCLUSION

Every company has to find their own way of managing a diverse workforce and flexible working conditions. Internal management myth about what is and what is not possible as well as cultural factors will play a role in deciding on and designing a path forward.

Whilst Starting Over is still at an early stage Tech Mahindra's senior management is pleased with the intake of female talent. The phased approach to reintegration of women into the workplace after a longer break shows that with the right supporting measure great talent is re-joining the workforce. When employees are able to work full-time or part-time and from home in agreement with their company, it requires a greater flexibility and open-mindedness from all parties involved. In Tech Mahindra the clear commitment, mandate and interest from the top management has played a vital role in addressing the higher attrition rate of women and instigating the change for a more diverse workforce. Tech Mahindra's international acquisitions and growth will certainly bring further challenges. Having made such a positive start at home prepares the ground for the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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