

SPECIAL EDITION

# OUTLOOK BUSINESS

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THINK BEYOND. STAY AHEAD.

## *INDIA'S BEST WORKPLACES FOR WOMEN*

An Outlook Business-Great Place to Work listing of Top 100 workplaces for women

Plus, how companies are furthering gender diversity and inclusion



# *With the deliberation of women, India*

A FEW COMPANIES HAVE LAUDABLE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MODELS



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AT PULLS WOMEN BACK INTO THE WORKFORCE AND CHEERS THEM ON



SHUTTERSTOCK

## Anishaa Kumar

**W**hen Vinusha Vasudevan was looking to get back to work after a five-year-break, taken to accompany her husband for an offsite job posting, she wasn't even making it to an interview room. "Organisations are wary of people who have taken a break... I had worked as a project manager earlier, but people were telling me that I would have to consider a junior position," she says. Things were looking hopeless till she heard about PayPal's Recharge programme.

Under this annual programme, 100 women from each location in Bengaluru and Chennai, who are looking to re-join work are invited to a one-day workshop with various sessions and interactions. Out of this group, 30-40 women are shortlisted for a boot camp, of which 10-15 are selected for positions at PayPal. Vasudevan aced it and now works as an engineering programme manager at PayPal's Bengaluru facility.

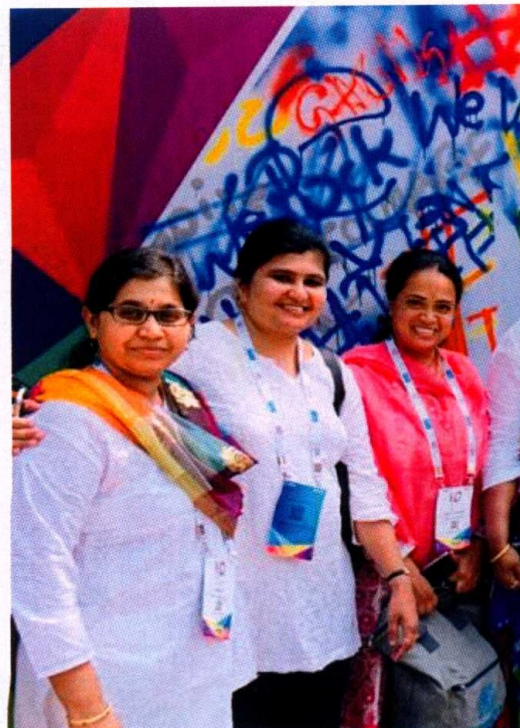
Vasudevan has shown exceptional tenacity. Usually, in India, women simply opt out and the situation seems to have worsened over the past decade. A study by one of United Nations' agencies showed that, between 2006 and 2020, the participation of women in our labour force has fallen embarrassingly — from 34% to 24.8%. Between celebrating Indra Nooyi's appointment as PepsiCo's CEO (in 2006) and trying to silence Gunjan Saxena's story by petitioning against it, something has definitely changed.

While the share of women in the workforce is thinning, the percentage of women holding senior positions in companies has remained pathetically low. According to a 2019, *Credit Suisse Gender 3000* report, women occupy only 15% of the board seats in India and 3% of the C-suite roles. The report surveyed 3,000 companies across 56 countries, and India's numbers earned it the 23<sup>rd</sup> rank on the list. This is despite the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) mandating that there should be at least one *independent women director on the board of top, listed companies*. In fact, even a month before the deadline of making these appointments, 20% of the top 500 listed companies by market capitalisation hadn't done so. This included PSUs, outstandingly performing companies and legacy groups. Nothing — not the backing of a sovereign state or an excellent balance sheet or the years of experience — seemed to give these companies enough confidence to let women have one seat at the table.

In such an environment, any initiative to include women in the workforce and in leadership roles is welcome and even worth applauding. Therefore, through this article, we look at companies big and small that have gone the extra mile towards diversity and inclusion (D&I). We find out what they are doing and how it is helping them.

Neha Bagaria, founder of women's only job site JobsForHer, says these few companies are part of a growing sentiment that women are a poorly tapped talent pool. "When I started JobsForHer in 2015, there was a lot of bias around women who had taken a break in their careers," she says. Today, there are at least 50 companies that are focused on hiring returnee women who may have taken a break due to pregnancy or other personal reasons.

Anupam Trehan, head-HR (India and SAARC), Cisco, says, "If you look at the history around diversity, a lot of it is anchored from a compliance perspective. The shift has started in organisations where the focus is



not only on having diverse representation in the workforce but also on building an inclusive environment to help employees be successful,” she says. Cisco, Trehan says, is focusing on creating a collaborative work environment with resources and support groups such as those for employees with children who have special needs and for those dealing with health challenges.

For such initiatives to succeed, they have to be adopted by everyone in the organisation. Sandhya Ramesh, lead-diversity and inclusion, Great Place to Work® Institute, an initiative that works to create an inclusive, high-performance culture across various companies and puts out an annual list of Best Workplaces for Women™, says, “Working with over 1,000 organisations in India, has made us realise that creating a Great Place to Work® for all is a conscious choice made by leaders, managers and employees every single day. From accessibility of our workplace to the way in which we interact with our colleagues, workplace culture should be guided by meaningful policies that are respectful of all individuals who are part of the system.”

#### MOTHER LODE

Experts say that one big change that helped women in India was the Amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act, which provided additional support such as increasing maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 and ensuring that every establishment with over 50 employees has a crèche service. Many of the larger organisations such as PepsiCo, HUL and Genpact have tied up with crèche provider Klay for both onsite and nearside facilities.

Women are more likely to come back to work now and companies are less reluctant to hire them. In fact, companies such as PayPal with its Recharge programme and Intuit with Intuit Again, which is aimed at women technologists, go out of their way to support such candidates. “Some of the questions we asked ourselves are how can we help bring more women into the workforce of the future? How can we foster diversity and an inclusive environment with purpose?” says Jharna Thammaiah K, director HR, Intuit India.

*Cisco has created support groups for employees with children who have special needs and for those with health challenges*





*Alstom is committed to having women form 25% of its staff, as part of its 2025 vision. In India, over 16% of its employees are women*

Global real estate company Cushman & Wakefield has introduced a travel policy for returnee mothers who are still nursing and need to take care of their baby. "Any woman employee who is travelling for work can take her child and a caretaker — whether it is the nanny, the husband or anyone in the family, and the entire travel and stay cost are taken care of by the firm," explains Deepali Bhardwaj, executive director of human resources at Cushman & Wakefield.

#### STARTING THEM YOUNG

According to the World Economic Forum, less than 30% of the world's researchers are women and only a third of female students choose to study higher education courses in subjects such as math and engineering. Hence, experts believe that building a gender-balanced pipeline is essential to creating a diverse workplace. Therefore, PayPal's Girls in Tech programme goes to schools, particularly government schools, and brings girl students to their organisation every year. Jayanthi Vaidyanathan, director of human resources at PayPal, says, "We put them through a mini boot camp and educate them about what we do, expose them to our company where they interact with role models so that they

develop an interest in tech." The company also invites established women achievers to interact with the children.

Similarly, EY globally runs a Corporate Women in Finance competition, which recognises talented young women pursuing finance. The competition runs at country and global levels, and the national winner represents India globally. "This three to four-month-long engagement enables participants to work on business challenges, gain global perspective and help build a better working world," explains Vineeta Raghuvanshi, associate director-human resources, EY India. The multinational has also launched an initiative called RecruitHer. Under the initiative, they connect with women aspirants and give them an exposure to the culture of EY through site visits and other online sessions. The company says that they have also sensitised hiring managers to ensure no biases creep up during the interview process. "Ever since the launch of RecruitHer, the women-hiring percentage has shown an upward trend of 1% YoY," says Raghuvanshi.

Bringing about gender diversity in manufacturing, Alstom's MD for India and South Asia, Alain Spohr, says is challenging given the limited number of women in mechanical, industrial, electrical or electronic

engineering streams. In 2018, a study by Consulate General of Sweden in India found that women form only a measly 3-12% of the sector's workforce. But Alstom has committed, as part of its global 2025 vision, to have women form 25% of its staff strength. Currently Alstom has around 13% women factory workers across four locations including Sri City (Andhra Pradesh) and Madhepura (Bihar) who work across fields such as quality, supply chain, assembly and production. Globally, as on March 31, 2020, the company had 21.4% of women staff across managerial and professional roles. In India, over 16% of its employees are women (with industrial sites accounting to more than 13%).

Another company that is trying to shake free off its sector's legacy is Max Life. "In the insurance sector, a lot of the work is in the front end. There is an integral need to visit clients, often over the weekends and sometimes later in the evening when the customer is back from work, which makes it a bit more challenging for women employees," says Shailesh Singh, its director and chief people officer.

Max Life set about righting it "brick by brick" starting with educating the leadership team. They then worked to end the bias in hiring, extended leaves and gave more incentives to hire women. Almost 80% of their employees are in the sales force where almost 45% of their sales agents are women, "which is one of the highest in the private life insurance segment," he says. The share of women on the

### *Besides removing hiring biases, a few companies are putting in place programmes to groom women leaders*

company's rolls has increased from 16% to 50% and Max Life has two women-only departments, one in Mumbai and the other in Delhi.

Besides removing hiring biases that work against women, a few companies are putting in place programmes to groom women leaders. At HP, through their initiative titled Disha, they choose talented women from different parts of the organisation and put them through a six-month comprehensive leadership programme, during which they attend workshops and discussions, and also work on a real-time project. Besides that, these women are also assigned a mentor and a coach. "At HP India we believe in grooming our women employees to take on leadership positions. The India leadership team is extreme-

## INCLUSION IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

While companies globally are promoting gender diversity, there is no siren call for inclusivity. This means welcoming people with varied identities and experiences, such as those from the LGBTQ community and people with disabilities (PWDs). Great Place to Work's Sandhya Ramesh says, "If we need to succeed as an economy, inclusion is the only way forward."

In SHE LEADS — a report on India's Best Workplaces for Women 2020, of the 100 companies, 79% have PWDs as part of their workforce. "This is a great example of acknowledging diversity in its true spirit," she says. The workplaces' initiatives include setting up of support groups, conducting special training programmes, ensuring non-discriminatory hiring and providing supportive, physical infrastructure. For example, Mastercard has introduced a global support network for PWDs called ADAPTability, which extends to their families, friends and colleagues as well.

Similarly, RBS has launched initiatives such as #storyofchamps and silent meetings to encourage PWDs to open up about their experience, to create a culture of understanding within the organisation. They also conduct manager training and sensitisation workshops.

To include people of different sexual orientation and genders, companies are working on non-discriminatory hiring. For instance, under Tech Mahindra's Sexual Reassignment Surgery Policy, the company provides professional counselling and 30 days of paid leave for the procedure and recovery. Apart from this, they also facilitate the availing of same-sex partner insurance.

With the growth in WFH, more companies are expected to hire across diversity segments. Naren Krishna Madhurakavi, founder and CEO of Equiv, says, "There is no doubt that the pandemic has just fuelled the efforts of D&I (diversity and inclusion) and not just gender diversity, but I am also seeing a significant emphasis on hiring people from the LGBTQ community and PWDs." Of the 60-plus clients at Equiv, Madhurakavi says, at least 80% are continuing to put a lot of focus on D&I.

He adds that till now, in many companies, opportunities for PWDs were restricted due to challenges faced in creating additional infrastructure such as ramps and movement-friendly spaces. With the rise of WFH, it could be a win-win situation for both; firms can hire from a larger talent pool and PWDs can have access to more jobs.

While the pandemic has brought with it many challenges, it has led to unforeseen opportunities. Perhaps now is the time to embrace inclusivity and let diverse talents take over the workforce.



### *Through targeted programmes, Synchrony helps women employees maintain a healthy work-life balance*

ly committed and leads the way on this!” says Saroj Pathak, chair – Diversity and Inclusion Council, HP India. Since 2017, including the first batch that had 37 women, three batches of women have completed their training. The 2020 batch is in progress.

At Accenture, too, there is a programme, called the High-Tech Women, to fast-track the careers of high-performing women into the role of Technical Architects. “Under this 18-month programme, Accenture identifies high-performing women employees at mid-career levels and supports them through exclusive training and mentorship. More recently, the programme has a renewed focus on fast-tracking the career of women technologists in new technologies such as AI, automation and blockchain amongst others,” says Lakshmi C, managing director and lead - human resources, Accenture India.

#### **PANDEMIC EXIGENCY**

COVID-19, many from the industry say, has helped push company agendas on diversity and inclusion in the right direction. Bagaria says that the work-from-home option extended across roles has definitely helped. Earlier, companies used to allow this only in the lower levels such as for tele-sales, data entry or content writing. But now, they are extending this option for tech jobs too, such as for software developers, UI/UX developers, designers and SAP consultants. Many companies are even looking at carving out plenty of permanent WFH ones. All of this has

opened up opportunities for women who have relocated to Tier-II or Tier-III cities post marriage.

To help WFH mothers, specific programmes are being tried out such as Monsoon Magic at consumer financial services company Synchrony. Through this, the company hosts virtual live events across topics such as arts, science, cooking and fitness for four to 14-year-old children of employees. They have also involved those in the 15- to 18-year age bracket in a business externship programme, to help with live content and programming.

All the companies that *Outlook Business* spoke with agreed that unconscious bias was one of the biggest challenges that companies were facing when it came to promoting gender diversity. This change, Bagaria says, can come by including more diverse members in decision-making — from those in interview panels to those in boards. “Right now, the average working person in a company is a man. So, all the policies and programmes are built around men. If you want to get more women in, you will have to change the rules of the game. That requires effort and somebody at the top saying that they care enough to make that change happen,” she says.

Bagaria adds that, when it comes to diversity, ultimately it is not just about “equality” but rather “equity”, that is, understanding that each employee is different and catering to their unique requirements rather than chasing a one-size-fits-all. **DB**