

RETURNING WOMEN PROFESSIONALS IN INDIA-WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO DO TO ATTRACT, DEVELOP AND RETAIN THEM

Tooba Modassir *
Prof. Ramesh. B**

ABSTRACT

Various studies place urban workforce participation of women in India below 15%. In addition to this, there is a very high drop-out rate of women from the workforce due to a variety of socio-cultural factors. As organizations vie for the best talent, an important talent pool is qualified women who dropped out of the workforce at some point but are willing to return to work. This article outlines the benefits organizations can gain by employing Returning Women Professionals (RWPs). It then goes on to highlight and study the specific considerations required to attract, assimilate and retain RWPs. Additionally it examines the need for sensitization, providing RWP's a career path and challenges associated with employing RWP's. Finally, it covers existing RWP programs prevailing in India.

KEYWORDS: *RWP's, Organization Strategy, Business Requirements, Second-Career Programs.*

Introduction

Despite India's demographic dividend, organizations continue to face a dearth of skilled talent for a variety of reasons. It is therefore, essential to ensure that they are able to tap into all relevant and job-ready talent sources. Women in India continue to be an under- utilized talent pool. The International Labour Organization (ILO) ranks India 102th out of 131 countries examined for women's workforce participation. In 2010 workforce participation rate was 26.1% for women in rural India and 13.8% for women in urban areas. This effectively means that for organizations looking to hire employees in Tier 1-2 or 3 cities, the talent pool available is very small. Amongst this small proportion of women employed in the urban workforce, research studies indicate a very high drop-out rate. A study conducted by Center for Talent Innovation called 'On-Ramps and Up-Ramps India' finds that In India, 36 percent of women drop off from the workforce for some duration. Other studies suggest that 48% per cent of women in India abort their careers midway; which is 20% more than the global average². These career drop-outs or breaks occur for a host of reasons related to the socio-cultural norms in India, which place the majority of child-care and elder-care responsibility on women (3). A large number of Indian women professionals have to take a career break to manage domestic responsibilities such as child care and elder care. Lack of gender-sensitive policies in such scenarios cause them to drop out of the workforce (Rajesh Soundarya, 2013). The CTI study indicates that over 75% women take a career break due to child care & elder care responsibilities. The book 'Lean In' by Sheryl Sandberg states that globally, "43% of highly qualified women with children are leaving careers or off-ramping for a period of time." Additionally, safety provisions, the work environment and organization policies also play a role in women's decision to take a career break or drop-off from the work force entirely. As per Crompton and Harris (1998) work patterns of women are an outcome of their circumstances, opportunities and constraints, and the decisions that they make in response to these. According to Saundarya Rajesh- Founder of Avtar I-win-"Forty-eight per

* Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Goa University, Taleigao Plateau, Goa, India.

** Professor, Department of Commerce, Goa University, Taleigao Plateau, Goa, India.

cent of Indian working women under the age of 30 take a break, 60 per cent in STEM (science technology engineering and math) jobs take a break in the first 10 years of their career. These women often struggle to restart their career". (4 orgs) Women are also likely to take multiple breaks depending upon their personal and family circumstances. There is also a linkage between full-time or part-time employment and career breaks, with those women who were in full-time employment taking fewer or just one career break (Wendy, et al. 1992).

A large proportion of these women however are willing to return to work. Returning Women Professionals (RWP) are those that are willing to resume working once their primary responsibilities or reasons for taking a career break are dealt with. The CTI study shows that 91 percent of Indian women who took a career break would like to return to work. Other studies estimate this number in India to be 1.8 million women (bounce back). Catherine Hakim, in her book 'Work Life-style choices in the 21st century: Preference Theory', argues that 60% of women (classified as 'adaptive') would not prefer to choose between family and work and would want both; however, priority to either is 'temporary emphasis rather than lifelong commitment' (Hakim,2000) allowing us to infer that there is a significant percentage of women who would like to return to work, if they could. According to The Best Companies for Women in India (BCWI) Study 2016, instituted by Working Mother in partnership with AVTAR Group, which aims to identify best practices and policies followed by companies for increasing women's workforce participation, women look for companies that offer second career programmes for returning mothers. Given this scenario, it would be prudent for organizations to work on effectively retaining their female work force, and also find ways of hiring those women who are willing to return to work post a career break.

The Organizational Perspective

Tapping into the RWP pool affords organizations with many advantages. Organizational Diversity- there is significant research that establishes the organizational benefits of having a more diverse and gender-balanced workforce. Women returning to work post career breaks could bring in diverse and well-rounded perspectives owing to their life-experiences. Experienced talent, better productivity- Several open job requirements in organizations require experienced talent- this talent pool could serve as a valuable resource for suitable candidates who have the requisite experience, skills and maturity required. Their lead-time to productivity would be shorter owing to their prior experience. Lower training investment vis a vis inexperienced candidates- experienced second-career candidates would require lower training investment. Job structure flexibility, cost saving- There could be roles within an organization that do not require full-time resources or can be structured to be delivered from outside the physical workplace. Many organizations today are operating with having a certain target percentage of their population working remotely- providing cost saving advantages to the company on account of lower work-space and physical resources utilization. Second-career candidates could be well utilized for such roles, proving mutually beneficial to the employee and the organization.

Internships: Certain assignments may not require full-time employees in situations where work may be seasonal/cyclical in nature or project/assignment based, but need requisite skills and experience to be delivered. In such situations, women employees who are available post a career break and would prefer to work on a part-time or assignment basis could be well suited for such requirements. Also, internships are a very effective method to assess candidates in live assignments, helping to make better hiring decisions for the future. According to Carol Fishman Cohen, co-founder and CEO of iRelaunch- an organization that works with organizations to structure re-entry internship programs, returning professionals "have a more stable lifestyle, with less partner relocation; a more mature perspective; and enthusiasm about returning to work precisely because they have been away from it for a while". (Wall Street).

How Organizations Can Structure Programs for Returning Women Professionals?

Structured programs for experienced women professionals looking to re-enter the work force will allow organizations to draw the maximum benefit from this talent pool. They provide systematic access to suitable candidates and help to ensure good integration, productivity and retention. Carol Fishman Cohen also suggests that structured programs are scalable, helping companies to engage with larger numbers of people returning after career breaks and are also competitive, with well established programs receiving a large number of applications. Also, the interventions to support returning women professionals should provide flexible strategies in accordance with what women require at various life stages (Herman and Webster, 2010).

Organizations should Factor in the Following to Have Successful Second-Career Programs:

Organization strategy and business requirements- it is essential for the program to fit into the larger organization strategy and should integrate well with existing business requirements. Given that this talent pool has some unique characteristics-the program should ideally be introduced if it addresses a real business need. Programs that do not factor in these real needs are not likely to have the necessary leadership buy-in or be successful or sustainable. Organizational values and culture-companies must assess whether such a program would fit into the organizational eco-system and mirrors the values that the company represents. In the absence of such integration the program would face hurdles in implementation and sustainability.

Structuring the Program

Assess and identify suitable roles/requirements- for the right job-candidate match, the organization must undertake an evaluation of the roles/assignments which could be best fulfilled by second-careers candidates. They must keep in mind aspects of the skill set required, work structuring, flexibility of operation and team dynamics. Roles that allow flexibility of operation are often preferred by RWP's and would aid long term retention. In a survey of 4883 Queensland women, on behalf of the Queensland Government's Office of Women's Affairs (including 1390 who had taken a career break) a large proportion of women who took child-related career breaks preferred to work part-time (Arun, et al.2004).

Roles for returning women professionals could be of two kinds- permanent positions and internships. Permanent positions are usually assigned to RWP's if there is a strong skill set match or if they have relevant prior experience- these could have full-time or part-time working requirements. A large number of organizations follow the internship route- where relevant short-term assignments are identified to be filled by RWP's with the commensurate experience and skills. These internships are a good way for the organization to evaluate the performance of the candidate and equally for the RWP to ease back into work and assess if she would like to consider a permanent position in the company. Several corporate RWP programs have a strong conversion ratio, making them more attractive to interested candidates. Organizations looking to start a program could also identify pilot positions which would be suitable for RWP candidates. Once this is met with some success, there are certain companies that even set a target percentage of positions that need to be filled with RWP's.

Flexible Work Options with Technology as an Enabler

Technology will be a key enabler in making flexible work options work on the ground. The CTI study suggests that policies such as flexible hours, reduced hours and telecommuting, which support work-life balance, would prevent Indian women professionals from leaving. Tools such as video calling are efficient ways of eliminating the need for in-person interactions and can be just as effective. Online modules on professional development, mentoring and one-one advice sessions allow participants to attend regardless of location and structured activities enable them to get support including around issues such as work- life balance (Herman, 2011).

Finding the Right Candidates

The standard recruitment and selection practices followed by organizations would not be sufficient to tap into the RWP talent pool. To start with, the company EVP should reflect values that resonate with this talent set, in order to attract this talent. Research suggests that these professionals usually return to work out of their own choice, hence it is important for them to be able to relate to the value proposition the company has to offer. There are companies that also carve out targeted value propositions for RWP's. Several sources should be utilized for recruiting RWP's. In addition to write-in's, direct advertisements and placement consultants, employee referrals are a valuable source to seek out RWP candidates. There are several studies that establish better retention rates for candidates hired through referrals, which would hold good for RWP's as well.

Many companies have customized their direct sourcing tools and websites to highlight their programs for RWP's. LinkedIn is also being used as an effective tool to reach out to RWP's. Company alumni i.e. women who have left the company and are on a career break are also an excellent resource to tap. They are familiar with the organization norms and culture and would have pre-existing networks within the company, making their assimilation smooth and speedy. Additionally, there are now a host of platforms that cater exclusively to RWP's. These platforms serve as placement agencies specifically for RWP's and have an extensive database of suitable candidates. They also provide value added services to the candidates by making available a variety of tools and resources for resume/LinkedIn profile

building, re- skilling and mentoring to ensure readiness to return to work. Some platforms also work with companies to customize their RWP programs and make them more effective.

Some key platforms currently operating in India are Avtar I-Win which was amongst the first to start operations in the space of helping women re-start their careers. Avtar I-Win has nearly 40,000 women on its network and has placed 8,000 women after a break. SHEROES brings together corporate jobs for RWP's that offer various options such as flexi-time, work from home etc. RWP's who are members get access to a variety of resources that prepare them to re-start their career. SHEROES also provides RWP's with industry mentors. Bengaluru-based Jobs For Her was founded by Neha Bagaria with the vision to reverse female brain drain from within the Indian workforce and is associated with over 700 corporates to provide them with job-ready RWP talent. They work in the space of permanent, freelance jobs and internships. Her Second Innings works on not only finding RWP's with suitable jobs but also empowering them by providing services such as coaching. They also help organizations improve their diversity and inclusion programmes. This includes diversity and inclusion assessment survey and women leadership programmes. (4 orgs) The growth of such platforms and the enthusiastic response they have received from RWP aspirants as well as companies is an indicator of the fact that both-demand and supply exists in this space, it is a matter of leveraging such platforms to bring together aspiring RWP's and companies that are looking to utilize their skills.

Globally, there are sector specific platforms as well such as Women in Capital Markets (WCM), an organization that helps bolster women in the field through mentorships, award programs, training, and networking, enabling them return to work in the finance industry. (women in capital). For selecting RWP candidates, companies should factor in an understanding of what is making the woman exercise the choice of returning to work, her motivations and expectations of the company. Evaluating her level of preparation & readiness to return to work would be important. They should also make every effort to provide her with a clear understanding of the job requirements and company expectations. Employers should be aware potential of the barriers for returners that may exist in the organization and provide due recognition of the value of previous work and life experience can bring (Herman, 2011). This is essential to ensure the right fit, productivity and retention.

RWP Assimilation

It is critical for the company to invest in methods for proper assimilation of the returning women. Returning to work, from a psychological perspective, may depend on the presence of various forms of support both within the home and the workplace (Houston, Marks, 2003). A well-structured on boarding program would be required to provide them broader context of the company. Given these are professionals with experience, it is important to help them understand the company vision and mission and where they fit in the larger picture. Other resources for a smooth assimilation are buddies. A good buddy system can be instrumental to help the RWP settle comfortably into the organization.

Sensitization

An RWP program is not only about the right positions, candidates or development interventions- it is a mind-set that needs to be embraced by both the RWP and the organization. Sensitization training for senior leadership, supervisors who will manage RWP's and peers would be important for lasting success. Initiatives to enhance gender- friendliness in organizations are necessary (Rajesh, 2013). Equally, interventions for the RWP that make them better equipped to return to work, both mentally and emotionally go a long way in making this transition smooth for them.

Development and Career Path

There is a need for training to be imparted to women who return to higher occupations (Bird,1999). Organizations should invest in the required training and re-skilling programs to ensure that RWP's are properly equipped to carry out their responsibilities. For RWP' in permanent roles and even those who are looking to convert their internships into full-time employment, clarity on the career path available is key. RWP's should not feel that they would be left out for large or critical roles and that they would have an equal opportunity for growth, once back in the workplace. Providing senior mentors from the organization will allow RWP's to get guidance, leadership exposure and build networks. There is substantial research suggesting that these factors are instrumental for growth. External coaching is also a valuable resource to help RWP's uncover any blocks they are facing An external coach would provide a neutral perspective and help the returning woman employee to challenge any internal and external

barriers she may be encountering. There are external coaches that specialize in helping women deal with the challenges of returning to work post a career break.

Challenges

Once back at work, RWP's and their assimilation can be fraught with certain unique challenges. The transition of returning to work can be a complex one with several influencing factors. For the RWP family pressures and expectations, age, confidence to return to work, and re-skilling are some of these. Additionally, comparison with the career trajectory of peers who have not taken a career break can be particularly challenging. These would include level/ position, influence and remuneration. Perhaps this could be a reason as to why many RWP's would not like to return to their previous organizations. The CTI study finds that 72 percent of the women who took a career break do not want to return to their former employer. For the organization, ensuring that unconscious biases do not come in the way of the RWP's progress is a critical challenge. Additionally, the onus of making part-time or flexible work arrangements effective on the ground also lies with the company and is key to ensure that RWP program is a success.

Sustaining Success

For long term success of RWP programs creating the right environment where RWP's are made to feel like contributing and valued citizens of the organizations is a critical factor. Celebrating success stories and highlighting RWP role models is also a good way to build confidence in the program. Ultimately, as is the case with any program or intervention, clear measurable outcomes around retention, productivity, efficiency and organizational value creation are essential to ensure a sustainable and successful returnee program.

Returning Women Professional Programs in Corporate India

As per the BWCI Study 2016, 30% of the 350 participating companies have introduced strong formalized return ship programs and second career programs stand out to be the most effective initiatives for helping young mothers in rejoining the workforce. 100% of the Top 10 Best Companies for Women in India have programmes for returning women.

Some of the well known programs are:

TATA Second Career Internship Program (SCIP)- is an initiative by the Tata Group, started in 2008, providing 'Live' business projects of approximately 500 hours of engagement spread over 6 months on a flexi-time basis. The programme does not guarantee full-time employment at the end of the project; however participants have the option of exploring full-time employment on mutually acceptable terms. Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL)- Career by choice- the program assigns live business projects for returning women professionals who have a minimum of two years experience. It is a comprehensive program that allows the RWP to structure their work days, timings or work from home in consultation with their project guides. The program also offers a structured induction program to build familiarity with the company and assist in a smooth transition back to work.

Microsoft Springboard is Microsoft IT India's endeavor to give a platform to women on career break, who seek to make a gradual transition into the corporate workspace. It is applicable for women with atleast 1 year career break. It offers live and strategic business projects with flexible work arrangements and an opportunity to interview for a full-time role at the end of the program. IBM 'Bring Her Back'- A 12-week internship for skilled technologists who are returning to work after an extended time away. Society of Women Engineers and iRelaunch, the return- to-work experts, partnered to launch the STEM Re-Entry Task Force- IBM designed a program that used the best of existing return ships and tailored it to the specifics of working in technology.

Ernst & Young India has a programme guaranteeing a job for working mothers who take a career break to take care of their children, within five years of leaving the organization. Axis Bank Reconnect- offers opportunities to women ex-employees of Axis. The applicant should have worked for atleast 2 years with Axis Bank and have a maximum career break of 5 years. Goldman Sachs Returnship® Program-10 week internship program for professionals with a minimum 2 year career break. Globally, Goldman Sachs was amongst the first organizations to introduce internships for returning professionals. The program structure incorporates support such as mentoring to ease a smooth transition back to work and is open to both, women and men.

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