

Flexibility Spurs Diversity

Employees with disabilities are 11% more likely to prefer working in organisations which offer a hybrid workplace	70% Women world over prefer hybrid workplace	13% Members of the LGBTQ community prefer a hybrid work model	24% Of LGBTQ members are likely to leave the workforce if it's not hybrid	14% More employees with disabilities are likely to leave the workforce if it isn't hybrid
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SOURCE: MCKINSEY



Image: GfK

Diversity Goes Beyond Gender

From hiring differently-abled people from the LGBTQ community to those with diverse educational and vocational backgrounds, India Inc. wants to ensure its workforce mirrors its consumers.

By AJITA SHASHIDHAR, Jun 7, 2022 | 7 min read



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Thirty-year-old Nikhita Bandi is a shopper market manager with FMCG major Marico. She is always on her toes, travelling from one city to another to understand shopping behaviour of consumers at modern retail stores such as Reliance Retail, DMart and Spencer Retail. The 2017 IIM-Bangalore alumna's confidence and commitment to her job is remarkable. As she talks passionately about Marico's digital transformation journey and how she has benefited from it on a virtual call, there is no way one can know that she functions with just one arm. "I am grateful to Marico for ensuring that my disability doesn't get the better of me," she says.

While Bandi is a role model for people with disabilities, for Marico, her passion for work is vindication of its conscious strategy to hire talent from various walks of life and ensure that its workforce is as diverse as possible. "We are a consumer business. To take right calls around innovation, it's important to have similar social representation in the organisation as we have in society," says Amit Prakash, CHRO, Marico.

A gender diverse workforce is a given in today's times. But now, companies, especially the big ones, are pushing the diversity needle further by trying to hire not only women but also people with diverse skill sets and industry experiences, apart from differently-abled and people from LGBTQ communities. "We are launching Kindle and Audible for visually and hearing impaired. How can we do that unless we have visual and hearing-impaired people in our teams who can give us the right inputs?" says Deepthi Varma, director, HR, Amazon India.

Take Bacardi, where more than 80% team of blenders is millennial women. The company has launched premium blended whisky DEWAR'S which, according to its global master blender Stephanie McLeod, is not just targeted at whisky connoisseurs at large but also millennials and women who enjoy cocktails. "DEWAR'S lends itself beautifully to cocktails. Women and younger generation are not much into consuming whisky on the rocks. A new generation of consumers is coming up. We have to innovate for them," says McLeod.

Hindustan Unilever (HUL) swears by a similar strategy. It has launched a programme called #Belong as part of which it not just focuses on hiring differently-abled but also people from the LGBTQ community. It plans to increase representation of women from 44-50% and ensure that 5% workforce by 2025 comprises people with disabilities. Marico and L'Oreal India say 2-3% of their workforce will be differently-abled by 2025. "We need to create an enabling environment so that differently-abled are able to work without interruptions. Once we do that, you will see numbers spiralling," says Prakash of Marico.

Diversity On The Menu

- By 2025, almost 5% of HUL's workforce will be people with disabilities; it aims to increase gender diversity in managerial cadre from 44% to 50%.
- HUL's Ahilya focuses on getting more women in frontline workforce. The target is least 5,000 women in frontline sales roles by 2025.
- L'Oreal India has a programme, License To Hire, to train hiring managers to overcome biases and respect diverse perspectives.
- Take-2 is L'Oreal India's initiative to get women who have taken a break into the workforce. Axis Bank, Marico and Amazon have taken similar initiatives.
- Axis Bank and Marico are actively hiring retired people.
- Amazon has been hiring veterans from armed forces; it has also launched Rekindled, which focuses on hiring women who lost jobs during the pandemic.
- Around 1% of Marico and L'Oreal India's workforce is people with disabilities; they are planning to increase that substantially.
- Marico is also focusing on hiring sociology, psychology and physics graduates instead of the usual business school graduates.

Google India's mission is to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. It requires diversity in thinking and a workforce reflecting diverse thoughts and ideas. According to Sanjay Gupta, country head and vice president, Google India, "In order to keep our culture inclusive, innovative and thriving, we hire for culture 'add' not culture 'fit', where people of different views and backgrounds can do their best work and show up for one another. Moreover, growing a representative workforce is crucial in launching programmes that support our diverse communities, and to build products that better serve all of our users."

The trend is clear. Gone are the days of one-size-fits all. For organisations to succeed, they have to innovate for consumers from every walk of life. This holds true for B2B businesses such as consulting firms as well. "The more diverse the organisation, the higher the chances of success," says Suresh Subudhi, India recruiting chair, Boston Consulting Group. BCG, which has been a day-one recruiter in most leading business school campuses over past few years, has also started recruiting from schools in Tier-II and Tier-III India. It has been hiring graduates, lawyers, armed forces veterans as well as chartered accountants (CAs).

Marico is even hiring undergraduates students. Vedant Singh Rathore, a physics graduate from 2020 batch of St. Stephens College in New Delhi, wanted to become a physicist until he got a job at Marico. An opportunity to earn at 20 and that too in a company with a global footprint is indeed alluring. "We were told we needn't be economics graduates to apply. All that was needed was a passion to learn. Therefore, I decided to try it out," says the 23-year-old. After doing stints in sales, packaging and digital marketing in past two years, Rathore is now with data sciences division of the company.

Diverse Thinking

The diversity strategy involves not just hiring from diverse walks of life. What is needed is diversity in thoughts and ideas too. Companies need bandwidth and empathy to accept diverse perspectives. Prakash of Marico gives an example of a personal care brand. "Though the brand has a loyal set of consumers and is extremely popular, a young trainee told us that it made sense to her mother and she would use it only if it was available in a particular format. This triggered a conversation with the innovation team."

Would Marico have taken an innovation idea from a trainee five years ago? Unlikely. Anand Kripalu, MD, Essel Propack, agrees that most legacy companies are yet to become nimble-footed in taking risks to innovate. "We have a mindset of analysis and presentations and five levels of approvals, and sometimes that bureaucracy doesn't let you cut through," he says.

Diversity in ideas and thought is much harder, agrees Faridun Dotiwala, partner at McKinsey & Company. "Diversity in thought impacts financial returns. More than often, I have heard people say that even before a person starts saying something, they know what he is thinking. This is because they have a homogenous thought process. It is easy to work with people having similar backgrounds. Therefore, you have to ensure that you have a truly diverse team which is able to come up with new ideas all the time. It takes effort to make it work."

Organisations are realising the importance of diverse and objective thinking. L'Oreal India has launched an initiative, 'Licence To Hire', which trains its 300-odd hiring managers to eliminate biases while hiring. "We train our managers to respect diverse perspectives. That way we are able to have a much better decision-making process," says Roshni Wadhwa, CHRO, L'Oreal India.

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Hindustan Unilever, on the other hand, uses technology to strengthen its listening skills when it interviews a candidate. Throughout the pandemic, the company has been onboarding new hires through digital platforms, which has enabled it to get rid of a lot of unconscious biases, says Anuradha Razdan, executive director, HR, HUL. "Covid-19 gave us an opportunity to listen to interviews... By listening you can see what are the points being checked again and again and what are the points getting eliminated." Apart from hiring within India, HUL has also been focusing on Indians studying in universities abroad.

Gender Diversity, A Long Haul

Though conversations around diversity of thought are gathering pace, companies across the globe are still struggling with ensuring adequate representation of women in their workforce. In fact, the pandemic forced more women than men to exit the workforce. According to ministry of statistics and programme implementation, over half a million women exited formal employment during the pandemic, nearly double the number for men. "Women exiting workforce is an extremely worrying trend," says Anupam Kaura, president and global head, HR, CRISIL.

However, with the pandemic enabling flexible working, organisations across the board are trying to get women back into the workforce. Amazon has launched an initiative called 'Rekindled', which focuses on hiring women who lost their jobs during the pandemic. L'Oreal India has 'Take-2 At L'Oreal' to attract women who have taken a break. "Women want to come back to corporate world due to flexibility available today. In a span of three months, we have put out 25 positions and received more than 1,500 applications," says Wadhwa.

At Diageo India, 50% of its executive leadership team and 27% of its top leadership team are women. It has also launched a 26-week paid family leave policy, which is applicable for all new parents, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation. Its wellness policy provides insurance benefits for same-sex and live-in partners, along with surrogacy and fertility treatment benefits for all. The alco-bev company has launched a 'thriving through menopause' policy as well.

Though larger companies are making the right noises around diversity, it is just the tip of the iceberg. Diversity in Tier II and Tier-III India is a huge challenge. India Inc. has miles to go to meet its diversity target.