

Hiring the Women

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By Aditi Seshadri

Mumbai (Women's Feature Service) - When Natasha Hebde's son, Vikram, was born in 1992, it was a bittersweet year for her. Motherhood was a delightful experience and Hebde poured herself into her family life, enjoying every minute of it.

But it was also the year that Hebde quit her job, giving up a burgeoning career at a consultancy firm that she loved. "I rejoined work after three months of

maternity leave because I couldn't get more time off.

I ran ragged in the next few months trying to handle a baby and a full-time job," she says. "It eventually led to a stand-off of sorts with my boss who told me to 'decide what my priorities were'. Naturally, I chose my family," she recalls.

After staying at home full-time for a decade, Hebde, 42, took up voluntary work. Although she knows she made the right choice all those years ago, she regrets having had to choose at all. "I feel if I was in the same situation today, I might have more help and a better shot at making a career."

There is truth to Hebde's observation. There is an increasingly popular word in today's corporate lexicon: diversity. While most companies have traditionally found their comfort zone in male employees, because they were seen as leaders - ambitious, tough, and, most importantly, not likely to up and leave when family duties came calling - there has been a shift in perspective in recent times.

Companies are not only looking to tap into a bigger talent pool, but in today's gender-sensitised times, want to be seen as progressive equal-opportunity employers. Recognising the fact that women contribute as much and bring as important skills to the table as men, they are hiring more women, and, more importantly, going to great lengths to keep them happy and from leaving.

Genpact, a BPO in Gurgaon, Haryana, has become something of a byword for flexible work policy and women-sensitive measures. All its employees have the option of moving from full-time to part-time work, changing work shifts, changing locations, working from home and taking a sabbatical for a few months; options that are especially useful to the female employees who constitute 40 per cent of the company's workforce.

"First, we try to ensure fair assessment at the time of hiring. For example, we don't ask our female interviewees questions like 'Will you be getting married soon?' or 'Are you planning to have children?'" says D.

Subhalakshmi, Vice President, HR, Genpact. The company also has an ombudsperson to tackle harassment in the workplace and discrimination in promotion and raises, or any other concerns.

Confidentiality is maintained.

A senior manager vouches for the company. "I worked weird hours when I first joined but changed shifts after marriage. And when I had health problems and the doctor said I couldn't travel for a while, I worked from home - going in only two days a week. It didn't

affect my promotion," she says. Not surprisingly, this senior manager has spent close to a decade with the company. While the company has her expertise, experience and loyalty, and is saved the expense of bringing in someone new, she has not needed to give up her career.

"There is a distinct change in the corporate attitude towards women employees, shown to be more loyal and engaged. With many women employees invariably quitting their jobs because of family responsibilities, companies have realised this in an issue they need to

tackle," says Saundarya Rajesh, chief executive, Avtar Career Creators and Avtar I-WIN, which provides flexible work opportunities for women professionals.

"By investing in just one crèche or a concierge service, companies can take care of the needs of so many people.

Because, despite social change and the involvement of men in housework, the responsibility for home and family still falls largely on women. Co-authors and psychology professors Alice H. Eagly and Linda L.

Carli write in their book, 'Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders': "In the United States, married women devoted 19 hours per week on average to housework in 2005, while married men contributed 11 hours. That's a huge improvement over 1965 numbers, when women spent a whopping 34 hours per week to men's five, but it is still a major inequity."

In a three-month study conducted by Avtar in nine Indian cities, over 73 per cent of the respondents - women professionals who began their careers during the era of liberalisation - felt that managing a home and a career was the primary reason for the stress that results in poor health.

Delhi-based IT giant Accenture, for one, has education and training initiatives to sensitise employees about gender differences. These include educating employees on discrimination and harassment policies and discussions on issues relevant to women such as work-life balance, leadership and assertiveness.

"We also have a programme designed to provide women the opportunity to network among their peers and senior management and to ensure visibility of women achievers within the organisation," says Rekha Menon, Executive Vice President, India Geographic Services & Human Capital & Diversity, Accenture India. "We've also established an Accenture women's networking forum, Vaahini, that organises breakfast sessions, hosts guest lectures and implements community meets," she adds.

To take care of more practical matters, Accenture offers flexible working hours, working from home, extension of maternity leave, shift changes, and day-care centres and wellness clinics. As Poornima, 31, a senior associate, says, "It's a relief not to have to prove my commitment to the company all the time. Yes, I have kids and a family, and I need to take care of them; the company understands that. The biggest need that is being met is flexibility."

Saundarya agrees that attitudes are changing across industries, adding, "Companies such as the Pantaloon Group, Unilever India Shares Services, Scope International, Barclays Bank, Cap Gemini, the Murugappa Group, Tata VSNL and several other FMCG,

Telecom and IT companies have implemented the flexi-career concept." The concern seems to trickle down to an inter-personal level as well. Lekha Nair, 31, an associate with a top-level multinational placement company, has a three-year-old daughter. "I wanted to leave the company last year because I felt I wasn't giving enough attention either to my family or to the job," she says. "But my boss just told me to take a few months off to recoup. I did, and I'm still with the company." Perhaps these happy professionals are luckier than others are because they work in multi-national companies that follow worldwide standard policy.

Akshata Naik, 34, who works for an Indian banking corporation in Mumbai, thinks so. The senior manager says she has been battling with prejudice and competition for years now. "I was recently passed over for a promotion and I believe it was because I have a toddler and the powers-that-be think I won't give the company 100 per cent," she says. "Naturally, they don't attach the same perceptions to my male colleagues who have young children."

Change may take time, but it seems to be in the wind now. While Hebde and Naik may not have benefited from it, a lot of other women professionals certainly will.

(Names of some women have been changed on request.)

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)
