CAREER RE-LAUNCH FOR MID-LIFE WOMEN
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ABSTRACT
Today’s women are qualified, confident, adventurous and demanding which have helped them to cross societal barriers and emerge victorious in the fields chosen by them. A number of opportunities are available to Indian women post-liberalization. Women have marked their footprints in aviation, information technology, trade and commerce, banking, space science and engineering, fine arts and the list goes on. The present woman confronts the challenge of fulfilling her responsibilities as an employee and a home-maker. This has led to work / life conflict and in many cases, affected a woman’s career. However, a few women make efforts to come back to the career facing many challenges in the process. This paper tries to uncover reasons of women resigning from their jobs, look into company practices to address those issues and the re-entry opportunities generated by some organizations in the current scenario. It is hoped that a few more companies adopt measures to re-launch mid-life women as increased gender diversity brings-in innovation and value to the organization.

INCLUSIVE WORK CULTURE
Today’s organizations employ diverse people and create an open and equitable organization based on race, culture gender, age and physical disability. Employing diverse people helps the company to gain ideas, perspectives, skills and experiences which facilitates in addressing familiar problems in new and innovative ways. Promoting an inclusive work culture maximizes productivity, attracts new talent, retains talent and increases employee commitment. People and values are considered as assets. HR policies are so designed to provide equality and human rights, dignity of work, suitable working conditions, employee welfare programs and fair recruitment and selection practices. Such actions by the companies can have a significant impact on the brand reputation and it is business sense to have an inclusive work culture.

A few companies have launched gender diversity drive to attract and retain women employees. It leads to a more creative, innovative and flexible organization in tune with the society and the market. This also helps the companies to cash-in on the strengths of each gender, increasing the mutual understanding, respect and trust. HUL, P & G, CSC India, Accor, Accenture, Microsoft are some companies who are striving to maintain gender diversity. Vodafone, in a unique step of gender diversity has launches ‘Vodafone Angel Store’ in Mumbai and Hyderabad which is managed and completely run by women employees. N Krishnakumar, CEO, MindTree Ltd, states the case of Xerox, where an all-women top management team headed by CEO Ursula Burns recently collaborated to transform the company. In fact, Mr. P Chidambaram, Union Minister of Finance has announced in this year’s budget of setting up of a first all-women bank that lends mostly to women and women-run businesses, supports women SHGs and women’s livelihood, employs predominantly women and addresses gender-related aspects of empowerment and financial inclusion.

Companies with strong corporate governance practices are making conscious efforts to introduce diversity among board rooms, by including women on their board. As stated by Deloitte Global Centre for Corporate Governance in their third edition of research (2013) titled ‘Women in the
boardroom – A global perspective”, in India, there is a women representation of 5.2% on a sample of 62 listed companies and the percentage of women in the board rooms is 5%. The population of working women in India is one of the largest with 24% of employed women. Booz and Company in a recent study informs that if men and women in India are equally employed, India’s GDP could go up by 27%.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Founder, Center for Talent Innovation has conducted a study for the past ten years and released a report (2013) titled ‘On Ramps and Up Ramps India’ and found that women do not pursue a linear career progression. The study shows that the career of a woman goes along a scenic route, which involves taking time out, working part-time, reduced hours and flexi-time for a number of years during her mid-life.

**REASONS FOR NON-LINEAR CAREER PROGRESSION FOR WOMEN – WORK / LIFE BALANCE**

Work/Life Balance is a state of equilibrium in which the demands of both a person’s job and personal life are equal. This term is now used widely during the past decade as the working environment in the country has changed enormously. Today’s companies test the attitude of the employees during recruitment to check if they can be on the job 24 x 7. There is also a change in the working pattern where employees need to constantly work and interact with people from other countries. The extensive use of the mobile phone and the internet is forcing the employee to be engaged in the job at all times. Hence the concept of a 9 to 5 job has almost become invisible in the private sector. These industries have created ample opportunities for Indians, no doubt, but with its share of problems like work pressure, extended working times, stringent goals that has led to work/life conflict. With no clear distinction of work-life and family-life, it has led to work/life imbalance. Consequently there have been reports of employees suffering from stress and health related issues.

Today’s families are tending to be nuclear and gone are the days where people received support from the extended family structure. Both the spouses going to work to maintain a better standard of living is the new trend in urban families. The number of women being educated and employed has improved for quite a decade now but the household responsibilities still rest with her. Women compared to men have more personal and social pressures. They continue to undertake the majority share of domestic chores and rearing children. She is the first one to rush home if the child is sick or stays back to render help to her family. The additional responsibilities of managing work and family leads a woman to do a balancing act. The spillover of work into family results in spending quality time with her family and work pressures have shown consequences on her health and family relationships. “A lot of high potential women tend to leave mid-career either because the spouse is moving, marriage at some other place, or pressures as a new mother, etc.”, says Rekha Menon, Managing Director for Geographic Services for India & ASEAN at Accenture.

This point is emphasized by the study conducted by Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2013), which states that 36% of Indian women take a break from work. Among them 75% of the women take a break for childcare and 80% for eldercare responsibilities. 72% of women quit because of unsatisfying careers, 66% feel their career progression is stalled.
Striking a good work-life balance is much more important to women than men. As indicated by the Defining Success 2013 diversity survey conducted by Accenture, it was found that 70% of female respondents in India said that work-life balance was the key to their definition of “success” in their career. It shows that Indian women attach the highest importance to work-life balance than money which is a key reason why women in India leave their jobs. It was found that 48% women quit their jobs because of long and un-flexible working hours. About 72% of the women have turned down or did not pursue a job because they were concerned about its impact on work life balance. The other reasons why Indian women quit their jobs are poor work culture (68%), gossip (66%), disparity of remuneration (46%) and lack of recognition (58%). 27% of women surveyed also disliked the type of work they were doing that led to lower job satisfaction. 42% of the women cited lack of opportunity for growth (learning, increased responsibility, etc) as some of the reasons for lower job satisfaction.

A 2010 McKinsey report mentions, female senior executives cited the “double burden syndrome” of balancing motherhood and work as the main obstacle to women attaining more top roles in the organization. A 2009 study of female attorneys in New Jersey, conducted by Rutgers University’s Center for Women and Work, found that 29% of the respondents said that they left their previous firms because they had “difficulty integrating work with family/personal life.”

AVTAR Interim Women Managers (I-WIN), a 26000 strong network, has conducted an interesting study on the attrition of women employees. It found that 18% of the 98 lakh women in the workforce quit every year for reasons ranging from lack of work life balance to an unsustainable career track, says Saundarya Rajesh, founder-President of AVTAR Career Creators and FLEXI Careers India. Many of these women never return to their workplace, but over the years, around 15 lakh women are trying to make a re-entry into their careers.

**COMPANY PRACTICES TO ADDRESS WORK / LIFE BALANCE ISSUES OF WOMEN IN INDIA**

Progressive organizations are taking baby steps in recognizing the value that women employees bring to the table and are now focusing on gender-sensitive and equal opportunity policies. Some top companies have crafted a host of new initiatives dealing with work / life conflict for its female employees. Options such as realistic workloads, flexible working hours (part-time, telecommuting, job sharing, customized schedules), child care facilities, maternity leaves, and concierge facilities try to provide the much needed platform for women to carve a successful career. As seen earlier in this article, 80% of women quit their jobs for geriatric care. Though many organizations have included pediatric care as one of the initiatives, it is now imperative on the companies to also include geriatric care (Cisco, US has) as one of their work / life initiatives for women employees in India. The list below provides information of the implementation of work / life initiatives of some of the companies in India.

It is surprising to note that the most progressive work-family measures in Indian organizations come from the **Public Sector**. It includes reduced hours, career break leave, responsibility leave, and parental leave. In the private sector, the IT and ITES sector and a few MNCs are providing family welfare measures to maintain uniformity in HR practices globally and partly due to the demand of the young workforce and partly as a tool to retain talent.
Proctor and Gamble has a benefit menu for its women employees to choose from like work from home, flexible working hours, and family and medical leave. About 80% of P&G women utilize the work from home option once a week and 15% make use of location free assignments. This is useful for women whose spouse is being posted to onshore locations where she can be on work mode by choosing location-free assignments.

Infosys has set up satellite offices in Bangalore to save the working mothers on travel time and offers family enrichment programs and workshops. The Infosys’ Women’s Inclusivity Network, works towards training women to managerial and leadership roles thereby creating a gender-sensitive and inclusive network.

Accenture provides young mothers with the Maternity Returners program to ease the transition and provides career guidance and support for ideal re-entry roles. Flexible work arrangements, Back-up dependent care, Limited concierge service and Employee assistance program, Elder Resource Program, and Nursing mother programs help the working mothers to pursue their careers without sacrificing their personal priorities. Women in Accenture are connected globally with their Accenture Women’s Network based on ‘Defining success, your way’ theme where women interact with their peer group across the world. This theme encourages women by providing resources that can help them defining their visions of success through education, tools and personal experiences of other Accenture women.

HCL Technologies has instituted a women-centric website www.hclwomen.com to persuade women to speak about their work / life issues openly and get support from their peer group in managing work / life priorities. The website also features discussions and debates on current topics and counsel on everything from work life continuity to career management. BlogHer is another women-centric blogging section dedicates to address women-related issues that impact their performance at the work place.

Fiserv India, a leading global technology provider serving the financial services industry provides flexi-time options to its women workforce. Associates have the option to arrive early and leave early as per mutual agreement with the project manager. Work from home options, extended maternity leaves, extended breaks to solve personal issues and return back to work are some of the other initiatives to its women employees.

Intel Technologies conducts career-development workshops to retain talent of mid-life women engineers.

Johnson & Johnson’s ‘Crossing the Finish Line’ is aimed at director-level women employees by providing skills and strategies to strengthen their abilities to further progress in their careers and thereby manage an environment that leverages diversity.

HSBC was the first company in India to implement the flexible work arrangements (FWA) policy in 2008 and hires housewives for its call-center under its part-time option. It is also keen to leverage the FWA to launch a return-to-work scheme for women on a career break.

HDFC Bank, ICICI Prudential Life Insurance, Genpact, and Max New York Life Insurance have introduced flexi-work options for women employees.

PAYOFFS COMPANIES EARN THROUGH CAREER RE-LAUNCH PROGRAMS
“Women are being hired back in critical positions in sales and profit centre leadership after maternity breaks and sabbaticals, which was unheard of a decade ago. Most staffing companies have witnessed a spike in demand for women candidates for various temporary as well as permanent business roles, which is an exciting trend of inclusiveness in our workforce,” says Rituparna Chakraborty, Vice-President of Indian Staffing Federation.

This is good news for women who want to kick start their career once again after tending to their family responsibilities. Many companies are now welcoming women with open hands. Many companies have launched campaigns to re-employ women on a sabbatical and want to return to their career. They are young mothers, women who wanted to pursue their education or women who wanted a few years to take care of their families. The companies would like to provide opportunities for women by offering small projects, internships, flexi-time work schedule or full time employment.

Company practices to re-launch a woman’s career facilitates in attracting talent by encouraging hardworking female employees – increase productivity, retention, job satisfaction and women empowerment. Sunil Nayak, CEO, Sodexo India says that many women who takes breaks come back with stronger views and different perspectives.

**Gender diversity leads to innovation**

As discussed earlier, gender diversity has played a key role in the growth of organizations. Diversity encourages new perspective, lateral thinking, and brings in innovation. Women bring empathy and intuition to leadership, take initiative and drive for results. Women also have experience in both their professional and personal lives and are often known to provide unknown, applicable solutions or improvements that are useful to increase productivity and solve problems.

IBM has 26% women employees in India and Randstad has 70% women in its workforce. A ‘Diversity in Action’ report brought out by the country’s software industry organization, NASSCOM along with PwC measures the number of women employed in large IT firms (of 20000 – 70000 people) at 24 – 30% and in back office firms 35% - 42%

**Inherent Leadership Qualities**

A 2010 study by the Standard Chartered Bank, Community Business and the Cranfield School of Management reveals that out of a total of 1112 directorship on BSE – 100 firms, 59 or 5.3% of directorships were held by 48 different women. Women in leadership roles improve the return of investor capital, quality of the end product, and the corporate bottom line are the views of Cleo Thompson, Global HC, PwC. Deepak Deshpande of Netmagic Solutions comments, “Women understand the strengths and weaknesses of people well. If we hire them back to work, we get more mature, resilient and strong people.” Women are able to match the expectations of the employers with much ease compared to men. Women also show a high level of commitment as they have resolved to re-enter into their career. Companies also value women employees for their multi tasking abilities.

IBM has adopted several Leadership programs for potential women in the areas of technology and sales. SalesElan, TechAcme are two leadership development multi-tier programs across all
levels and business units. It aims to develop basic skills (sales and technical), providing a deep understanding of the market and business development competencies.

At P&G Hygiene & Healthcare's Mumbai headquarters 45% of its senior leadership is made up of women.

**Talented and trained work pool**

According to Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard, after a career break, women have strong educational credentials, significant work experience, high energy levels and unbeatable enthusiasm about returning to work precisely as they have been away from it for a while. They are more grounded and are actually better for positions requiring advisory, consultative approach.

The growth in the Indian market is fast and talented work pool is not easy to find. Hence the gap gets filled by offering opportunities for women with a career-break. However 72% of them do not want to go back to their previous employer (Hewlett study). Nevertheless, companies want to win the battle for talent by attracting hardworking female employees in large numbers as it is a win-win situation for both.

SAP India has launched a program to ‘Stay-in-touch’ with its women employees who have quit in the last 18 months and want them to return back to work after their sabbatical. LiquidPlus, a priority engagement program of IBM focuses on women ex-IBMers to continue to get connected professionally with the company. The main purpose of the program is to search for the world’s best talent to design and develop innovative software applications.

**Abundance of professionally qualified women in tier 2 cities**

Women qualified in domains like finance and accountancy, management, legal, secretarial, engineering are now coming in larger numbers from tier 2 cities and smaller towns in India. Their credentials like personal drive, integrity and capacity to manage conflict positively can build value for stakeholders in a business enterprise. According to N Krishna Kumar, CEO, Mindtree Ltd., employing women is a ‘smart business decision’. Hence Indian women professionals are ready with the required skill sets to succeed in the global business environment.

**High Quality of Hire and Low Cost of Hire**

The objectives of any organization are to hire the best available talent at the minimum cost. To improve any talent acquisition process, the key lies in focusing on two dimensions of recruitment: Quality of hire and Cost of hire. The above innovation in Talent Acquisition, besides streamlining the existing recruitment process, becomes mandatory to look at innovative talent pools.

Tata Companies and other corporate majors like IBM, SAP, Mahindra Satyam, Hindustan Unilever, Virtusa Corporation have dedicated programs to woo back women into their workforce.
Hewlett’s ‘On Ramps and Up Ramps India’ also states an interesting fact that Indian women stay out of work for a much shorter duration, an average of 11 months in comparison to 2.7 years in US and 1.8 years in Germany. 91% of those women who have taken a break want to restart their career and 58% are successful to rejoin full-time work facing smaller salary penalties. However, a survey conducted by People Matters commissioned by TCS reveals that there is a lack of re-entry opportunities (29%) with only 2% companies providing reintegration programs.

Some of the companies mentioned below are working on ‘return-ship’ or ‘second-career’ management programs for women and help them make an easy transition back into the corporate world.

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<th>Sl No.</th>
<th>Companies and Programs</th>
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| 1.     | GE RESTART Program - John F Welch Technology Centre, Bangalore | • Flexi program, manages training, access to day-care facility, pre- and post-maternity programs: ‘Mom to be’ relaxation rooms, car park and lactation rooms  
• RESTART hires provided with mentors for ‘re-learning’ the organization  
• CVs of women to be sent to restart.jfwtc@ge.com |
| 2     | Mahindra Satyam ‘Starting Over’ | • Test the potential of the candidate rather than just previous experience  
• Training programs to re-orient the new hires to the corporate processes  
• Nurtures talent from application stage and opportunities are given in three employment avenues – internship, part-time and full-time  
• Information on website - https://startingover.mahindrasatyam.com/ |
| 3     | IBM ‘Bring her back’ | • Walk-in interviews encouraged and IBM alumni enabled to contribute to projects at IBM  
• Women graduates and post-graduate referrals are encouraged and employees earn a high referral bonus |
| 4     | TATA ‘Second Career Internship Program (SCIP)’ | • Women who have taken a sabbatical from 1 – 8 years with an experience of at least 4 years in a pre-determined domain eligible  
• Flexi hour assignments with its group companies for 5 – 6 months.  
• Hand-holds and mentors women with inputs from senior leaders and helps them gain confidence  
• Flexible work schedules with live business projects to refresh their skills, hone their strengths and integrate them back to the work-environment  
• Trained women can move to full-time roles within or outside the TATA group |
<p>| 5     | Hindustan Unilever ‘Career By Choice’ | • Women with 2 year experience in marketing, HR, Supply chain and R &amp; D eligible |</p>
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<th>No.</th>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>PepsiCo ‘Diversity and Inclusion’</td>
<td>Women undergo workshops to adapt to the new role and balance both their personal/professional lives</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Microsoft’s IT India ‘Springboard’ (Engineering division)</td>
<td>Employees with requisite professional, post graduation qualifications with 4 years of continuous work experience eligible</td>
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<td>Hones technical skills, offers attractive monthly compensation for the duration of the project</td>
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<td>Initially join as interns for six months with flexi hours, choose the type of the project, duration and the work hours</td>
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<td>Can join as a full-time employee on successful completion of the program</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>SAP India ‘Stay in Touch’ and ‘Amico’</td>
<td>Stay in Touch is a program for women professionals who quit in the last 18 months and expect them to return to work after their sabbatical</td>
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<td>Amico aims to stay in contact with absent employees, updates them on new developments at the work place and addresses their concerns.</td>
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<td>Hopes to convert the fence-sitters who may be in two minds about returning back to work after maternity leave</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Virtusa Corporation</td>
<td>Opportunities in software development, project management and pre-sales activities for women who have taken a break on personal constraints</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Avtar Career Creators and Flexi Careers India</td>
<td><strong>AVTAR I-WIN (Interim Women Managers Interface Network)</strong> set up to place women who seek integration between home and work spheres, women with interrupted careers and women who require flexi-options – part time, flexi time and project based work modules</td>
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<td>Network helps women to find ‘family-friendly’ working hours, access and share information with peer groups on career opportunities, work – life integration and support systems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Organizes Se-gue (or smooth transition) sessions in industries spanning IT, BPO, FMCG, retail, banking,</td>
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CONCLUSION

A woman can be successful in her career if she earns half the income and the husband does half the housework as said in Sheryl Sandberg's new book, “Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead”. Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook advises women to believe in their own capabilities, reach out to opportunities, and turn their life partner into a real partner, who can share household chores. Women after a career-break have to be mentally prepared to move up, down, or lateral in their career paths to pursue a career which is challenging, fulfilling and exciting. They might also have to be prepared for lesser remuneration as compared to women who have continued with their jobs.

Career transitions at mid-life are very different from those done immediately after education. Suggestions to women who are looking for re-entry opportunities:

- To keep up-to-date the happenings of the chosen field, read about the latest developments, try to attend conferences or read new books and journals – whatever is relevant for the profession
- Take-up courses to hone up skills to stand in pace with the changing needs of the job
- Look-out for companies offering Career-Re-launch programs in the chosen field and try to take up business live projects, flexi-time opportunities to gain experience and ease the transition
- If re-entry is difficult in the chosen field, can take up alternate professions like administration, content writing, education, public relations, accounting, copy writing, etc.
- Pursuing hobbies (dress designing, catering, dance, music, and painting) into a full-fledged career is a self-fulfillment option.
- Franchisee opportunities and entrepreneurship are other viable options.

Finally, women need to think if it is the right time to re-enter, identify the work which gives utmost satisfaction, develop confidence, gather latest technologies required at the workplace, evaluate competencies and accomplishments, identify inherent values, network with former colleagues and contacts and be ready to accept challenges.

REFERENCES

Tanuja Agarwal, 2007, Strategic Human Resources Management, Oxford University Press, pp. 709


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