



The ♀ factor

Smart companies have realized that women sensitive policies make good long term business sense, as talent attraction as well as retention strategies. In the March 1-15 issue, we profiled women life sciences professionals who left corporate careers to follow their entrepreneurial dreams. In this issue, **Viveka Roychowdhury** examines how corporate culture has evolved to such an extent that gender diversity is today part of the very DNA of most life science organisations

In a year's time, we will be marking the Global Centenary of International Women's Day (IWD). As per the agenda designated by the United Nations, IWD is marked as a global celebration of the economic, political and social achievements of women. The main aim is to increase awareness of the struggles of women, to celebrate successes and hold them out as beacons of hope. This is all the more relevant today, when more than half the workforce is soon going to be female, as opposed to a century back when this portion was very miniscule.

But this is still not the case in India. Tejinder Pal Singh, Senior Partner - Life Science Practice, TRANSEARCH International admits that it's a fact that there are too few women in the business world and hence the business culture and practices continue to be predominantly male oriented. He points out that globally, top corporations aim to have gender diversity in boardrooms as well as at top management positions. "In India, this trend has percolated quite well and increasingly our clients while mandating us executive search assignments, cite high preference for women leaders and managers even for traditionally male dominated roles say Finance, Supply Chain, Manufacturing etc," reveals Singh. This is so that they can build up gender diversity as the belief is that it catapults corporate performance, adds to the corporate image and corporations where women are strongly represented at the board and top management level are the ones that perform the best," reveals Singh.

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- Ravi C Dasgupta
Head - Group HR
Biocon

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President and CEO
Reliance Life Sciences (RLS)

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Vice Chairman & Managing Director
Novartis India

In India, while there has been a steady increase in the number of women in the workforce, we have not, by and large, seen the kind of strident feminism as observed in more developed nations. The change has been more inclusive, subtle, sustained and therefore less celebrated. As Ranjit Shahani, Vice Chairman & Managing Director, Novartis India points out, "Women have made significant strides in the business world and today it is not uncommon to even see them in the boardroom. We have women at senior management positions at Novartis India and do believe that it is possible for a woman at Novartis to reach the top."

Equal opportunity recruiters

According to a survey conducted by Ernst & Young, overall, the percentage of women in Indian pharmaceuticals and biotechnology companies ranges between eight percent to 15 percent. Many life sciences organisations are committed to being equal opportunity recruiters and support equal employment and affirmative action in hiring decisions to achieve gender diversity. The effect of these long term policies is visible today in companies like Reliance Life Sciences (RLS) where "one third of employees are women and one fifth in the management team are women", says K V Subramaniam, President and CEO, RLS.

Ravi C Dasgupta, Head - Group HR, Biocon reasons that, "The demographics would vary depending on the areas the company focuses on. Companies with a large manufacturing or sales setup will tend to have more men working for them. Areas like Clinical Trials, R&D and Quality tend to have a higher percentage of women." For instance, within the Biocon Group, Clinigene has 33.8 percent and Syngene has 16.7 percent women. Within Biocon, the percentage of women employees in R&D & Quality is 25 percent, though overall (because of the large Manufacturing and Sales teams) women account for 11.26 percent of employees.

Underlining this trend, Aditi Kare Panandikar, Director, Business Development and HRD, Indoco Remedies states that women constitute 20 percent of Indoco's non-field workforce. Subramaniam too

points out that many of RLS' business functions like Clinical Research, Regenerative Medicine, Molecular Medicine, Quality Assurance, Human Resources and Legal have 50 percent and higher female employees.

A delicate balance

But do we need to celebrate a trend that is so natural, still so nascent and evolving that it risks upsetting the delicate workplace balance? Or may even cause achievers to be 'stigmatised' as a 'pampered lot'?

Biocon's Dasgupta rejects this argument, saying "It is very unlikely that sentiments such as resentment are experienced by men who have grown up in equal opportunity environments. A good proportion of the workforce today come from double income families who understand and appreciate the difficulties such families face."

In fact, as Kare-Panandikar points out, in appreciation of this "delicate balance that is required between home and work and as a first step, we have introduced flexi-timings for working to allow both men and women to manage their home and work life better."

An ORCHID in bloom

Back in 2005 Novartis India introduced Project Orchid - Organisational Results by Channelizing Human Initiatives & Diversity in their largest division - Pharma - to make life a little easier for employees in general and women employees in particular. Under this programme, mothers-to-be are allowed to come to work two hours late or leave two hours early for two months prior to delivery and for three months after resuming work. Working mothers are entitled to reimbursement for childcare up to the age of three. Male employees are entitled to paternity leave of up to five days.

The company has a concierge service available to help employees deal with chores such as paying bills, renewing train passes or even purchasing movie tickets. An office-home car drop facility is available to all employees working beyond 10 pm. There is a mentoring programme for women employees with emphasis on growth and leadership. Motivational talk sessions are also held which are open to interested men as well. Yoga classes are held and there is a gym with a professional trainer available every evening. The company also has a rejuvenation lounge for specific salon treatments that operates on the company's premises once a week. A couple of months ago the company introduced the concept of Fun Friday allowing employees to relax, let down their hair and interact with one another in a more informal manner. Novartis India runs their own creche at their office premises in Hyderabad which is open to pre-school children of both men and women.

The financial meltdown in the US, in which Lehman Brothers played a leading role, brought discussions on gender diversity to the forefront. In fact, business analyst quipped, only half in jest, that the meltdown would not have happened or been so severe if it were 'Lehman Sisters'. Commenting on this, Kare- Panandikar cites the argument about "Evolution and the Genes" resulting in a lesser percentage of women committing crimes and frauds per se. It has been observed that women in monitoring and control positions such as Quality Assurance, Human Resources, Regulatory, tend to have a better regard for rules and guidelines and consequently have greater acceptance. She guesses this theory could be extrapolated to Ethics in Business and better corporate governance, but as a firm propagator of 'Equal Rights and Opportunity' she believes that gender issues should not be brought in, to create false stereotypes.

Dasgupta too discards this 'stereotype' pointing out that the risk taking appetite of an individual is a subjective evaluation. As an example, he cites Carly Fiorina, who led the controversial merger of HP and Compaq despite strong opposition from various Company Board Members. Moving closer to home, he points out that his own company, Biocon, is led by a woman (Kiran Mazumdar Shaw) and has a well balanced product portfolio which mitigated the recessionary effects on company performance. But he does agree that, "In general, women managers are more intuitive. They are more sensitive to the needs and capabilities of her team members. That makes her good with delegation and she is able to derive the best out of her teammates." But, he cautions, not all men are initially comfortable about having a woman managing them.

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Leveling the playing field

Women employees today make up almost 46 percent of RLS' 'Young Professionals Programmes'. So also 25 percent of the employees receiving the "Employee of the Year" Award, another rewards and recognition program to highlight excellence across job areas are women, according to Subramaniam. Given that the selection is based on criteria like significant contribution in the areas of "Work contribution", "Leadership traits", "Behavior & conduct" and "Out of the box thinking", this is proof that there is a growing pool of women professionals ready to take on senior management positions within RLS.

Do these encouraging statistics mean that the measures to 'level the playing field' have been successful and therefore are not needed today? Not yet it seems. "To successfully strike a balance between her work and family, the measures to 'level the playing field' are important for women employees. If these measures are scrapped, then women's participation in the workforce will also decline," cautions Dasgupta.

And for Novartis India, the playing field extends outside the company as well. Shahani reveals that for the past few years the company has been giving an annual scholarship of Rs 12 lakh which is divided among three needy women students with excellent academic credentials who come from not so privileged backgrounds. The company is committed to giving this scholarship every year until 2012 and further extension will be considered at the end of this period. The company has also been increasing awareness of women health through Arogya Parivar, its rural healthcare initiative.

Lupin too reaches out to women outside its ranks. A main part of the Lupin Human Welfare & Research Foundation deals with women empowerment issues. According to the company, around 4000 Self Help Groups (SHG) were formed with a membership of around 50,000 women, and 70 percent of them are linked with income generation activities.

Deepening the talent pool

RLS' policy of nurturing in-house talent exposes the root of the problem: the shallow talent pool. Spelling out ground realities, Dasgupta says, "Many women tend to take a break from their careers for a few years while their children are growing up. This break sometimes results in their lagging behind in their careers compared to others who have worked in continuity. Some women also avoid jobs with long hours and extensive travel so that they can focus on their families as well. Yet other women need


to move cities as their husbands' careers progress. All these factors taken together tend to result in fewer women reaching the top in organisations than men."

Singh reveals that as the talent pool is so limited at the top levels, not just in the life science industry but across all sectors, the vision for building gender diversity hardly takes off from the drawing board. Only organisations with real conviction and dedication to make it happen succeed at the end and it requires nurturing talent within from bottom to top with flexible HR policies as well as having an open mind in terms of searching and identifying talent across sectors wherever there could be a possibility of transferability of skill sets, he explains.

Some companies try to compensate by deliberately looking for 'diversity' candidates when filling up senior vacancies, says Dasgupta. But it's not enough to just identify and hire promising women candidates. Singh stresses that the company has to take this forward by diligently helping the incumbent in filling up the knowledge/ skill gaps through training and providing other relevant business opportunities. "Some of our clients are willing to top up our fee if we succeed in realising this vision of theirs. But it's a tough task and takes an effort considering the ground realities," he cautions.

But there is light at the end of the tunnel. Dasgupta opines that the situation is changing quickly, and as more women enroll for professional courses and enter the workforce, the next couple of decades will see more women at top management and board level positions across organisations. Singh too is positive that "we just need to script a few success stories by facilitating this diversity movement. A few examples, coupled with direct impact on performance would provide the necessary impetus to this vision and more companies will start taking it seriously."

viveka.r@expressindia.com



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