

Heralding Her

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Abstract

Is today's jet setting woman all set to dominate and takeover the HR department? Researchers and practitioners are of the opinion that the female of the species is definitely making a kill this time. What would be the reason behind this windfall of female employees in this particular area? Some people believe that it is perhaps more conducive to raising their family as it is less demanding a job. Mary Mercer, principal consultant at the Institute for Employment Studies feels that. There is a feeling any one can do HR, that it is something anyone can pick up. But is that all that easy? This paper will study about the role of women in HR, the reason behind HR being feminized, obstacles and ways and means of overcoming those obstacles. It is really a soft option? What is it in HR that drives women in droves to it?

Keywords

Women, HR, Welfare, Female-dominated, Glass Ceiling, Corporate

I. Introduction

According to Angela 'O' Connor, HR Director at the Crown Prosecution Centre, UK to understand why there are women in HR we must look at the history of the profession in the UK, "the roots of HR go as far back as the late 19th century, when the role of welfare workers was to take care of women and girls in the work force, she says. These welfare workers were all women, and as more women entered the workplace during the two world wars, the number in welfare work increased and their role expanded to include recruitment and training".

The development from the welfare role to personnel and then to HR, took place, therefore in a predominantly female environment – in much the same way for example, that engineering developed as a mainly male occupation. Duncan Brown, assistant director general at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), attributes the high levels of women in HR to educational background.

"In the UK, HR has been associated with a softer social science background which tends to attract women, whereas men tend to prefer the harder sciences".

According to Marianne Huggett, Associate Director of the Work Foundation, "as per many people in the outside world are concerned (HR) is a soft and fluffy job all about social and welfare issues". "Anyone who gets close to HR knows it is anything but soft". Paul Turner, General Manager at West Bromwich Building Society is of the view that women seem to be attracted to caring "people based" professions such as HR, while men traditionally preferred professions where success is judged on results. In male dominated professions, such as sales, law or engineering, you can see the member of sales made, or court cases won, or bridges built. You can usually see exactly what has been achieved. But in HR, it has not always been easy to measure your achievement". Turner also rejects the notion that women prefer HR because it is a soft option. "In the difficult areas of HR that managers often shy away from such responsibilities such as discipline or hardnosed negotiations and it is often the women who are prepared to cut to the quick and be decisive. HR is a job where the amount of power you have lies in your ability to influence other people, whereas in many

other jobs you have power through position. I think the women into HR and do well are particularly good at influencing other people". And the reasons cited corroborate the figure cited by UK based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) – 72% of CIPD employees are women. And 28% of the 124,500 members are men. But sadly enough, there is a bitter truth which we cannot ignore. The number of women at the top is extremely low. In fact, it has been found that the HR director is always a man. This startling truth is quite in contrast to the feminized HR department. This phenomenon is across the globe where only 10% of senior managers in fortune 500 companies are women, there are less than 4% women as CEO's president or executive vice president and less than 3% do not fall under the category of highest corporate earners. Naomi Bloom a US HR blogger finds that the US HR profession remains female-dominated, with significant progress having been achieved toward fairer pay and greater representation of women at HR executive levels. But while women remain dominant in terms of numbers, this dominance is not necessarily reflected in the power structures controlling the profession. Bloom says:

"Attend a local or regional SHRM meeting, and that domination in numbers [by women] is absolutely clear. It's even obvious at the annual HR Technology Conference. But review the annual list of the top HR executives from HRE, and it's equally clear that males dominate the top positions." There can be certain reasons- perhaps it is family concerns, or some other bottle necks which prevents these ambitious and aspiring women from achieving the top slot. Dorothy Dalton writes in *The Feminisation Of HR*: It seems that tough decisions or actions performed by an HR woman, will not be perceived as tough and decisive as if they were performed by a man. Culturally women are expected to exhibit softer skills, while men are expected to be more decisive. The criteria for evaluation is such that even when women are decisive they are not taken seriously, or get caught up in that old double bind as being too "aggressive".

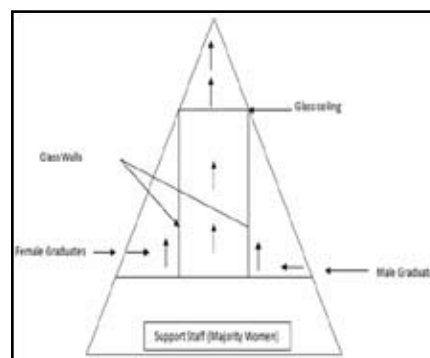


Fig. 1: Source: 21st Century Women in Corporate World Ms. Sraboni Ganguly Faculty-Human Resource Management International School of Business

II. Misconceptions Regarding Women

Some people are of the opinion that women change job more quickly and are less ambitious than men. Others are of the view that they do not handle crisis with firmness, rather they succumb to it. They are emotional and are too finicky about environmental conditions.

But those are merely excuses. Here's what Ilene Lang, the President of Catalyst has to say. Ambition knows no gender. Therefore the myth that women are less ambitious for top slot is here busted. So what are the reasons behind this glass ceiling? What really stops these women?

It is 25 years since the term "glass ceiling" was coined by the Wall Street Journal to describe the apparent barriers that prevent women from reaching the top of the corporate hierarchy. The glass ceiling phenomenon is proving persistent. The top of the corporate ladder remains stubbornly male, and the few women who reach it are paid significantly less than their male counterparts. This glass ceiling applies to large organizations also where women are restricted to human resources and administration. They do not get the opportunity to prove themselves in areas which are central or strategic to the organization. Apart from glass ceiling, they also face a glass wall that hinders their rise in the pyramidal structure.

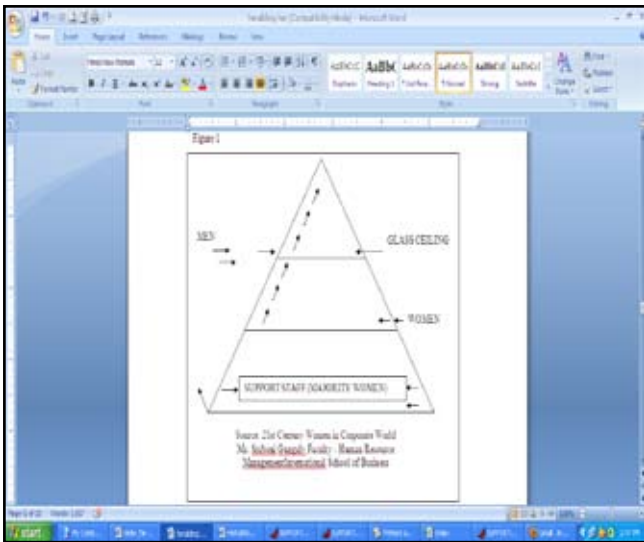


Fig. 2:

III. Apart from the Glass Ceiling and Glass Walls there are Several Other Reasons

Top business women in American attribute three main reasons. First comes the exclusion from informal networks. In America and elsewhere it has become almost traditional to take clients to night clubs and the like. These activities prevent women from forming social networks which are so essential for ascending the corporate ladder.

The second obstacle as per Ilene Lang, "pervasive stereotyping of women's capacity for leadership". People are averse to working under a female boss.

The third bottleneck is the absence of an ideal.

There are very few women at the top to advise how to get there. Chris Bones, a senior HR executive with Cadbury Schweppes is of the opinion that the flattening of organizations has meant promotions are far steeper up the ladder. This means less opportunities for women who seek to re enter at higher levels. Many women take time off to care of their parents or look after their families when they are on the verge of making it to the top.

According to Ben Rose, Professor at the Kenan – Flagler Business School, "Many women either become entrepreneurs or consultants as it gives them greater freedom and autonomy".

According to a finding many experienced and qualified women leave either due to family matters or due to working conditions at the workplace. Almost 93% of women felt they found very few options on their return. Rajiv Oza the director HR, Dr Reddy's

Laboratories Ltd attributes certain reasons for poor representation of women in boardrooms in India:

"The dismal position of Indian corporate when it comes to having women board members is a reality. In Indian Inc, the reasons are more to do with the social system, which will take its own time to change, the impact of low representation of women at the board could be an opportunity missed. Women being a big decision maker in the consumer world can impact business in a big way and a research report published by University of Nuremberg states that the board of companies having women have shown sustainable profits compared to the board having none."

IV. In View of the Above Findings, is Change the Need of the Hour?

In Norway, legislation has been passed decreeing that by the end of 2006 all companies must have at least two women on their boards. In Britain, an organization called Women Directors on Boards feel flexible working time would go a long way in retaining women. They also suggest mentoring as one of the methods.

If the same kind of coercion is done in India it would definitely help more and more women employees climb up the corporate ladder. According to Anisha Motwani, director and chief marketing officer, Max New York Life Insurance, "Out of 1,112 directorships of 100 companies listed on BSE of India, only 59 positions or 5.3 percent are held by women". This percentage is not only lower than the percentage of women directors in countries like Canada (15%), the US (14.5%), and the UK (12.2%), but also markets such as HongKong (8.9 percent) and Australia (8.3 percent) as per WILL KPMG Report, "In pursuit of balanced leadership: pioneering the path for corporate India."

The graph tells us about the number of women who are at the helm of affairs across European countries.

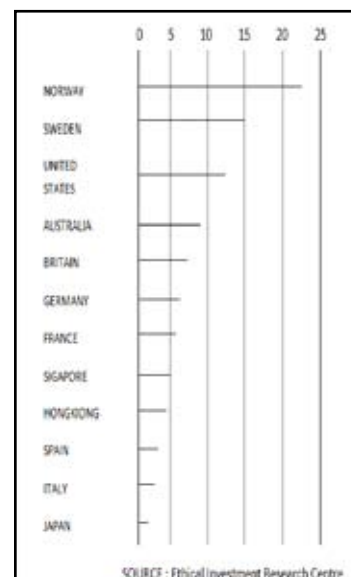


Fig. 3: Female Directors as % of Total, March 2004

V. Recommendations

According to Susan Miseinger, President and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management in Alexandria, "Creating a work/life balance for employees is easier today because of the influence of women in HR".

There are several ways by means of which we can retain high performing women. They can be allowed :

- Flexi time
- Telecommuting

- Job sharing
- Flexible maternity leave
- Working from home
- Dependant Care(Children and Elderly Parents)
- Opportunities for training and development.
- EAPs.
- Religious days off

Before the IT industry set foot in India, India, was primarily into the manufacturing industry. All these manufacturing industries had strong HR policies, as HR played a major role in policy making implementing, regulating & maintaining IR as well. In the day of yore trade union agitation were the order of the day. Employees always felt, strikes and lockouts were the best and the only methods to make their demands fulfilled by the organizations. Handling such complex situations require a person to be a well rounded personality. It requires multi tasking and looking after a variety of activities simultaneously and women have been found to be very efficient in such situations and do not buckle under pressure. Women seem to have a more balanced approach towards life as their emotional quotient is also high. Women find the HR job suitable for them for a number of reasons.

There are number of ways by which we can promote women's emancipation in greater numbers in organizations. According to the Government of Canada work Life Balance in Canadian Work Place:

“Work life balance is a self defined self-determined state of will being that a person can reach, or can set a goal that allows them to manage effectively responsibilities at work at home, and in their community, it supports physical, emotional, family and community health, and does so without grief, stress or negative impact”.

1. Flexible Time is beneficial both for the employees as well as for the employer. It gives the scope to accommodate to the office work and personal work properly. It allows a person to cater to the different needs of the clients as per their schedule. This in turn leads to reduction in cost. The organization saves office space, retains hardworking employees and thus saves money and time on recruiting and training new people.
2. Job Sharing is another way to retain experienced people for their knowledge, sincerity and involvement Women employees who want to get back to office after a hiatus would benefit from this method. This will put them back on their career track and the organization will get highly loyal and experienced people.
3. Allowing flexible maternity leave is a must for every organization. Under the Maternity and Parental Care Act. There are certain organizations which give paid maternity leave whereas others keep the position vacant for a specific period, so that the lady can join after the birth of the baby.
4. Working from home is one of the most popular form of employment. It does not require any investment and moreover it is convenient and financially rewarding too. Due to fast internet access jobs like data entry operators, article writing, clerical and HR jobs can also be done right at home.
5. Dependant Care: Women have the once of looking after their children as well as the elderly. The demands of both office work and personal work may take a toll on their mental balance. The company can take certain initiatives like :
Facilities for community child care and elder care centres, financial assistance and allowing employees to take personal days off in case of an emergency.
6. Opportunities for Training and development : Organizing workshops on healthy living and de - stressing, communication

style or seminars on topics suggested by the employees themselves are also very encouraging.

7. EAP : In addition to that, offering other fitness facilities like allowing employees to walk or cycle during the lunch break, providing a fitness instructor at the work place or may be encouraging employees to involve themselves over a game of tennis or badminton can be a great way of releasing their stress. A smoke free environment and serving healthy food in the office canteen are also some of the best ways to promote healthy living. A session of Yoga, tips on balanced diet, proper nutrition and meditation can immensely boost a person to perform well.

8. Religious Days Off :Religious practices are as important in a person's life as a job or home. This needs to be given equal importance in the work life balance system. For instance important meetings and conferences may not be scheduled on such days. Those marked holy days may be declared holidays and separate rooms may be provided for prayer.

A few more management tips :

- Managers can take the initiative of doing away with unnecessary meetings.
- They should be clear about their expectations from the staff.
- Organizations can also reduce office tours of female employees

VI. Conclusion

The study above suggests that HR is more female oriented and hence female dominated. Women may occupy and out number in the lower levels but at the higher it is always dominated by men. Men see it is as a soft option and a fluffy job. There are certain misconceptions as well. That women change job more frequently than their male counterparts. They are unstable and hence do not make it to the top. Some others are of the opinion that women always give time to their family and put job on the mental backburner and hence lose out on the plum posts. There is also the problem of glass ceiling and glass wall. And the shocking thing is that 60% of HR directors are men. But we need more and more women to occupy the top slot and not just in HR but in other fields to break some of the myths associated with women.

According to Turner : “The key HR skills in many areas are the ability to empathies, relate and influence, and use emotional intelligence. I am not suggesting that men don't have emotional intelligence, but in HR the women who do well have bags and bags of it.”

They are always good at multi-tasking and view things rather differently and trust their instincts. And these are some of their strong points. It is time therefore that organization sat up and took notice of an indispensable work force for a better, brighter and equitable workplace.

To quote Vinita Singhania, MD, JK Lakshmi Cement is optimistic about this, “I am optimistic as today women in India are excelling in every sphere of life .The first citizen of this country is a woman as well as the leader of the opposition party. Even in the corporate world, there are a good number of women in leadership positions(for example: Pepsi Co, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, Biocon, Thermax Kinetic Engineering,etc)where women are in leadership roles. I do believe the challenge would be not only in sustaining, but also accelerating the momentum and creating a strong leadership pipeline, for the women to take on a more leadership role.”

Women are found to be approachable , logical and humane. The combination of these three qualities makes them good at the negotiating table. They are known to communicate with a greater

degree of fairness and integrity and this favours them as good leaders and ethical professionals. The myth that HR is a fluffy job, is far from truth. Rather its just the opposite. Dealing with people can be an extremely challenging and exasperating work, what with complexities and the different issues that arise in a day. There are operational and budgetary issues or project issues, sometimes financial issues -but they all boil down to one single thing and that is dealing with human beings. Women often have to prove themselves twice as hard to prove their capabilities and themselves. To quote playwright and diplomat Clare Boothe Luce "Because I am a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed. If I fail, no one will say,"She doesn't have what it takes". They will say,"Women don't have what it takes". But the winds of change have definitely swept over organizations across the globe as more and more people are waking upto the reality of a balanced workforce and an inclination towards this indispensable workforce called women.

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