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Tech's Gender Reboot: Fostering Female Technology Leadership in India

Despite the global dialogue on improving gender gap in the workplace, women remain significantly underrepresented in executive roles. In the technology industry, which has been historically male-dominated, women hold only 28% of leadership roles globally.[1] In India, the landscape is even more challenging. According to Skillsoft's 2022 Women in Tech Report – India Region, out of 1,004 surveyed women tech professionals, a mere 7% hold executive-level positions such as Chief Information Officer, Chief Technology Officer, or Chief Information Security Officer.[2] This disparity not only highlights a gender diversity gap in India but also underscores the systemic barriers hindering women's advancement in technology.

As stakeholders increasingly demand equitable opportunities throughout organizations, diversity measures are essential for fostering a truly inclusive workplace. This involves diligently tracking diversity goals, thoroughly examining DEI policies, and gaining insights into the factors behind women's departures. Beyond tactical measures, organizations should also implement long-term practices to create a more inclusive environment. To understand how organizations can better support women in tech, Russell Reynolds Associates interviewed senior technology executives from the country. These senior leaders, who have had successful professional journeys acknowledged that while favorable personal situations with supportive families are critical, organizations can also more actively adopt strategies to create inclusive, equitable, achievement-oriented career paths for women, including:

1. **Embracing Diverse Choices in Career Paths**
2. **Creating pathways through mentorship & sponsorship**
3. **Recognizing and challenging unconscious bias**
4. **Encouraging open conversations**

"Supporting women through critical personal milestones like marriage, childbirth, or elder care is not just about having policies in place, but about effectively communicating and implementing them. When organizations stand by their female employees during these challenging times, they not only nurture the talent within but also earn the loyalty and engagement of these women"

Kamolika Peres
Vice President & Managing Director India/South Asia at ServiceNow

Embrace Diverse Choices in Career Paths

To achieve gender equity in leadership, organizations need to include women in challenging and impactful roles, while also acknowledging and respecting that men and women, depending on their individual journeys, could have different career motivators, approaches, and expectations—both within and outside of work. This requires a dual strategy:

▪ **Automatically include women leaders in succession processes:** Instead of waiting for women to actively opt-in, organizations should consider automatically including all women in leadership succession plans, unless they choose to opt-out. This approach ensures all qualified candidates are in contention, helping to narrow the gender gap. It's about providing flexibility, creating a safe space, and leaders taking an active role in encouraging and fostering women's career growth.

▪ **Don't penalize those who 'opt-out':** Equally important is recognizing that career paths are not one-size-fits-all. Women, like their male counterparts, may have varying professional aspirations and life circumstances. Therefore, organizations should create an environment where opting out of certain roles or responsibilities does not equate to a lack of ambition or commitment.

The "opt-in" versus "opt-out" is a major mental shift. Research shows that women often need to be asked to take on leadership roles, as they tend to undervalue their own skills for myriad reasons—fear of backlash over seeming "too aggressive," cultural differences, or lack of bandwidth between work and home responsibilities. This flexibility acknowledges and celebrates the diverse life stages and choices women navigate, and ensures their careers are not unfairly hindered.

"Organizations should not assume that career would take a backseat for every woman who is going through a major personal transition with small kids. On the flip side, if some women want to focus on family first, a year or two of slowing down should not be that hurtful to a career spanning 30+ years."

Chief Information officer for a large
global industrial company

Create pathways through mentorship and sponsorship

One of the impactful ways to advance women in the workplace is through well-structured mentorship and sponsorship programs. While the internal networks that arise from these programs are widely recognized as vital for career development, their effectiveness varies significantly across organizations. To address this, organizations can:

- **Develop sponsors:** Despite research confirming the important role that sponsors play in supporting the career advancement of underrepresented talent, we cannot assume that sponsorship is 1) happening at all and 2) effectively and inclusively championing others. Setting formal parameters around expectations for sponsors and establishing an intentional pairing process are important foundations.

- **Work to establish meaningful connections:** Effective mentorship and sponsorship go beyond check-in meetings and career guidance; they encompass meaningful connections that can significantly impact a woman's career trajectory and personal growth. When done right, these programs not only contribute to a more satisfied and retained workforce but also promote an inclusive culture within the organization.

> "Mentorship and coaching are crucial at every stage of your career. Finding the right mentor is key because career progression is like a pyramid - it's natural for some to take a break or not change jobs. Build your ecosystem; it's the support structure that carries you forward."

Trupti Mukker
Former Chief Operating Officer, International Business at BYJU'S

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Recognize and challenge unconscious bias

Women in tech often face two predominant forms of unconscious bias: the incorrect perception that they have inferior technical skills compared to male colleagues, and the (again) incorrect assumption that they're less committed to their careers, especially for women trying to balance family and career. These biases not only hinder fair assessment and opportunities for women but also contribute to a wider gender gap in leadership roles.

To foster a truly inclusive environment, it is important for organizations to proactively identify and challenge both unconscious and conscious biases. This involves training hiring managers to recognize and address subtle biases, and prioritizing a diverse set of candidates at the outset of every talent development pipeline. When roles are filled hastily—which happens often in early-stage companies— the urgency to make quick talent decisions can lead organizations to neglect diversity considerations. It's essential to recognize that diversity is not just an optional extra, but a critical necessity for an organization's health, regardless of its maturity.

Challenging biases can't be confined to the hiring process—it's also integral to internal reviews and succession planning.

As organizations strive to unlearn biases and create more inclusive environments, it's crucial to reflect on several key questions:

▪ **Are we effectively addressing the stereotypes and challenges faced by women in tech?**

▪ **Are we inadvertently making assumptions about a woman's professional commitment based on her role as a mother or caregiver?**

▪ **Are we doing enough to encourage and support women in taking on more challenging roles, and are we providing them with the necessary resources and support to succeed?**

> "Unlearning biases is a journey that requires effort and intention."

Pramod Jajoo
SVP Technology and India
Country Head, Shipbob

Encourage open conversations

Creating an environment where open conversations are not just encouraged, but are the norm, can significantly impact the retention and advancement of women leaders. This involves actively engaging women in discussions about their career goals across all levels of the organization. Such conversations can provide valuable insights into the unique challenges and aspirations of women in the organization, enabling more tailored support and development opportunities.

However, it's crucial to recognize that open dialogues are not only beneficial for women, but they also elevate the overall culture of an organization, making it more inclusive as more diverse voices are being encouraged to speak up. Modern male leaders are both allies in the pursuit of gender parity and advocate for supportive policies that enable them to be active fathers, caregivers, and partners. This support allows their spouses to pursue challenging and empowering roles at work. Including men in these conversations helps build a more inclusive culture, one that recognizes and supports the varied needs and roles of all employees. Such an approach leads to more comprehensive and effective policies, benefiting the entire organization and fostering a balanced, supportive work environment.

"One of the barometers of any diversity initiative is men's involvement. Handing the responsibility solely to the most senior woman in the room isn't effective. A successful initiative requires collaboration between men and women."

Kamolika Peres
Vice President & Managing Director India/South Asia at ServiceNow

Looking Forward: The future of women leaders in India's tech industry

From our discussions with female executives, a crucial perspective emerged: they seek recognition for their professional achievements rather than for their gender. Aspiring female leaders should foster a mindset that embraces growth, readily accepts challenges, and is at ease with making necessary trade-offs. Our interviewees shared the following insights:

Defining Your North Star: Establish a clear and compelling vision that can influence choices and direct the career path. Intrinsic motivation is the main catalyst needed to supercharge your career progression.

"Understanding my North Star has always been my driving force. Even when faced with challenges, like lack of support or recognition, knowing how my work impacts the larger picture keeps me motivated."

Rucha Nanavati
Chief Information Officer at Mahindra Group

"You can and should organize your work and life in a way that works for you. It is not about impressing anyone, but for you to own the moment. You can grow unapologetically."

Kamolika Peres
Vice President & Managing Director India/South Asia at ServiceNow

Understanding the Inevitability of Trade-offs and Remaining Resilient: Career journeys are filled with compromises and challenges. Resilience in the face of setbacks is key.

"Be ready for trade-offs, accept the 'no's, and keep asking. Don't get dejected by small setbacks."

Asha Poulose Johnson
Chief Digital Officer at GE Healthcare

Recognizing the Non-linear Progression of Careers: Career trajectories are not always a straight, upward climb. Seizing the right opportunities can alter one's professional course.

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"Approach your career like a marathon, with sprints in both work and personal life. It's important not to over pivot in either direction. If you start feeling stressed, remember it's a long-distance run, not a perpetual sprint."

Trupti Mukker
Former Chief Operating Officer, International Business at BYJU'S

"It's a misconception to believe that careers are linear. Career paths comprise phases of plateaus interspersed with sudden leaps in responsibility. You can have a very successful career and still make it to the top, even if you take a two-year break."

Mayur Danait
Group Chief Information Officer, Heubach.

Pursuing Challenging Growth Opportunities Actively: Look for and embrace opportunities that push you out of your comfort zone.

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Pursuing Challenging Growth Opportunities Actively: Look for and embrace opportunities that push you out of your comfort zone.

"The impact of "crucible roles" in one's career is massive. Raise your hand to take them and give it your fullest. It will be pivotal for your learning and growth…"

Shivani Saini
Global Digital and Tech Head, Business Units at Haleon

As India's tech industry grows, gender parity at the leadership levels should be more than a goal; it should be an integral part of the company's culture. Closing the leadership gender gap is not only about achieving diversity targets, but also this would create a more inclusive and dynamic future for organizations.

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1. Global Leadership Forecast 2023, DDI, 2023
2. 2022 Women in Tech Report India Region, Skillsoft, 2022

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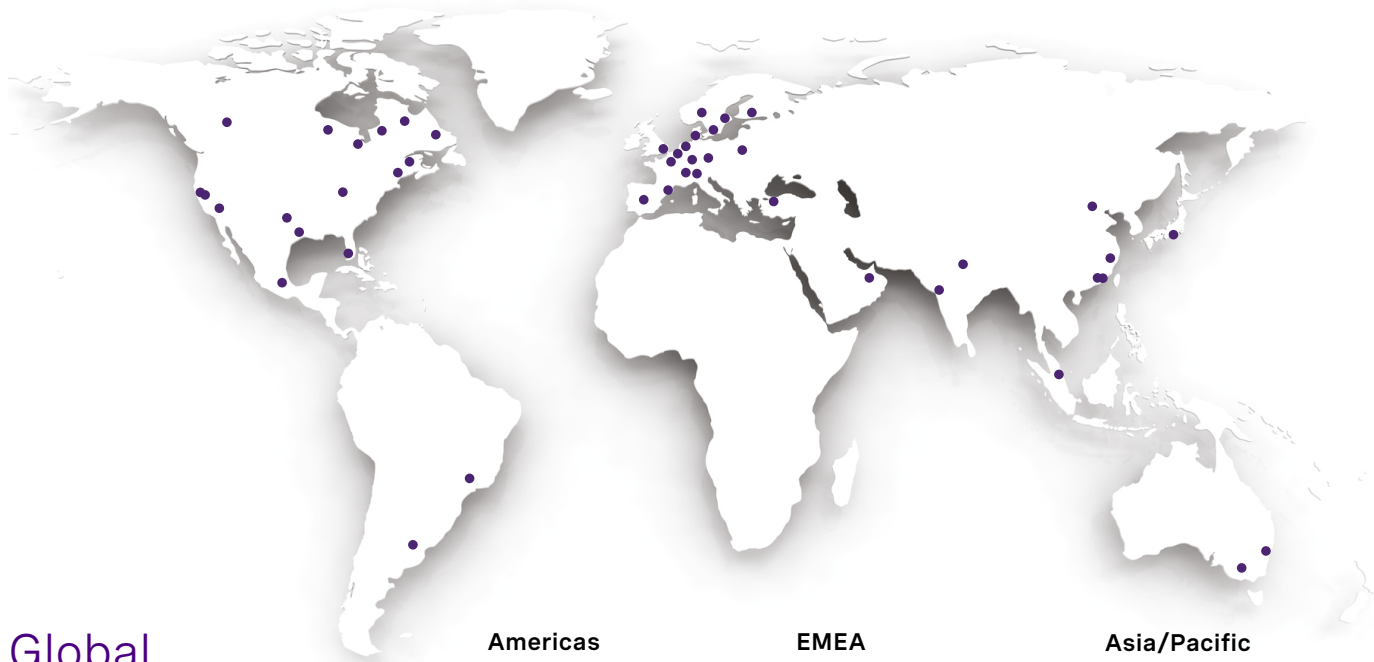
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