

Strengthening Women Power: Narrowing the Gender Divide

With annual revenues of USD 60 billion, the Indian IT-BPO industry has emerged as the largest private sector employer in the country, with direct employment of 2.23 million professionals and indirect employment of over 8 million people in different industry sectors. Interestingly, the sector is responsible for recruiting the largest number of qualified women from the overall workforce of 400 million.

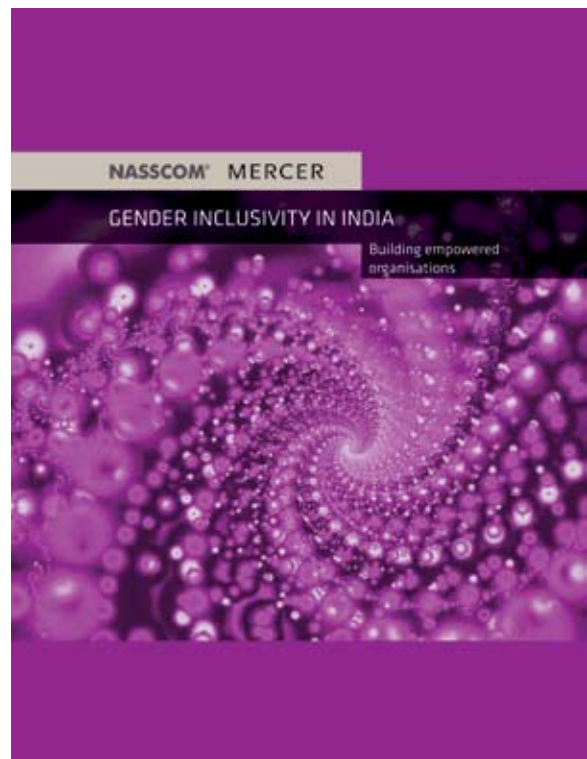
What truly sets aside the sector from other industries in India is the fact that it has remained gender neutral from the onset, providing equal opportunities for both men and women. Women in fact, contribute significantly to the success of companies and the IT-BPO industry.

Acknowledging the growing influence of this emerging workforce, IT-BPO organisations have taken a lead in adopting best practices in the areas of HR to increase the number of women within their workforce and ensure gender diversity. As a part of this movement, special groups, policies and processes that spur female participation have been introduced.

Despite these positive steps, more needs to be done for women. There are still a large number of geographies where women-oriented policies simply don't exist, which can deter women from entering and staying on in the IT-BPO sector. Further, women are still predominantly to be found at the entry and middle management levels in organisations. Inability to break the glass ceiling and reach the higher echelons of management has been a key challenge for women employees within the IT-BPO industry.

Identifying challenges faced by women within the ICT sector

Recognising the need for greater women participation in the IT-BPO sector and as part of an ongoing gender inclusivity initiative, NASSCOM and Mercer India joined forces in 2008 to conduct a special study on the existing status of women. The aim was to take a holistic approach to the issue of gender inclusivity and propose a multi-dimensional framework involving an ecosystem encompassing individuals, organisations, society, and the government to achieve increased levels of inclusion and enable women to grow in a leadership capacity.



After all, there is a strong business case for including women in the IT-BPO workforce. Recent studies indicate that gender inclusivity must remain a key goal for organisations for the following reasons:

- Companies with more than two female board members demonstrate a better return on equity compared to the industry average (11.4 per cent vs an average of 10.3 per cent)
- In India, companies headed by women grew by a Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of almost 35 per cent compared to 21 per cent registered by the BSE-30 (according to a 2008 study by The Economic Times).
- There are still too few female directors (less than 2 per cent) on the boards of Indian companies

The positive side

The good news is that the number of women employed in the Indian IT-BPO industry has increased in the past few years on account of the following:

- An increase in the number of women graduating from engineering colleges
- Acceptability of the idea of a working spouse

- The growing perception of the IT-BPO industry as a safe and friendly segment

Not only has the number of women in the IT-BPO industry risen, there has also been a hike in the percentage of women working in various job functions, typically considered male bastions. A drop in the percentage of women working in human resources, further shows that women are opting for careers outside HR. On the flip side, the feedback is that women drop out from the workforce as they start to progress through the ranks.

According to participants in the NASSCOM Mercer Gender Inclusivity: Building Empowered Organisations study 2008, the most significant benefits seen from gender inclusivity efforts include the following:

- A stronger employer brand
- Higher levels of productivity and profits
- Reduced attrition within the workforce
- The addition of powerful brand ambassadors

Building empowered organisations

In order to transform organisations into powerhouses of gender inclusivity, companies need to take the following steps:

- Recognise the need for inclusivity, communicate the intent, assign a team to work on the issue, and then design and implement the policies
- Include measurable targets such as recruitment numbers, the percentage of the workforce that should be women, and policies around workplace safety and comfort
- Define and implement policies that support women during key transitions such as marriage, childbirth, etc. These policies and frameworks,

pinned in place with metrics that measure processes and change, should be introduced

- Strive to reach a phase when the C-suite includes 50 per cent women and women do not see childcare, dependent care and home management as key challenges when taking on career advancement
- Get women and men to work together to eliminate practices that undermine effectiveness and equity
- Encourage women to recognise their limitations and change their roles
- Provide infrastructure to free women from many of the responsibilities that tie them down such as crèches and dependent care facilities
- Set up mentorship programmes for women in the organisation
- Provide career paths that are varied. Paths to the boardroom must include the possibility for career breaks and alternate options

At the same time, another key stakeholder, the government, must work on social change as much as legislative. According to the NASSCOM-Mercer Study, the government can focus on the following issues:

- Establish a system that will guarantee safe access to education and employment for the female population
- Expand education in tier 2 cities and rural areas to provide courses in skills and vocational training in a commercially relevant and viable way
- Create and establish provisions for training, funding and monitoring standards in setting up the infrastructure required for the actions listed above
- Provide incentives in the form of tax benefits, etc., for organisations which fulfil certain criteria in the empowerment of women, e.g., 50 per cent women at senior level
- Widen the framework for private-public partnership to build employable skills and knowledge

The entire ecosystem – the IT-BPO industry, government and society have to work towards increasing inclusivity and finally creating empowerment for women. Individuals and organisations will need to gain a more holistic perspective before this ambitious goal can be realised.

The changing gender-dynamics of the IT-BPO industry

- The number of women working in the IT-BPO industry has risen considerably and there has also been a hike in the percentage of women working in job functions considered typically to be male bastions
- Not only the idea of a working spouse has become more acceptable now, but the growing perception of IT-BPO industry being a safe and friendly segment has led to more women taking up jobs in this sector