

I D E A S T H A T I N S P I R E

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PURSuing THE DEI AGENDA

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“Who” in the leadership team, driving this agenda; DEI has become a KPI for the CEOs and MDs of organisations – how near or far are they on their journeys on this agenda.

In a May 2023 advertisement, we see a middle-aged couple waiting restlessly at a Starbucks. The number dialled by the father is of Arpit and in a few moments, it's not Arpit, but Arpita who walks in. The 2-minute advertisement, showcases beautifully the array of emotions and the distance travelled by the family to reunite with their transgender child. And more importantly, the inclusive position that Starbucks as an organization upholds, even when the advertisement brought both bouquets and brickbats.

In today's context, it is more important than ever to ensure that organizations are linking diversity, equity and inclusion to their public stand, to their people processes and to their strategy. The support and stance of leaders is certainly required since the representation of neurodiversity, LGBT+, PWD (persons with disability) employees, religion, are all very much lower than that of the general population, even when levelled for educational factors.

Acknowledging the contribution of neurodiverse employees, Kim Martin (Executive VP of Business Operations and Automation, Mastercard) says¹:

Neurodiverse candidates are known for being some of the smartest people in the industry, and they think about problems differently. That's why we want diversity in the first place: to supplement our blind spots, and to tackle problems. It just makes good business to focus on this.

A 2022 Deloitte report² estimates that 20% of the global population is neurodiverse and, as of 2 years ago, less than 1% of Indian companies actively recruited neurodivergent individuals. There is room for Indian leaders to lean into the advantages that this diverse group can bring in. What neurodiverse individuals need is flexibility and support to thrive. Sensory overload, inflexible work schedules, and communication challenges can hinder their productivity and well-being.

Reflexion specializes in Coaching, Leadership Development and HR and learning strategy. They work with leading organizations in the country today, to create a culture that is focused on empowering and enabling people. They offer exquisite services like Coaching, Leadership Journey Program, People Manager Programs and Corporate Wellness Programs.

WIP for the Diversity Dividend

Taking a look at gender diversity, we find that a unique recruitment drive was undertaken by Ola in its e-scooter manufacturing facility built over 500 acres of land in Tamil Nadu. The plant operations began with hiring more than 10,000 women. In a sector that usually sees just around 12% gender diversity in India, this was a bold initiative³.

There are examples from Tata Steel as well as Hindalco, both organizations that have been

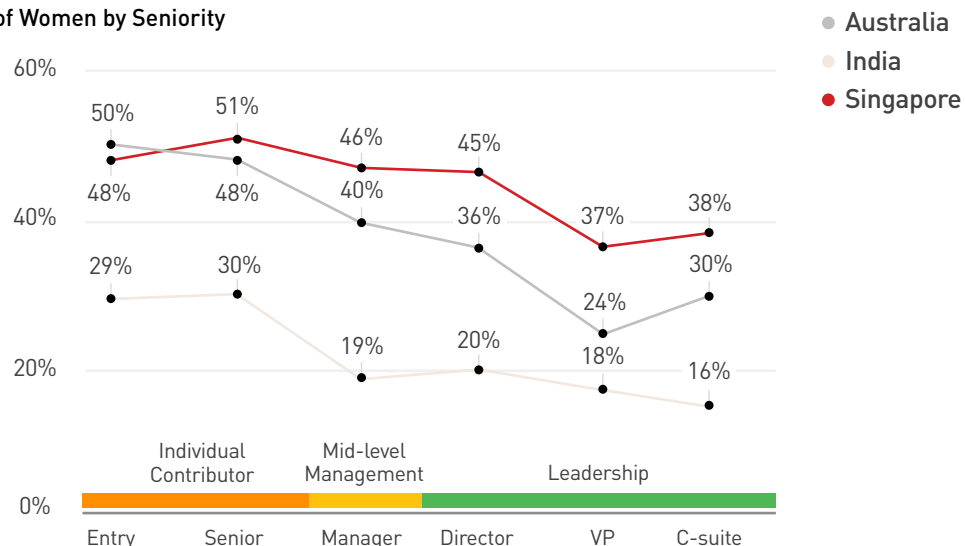
working towards making their workspaces more comfortable for women in manufacturing, since safety, shift working, travel and other constraints hinder equal numbers.

Tejaswini 2.0 is Tata Steel's initiative that has been recognized by the President of India. By training unskilled women to take on jobs of driving heavy vehicles, welding, gas-cutting and more, Tata Steel ensures growth opportunities for women on the shop floor⁴.

If we turn our gaze to urban India, women make up 20% of the workforce. Companies stand to reap financial benefits if gender diversity increases, since the top quartile worldwide for gender diversity are 39% more likely to outperform their peers⁵.

The average global standards in this area are 47%. Indian women's representation in executive leadership roles is under 20%, almost half that of Singapore and Australia⁶.

Representation of Women by Seniority



Source – LinkedIn Economic Graph

Lara S (<https://economicgraph.linkedin.com/blog/years-on-and-women-are-still-not-fairly-represented-in-leadership>)

Several leaders across organizations have taken a public stance on their gender diversity commitments. These include both multinationals and Indian corporates alike. The Cap Gemini 2023 statement on the topic "We are breaking barriers to better futures and towards more inclusive tech, starting by accelerating gender parity." Their targets include 40% of women in the workplace, and 30% women in executive leadership roles by 2025⁷.

A holistic approach is needed from CEOs and organizations to ensure the success and maximum contribution of diverse employees. This includes an inclusive culture, people processes, HR policies, infrastructure investments and flexibility to incorporate all employee needs.

In order to integrate PWD employees, there is a need to provide physical infrastructure like ramps, accessible restrooms, and Braille signage but these are

rare. And technological tools like screen readers and other assistive technologies might be needed as well.

The holistic approach needs to take into account more abstract aspects as well. Acknowledging and working through unconscious biases, continuous training of all employees and managers and, most importantly, measuring the engagement of diverse employees keeps the virtuous cycle moving forwards.

The measurement of inclusion through national surveys makes concrete the intention of organizations in the DEI space. The Avtar and Seramount Most Inclusive Companies Index (MICI) as well as the the India Workplace Equality Index (IWEI) are two such indices⁸. Each year, employees anonymously participate in the surveys. Individuals who are champions and organizations that meet the threshold standards are recognized for their best practices. And with each passing year, more and more organizations not only participate but strive to meet the benchmarks that herald true inclusivity.

The IWEI has released its third report on LGBT+ inclusion. Of the 33 companies that met the gold standard of long-term

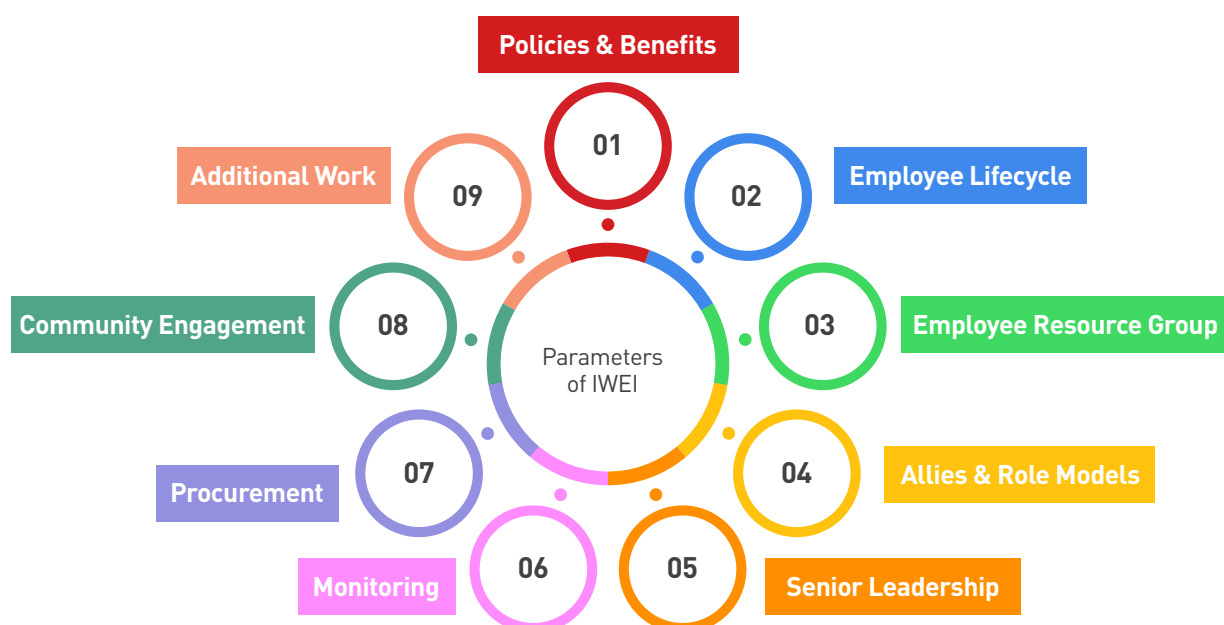
commitment, four were Indian organizations – VMware, Tata Steel, The Lalit Group and Wipro, while others were international conglomerates⁹.

Parmesh Shahani (Godrej) and Keshav Suri (The Lalit Group) have been early Indian pioneers of inclusivity role modelling and have contributed to the growth of other organizations through advocacy, openly sharing best practices and taking several concrete steps within to ensure a safe workplace for the DEI workforce. MNCs have global standards that their leaders in India ensure are maintained.

The intention to be an inclusive workplace is matched by the concrete actions of pioneering organizations and many more organizations continue to join this effort.



The 9 Parameters for LGBT+ Inclusion measured on the India Workplace Equity Index 2023



Source – India Workplace Equity Index: 2023 report

The full integration and participation of all diverse employees requires psychological safety on the ground.

The everyday behaviour of colleagues with transgender team members, wage parity, the equitability of work from home options, the questions during interviews, integrating viewpoints from younger team members – it is these daily interactions that need to be championed down the line – from the CEO to the person at the reception.

Ultimately, DEI has to be owned by everyone, not just by top leaders. People managers are the critical group that can translate the DEI intent into actions in the right spirit.

The right thing, done right!

To succeed and deliver on the organization's positional statement, the gap between intention and action needs to continuously reduce. According to Dr Saundarya Rajesh, Founder and President, Avtar group, DEI is progressing steadily in the Best Companies category on the MICI index, with 77% of them reporting an upsurge in their DEI momentum¹⁰.

Leaders need to be seen as sponsors who ensure that concrete KPIs and measurements are cascaded throughout the organizational layers, including functional heads, managers and smaller teams.

Declaring their inclusivity targets, participating in national-level surveys and working on cultural shifts to diminish bias are the measures that will move the needle both quantitatively and well as qualitatively.

Championing the DEI agenda by leaders is the right thing to do, and it is imperative that it is done right.

In the words of Verna Myers, Netflix Inclusion strategist, *"Diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being asked to dance."*

Here's to everyone dancing!

