Inclusive Workplace Practices in Indian Industries

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Abstract

In a globalised, multicultural world, diversity in workforce and inclusive work culture are no longerlimited to social causes, but also important for business growth. This paper is an exploratory attempt at understanding inclusive workplace practices in Indian industries. I will begin by introducing the concept of diversity and inclusion at workplace, and describe some of the key factors that shape them. I will then discuss the Indian context, and share a case study to capture the contextual and empirical nuance associated with the broad concept of inclusive workplaces.

I.   INTRODUCTION

"If you have a diverse team, they create as per definition, a richer understanding of the kind of backgrounds of end users you will serve. So, diversity is intricately tied to financial and business success." –Vishal Sikka, CEO and MD, Infosys

It is widely accepted now that diversity at workplace is good for business. When individuals are given opportunities to participate and contribute without worrying about their social backgrounds, sexual orientations, and disability, their confidence and productivity levels increase. For instance, Price Waterhouse Coopers, one of the Big 4 consultancy companies of the world, states in its inclusive workplace policy that

PwC is committed to creating an inclusive workplace where everyone can succeed in achieving his or her personal and professional goals. An inclusive workplace enables us to embrace the diversity and richness of backgrounds and perspectives of our people, and to leverage their diverse talents to arrive at winning business solutions.[i]

At this point it is important to define the two key terms: *diversity* and *inclusion*. Diversity can be broadly understood as respect for and appreciation of differences in cultural values, ethnicity, gender, age, nationality, disability, sexual orientation,

education, faith, and religion. Inclusion at workplace is essentially about valuing, supporting, and empowering each individual to work at his/her full potential, and harnessing their contribution towards shared organisational goals[ii].

The different between the two concepts is crucial because it is often noted that industries make diversity a priority without paying much attention to inclusion, which leads to poor outcomes[iii]. The two concepts are very closely related and both must be addressed in tandem − by hiring and nurturing a diverse workforce and creating an inclusive office environment and policies for them to thrive and contribute in value creation.

As we know, inclusion in an umbrella term. Therefore, it is not possible to create any overarching solutions for all kinds of industries to achieve an inclusive workplace environment. However, there are certain general principles than can help us develop further insights into inclusive workplace practices and how to achieve them. The next section will describe some of these principles.

II.   UNDERSTANDING 'INCLUSIVITY'

Following are some of the key factors that contribute in the making of inclusive workplaces practices[iv, v, vi, vii]

1.   Identifying the diversity strategy − every industry needs to identify its diversity strategy based on their business model and social context. For instance, for IT industry gender diversity aspects will differ from that of hospitality industry. Without identifying and articulating this strategy it would be highly improbable to design an inclusion workplace policy.

2.   Talent acquisition − attracting, searching and hiring diverse people, i.e., to put the diversity strategy into action, the company will have to reach out to various groups, and shape its selection processes in a way that is for example, gender neutral or targeted recruitments of people with physical disability.

3.   Talent management and retention − empowering and enabling employees to realise the mutual development of their personal and professional goals. For instance, by creating transparent policies for equal pay for females, performance reviews with minimum reviewer bias, incentives for further training for employees with special backgrounds, family-friendly policies, etc.

4.   Office infrastructure and communication system − ensuring a gender-neutral workspace, and facilities for physically disabled people. Following a communication system that allows a diverse set of people to voice their views, instead of a few dominant ones. This might also include flexibilities in work timings, dress codes, etc.

5. Networking – organising workshops and seminars to mentor and sensitise the employees about the importance of inclusion at workplace, connecting like-minded people, making diversity a part of company brand, etc.

III. INDIAN CONTEXT

Ultimately, to achieve an inclusive workplace in the Indian context, we need to focus more closely on the local conditions and assess the relevant efforts that have undertaken in different industries in India.

India is arguably the most diverse country in the world. The variety of religions, faiths, languages and dialects, sartorial preferences, geography and labour cultures in different parts of India is staggering to say the least. At one level, this diversity is deeply historical and has enriched a sense of co-existence and inclusion between different groups, and has positively affected trading and business cultures.However, this comes with its set of contradictions from the caste system, patriarchy, rural-urban divide, and legal and social discrimination against LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) community[viii]. Any attempt for achieving inclusion at workplace has to grapple with these socio-cultural realities.

The concept of inclusive workplace practices has only acquired a critical valence in the last decade in Indian industries. There are several factors driving this change. As a research report by Diversity and Inclusion in India Network (DIAN) and Community Business mentions:

Large multinational companies with expanding operations in India have been keen to explore how to apply and adapt their global diversity principles to their local businesses and teams in India. Large Indian companies are turning their attention to this topic too. Keen to compete on the global stage, and exposed to global practices, leading local organisations are being forced to up their game when it comes to embracing different perspectives and harnessing the contribution of all to drive business success. At the same time, complex and changing dynamics in India itself, such as large rural to urban migration and the growth and influence of the younger generation (India has the largest Gen Y population in the world), are providing impetus for Indian companies to put diversity and inclusion on the corporate agenda (p.5)[ix]

IV. CASE STUDY

In order to develop a grounded sense of inclusive workplace practices, it would be worthwhileto reflect upon one of the leading case studies that has been recently published by PWC and NASSCOM[x].

ANZ Bangalore employs 106 People with Disability (PwD), which is approximately 1.72% of the total workforce. It has adopted a metric driven approach to increase PwD representation year on year. They began this journey in 2010, and have hired 20 employees. PwD representation includes people with various disabilities, such as hearing and speech impairment, visual impairment, orthopaedic disability, paralysis and cerebral palsy. They have created a focussed recruitment and sourcing strategy by tapping into unique and specialised sources to hire PwDs. They started a dedicated PwD referral programme and built strong partnerships with NGOs such as v-shesh and EnAble India, which helped in acquiring a strong talent pool, training support and the all the required know-how for hiring PwDs.

The hiring efforts have been augmented with structured and segmented initiatives for greater inclusion of PwDs within the organisation by creating changes at three levels:

a. The transport team has been trained to communicate through SMS (for hearing and speech impaired) and in sign language. The existing PwD staff have been leveraged as brand ambassadors.

b. A series of sensitisation workshops have been conducted. Also, hiring managers have been coached through focus group discussions and training to resist the natural urge to use body language as a decision driver when interviewing candidates with cerebral palsy. Further, a task force (with hiring managers, business unit leads, team leads and project managers) and performance dashboards have been set up to track progress.

c. Supportive infrastructure has been installed in doors, ramps and washrooms after performing a detailed audit. Assistive devices such as wheelchairs, joysticks and pedals (one of the employees with cerebral palsy has been provided with an innovative device for operating the mouse with his legs) have been made available. House nurses/assistants have been hired to help staff with movement, along with special medical cabs. A library of finance terminologies in sign language has been created.

Also, there is an overall focus on building long-term employment opportunities by monitoring the performance of candidates and conducting open sessions to understand their requirements and progress, mapping existing processes to the skills and capabilities of PwD candidates, and amending/revising the recruitment test criteria from the existing/ traditional tests in order to assess the required skills/attitude for the job (for example, while hiring for a business, the focus is on judging candidates more on their analytical skills rather than their language skills). In the last six years, about 80% of eligible PwDs have been promoted and 20% have received double promotions. Further, there has been minimal attrition among employees with disabilities. The programme has brought about a cultural shift in the organisation. Employees talking in sign language on the floor have become a common sight, and

this form of communication has become a part of their DNA.

They also planto hire 70 additional PwDs in 2016, taking the total representation of PwDs to 176, which is projected to be 2.5% of the total workforce. This is far higher than the industry average of around 1%.

V.   CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to explore inclusive workplace practices in Indian industries by describing the conceptual and contextual scenario of diversity and inclusion in workspace. I've highlighted the need to think about both general principles as well as local, socio-cultural context for developing a holistic understanding of inclusivity. By discussing a leading case-study in detail, I have brought to bear the real-life lessons and strategies that can provide a tangible outlook towards inclusive workspaces.

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