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Market Watch

How women, who return to a second career, deal with technology-led disruption

BY SAUMYA BHATTACHARYA, ET BUREAU | UPDATED: JUL 02, 2019, 01.08 PM IST

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When I went on a break to take care of my children, I was in marketing. When I decided to come back, the work itself had changed to digital marketing,” says Franky Aggarwal, a 40-year-old working mother in Pune. Aggarwal, after doing a one-year digital marketing certification course, is now working for a US-based personal care brand through FlexiBees, a platform that re-employs female professionals part-time or on a work-from home arrangement.

Women are leaving work as young mothers or caregivers, resulting in a leaky talent pipeline across sectors. Even as the pool of second-career women — those returning to work after a break — is growing, the tech and digital disruption that is changing the way India Inc works is making it increasingly difficult for them to come back. In fact, technology-led disruption is the newest gender-diversity challenge in corporate India. Companies such as [IBM](#), [Microsoft](#) and [Ingersoll Rand](#) are rolling out programmes to deal with this.

In December 2018, the World Economic Forum’s “The Global Gender Gap Report” noted that the increasing expansion of [artificial intelligence](#) was creating demand for a range of new skills, among them neural networks, deep learning, machine learning and tools. It said: “Only 22% AI professionals globally are female, compared to 78% who are male. This accounts for a gender gap of 72%, yet to close.”

Avtar Group, a Chennai-headquartered talent strategy consulting firm, analysed the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18 of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and found that the estimated number of employable women in urban India, excluding Tier II and III cities, currently was nearly 2 crore. The NSSO data looks at employability age as 15-59 years. “Out of this, if we consider the generational cohort of women between 20 and 40 years, we may roughly have about 70 lakh women on career breaks and are professionally employable in urban India,” says Saundarya Rajesh, founder-president of the Avtar Group.



Bengaluru-based IBM India is set to begin the second round of its Tech Re-entry programme, which was started 18 months ago to hire people who have taken a sabbatical or break from work.

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DROPPING OUT

48% of India's women professionals leave their careers mid-way

This is **19 percentage points** more than the Asian average

Of the women who leave, nearly **18%** annually do not return to the corporate world

The drop is **sharper in urban segments** than in rural areas

While a number of companies now have second-career programmes for women, diversity and inclusion experts say not all of these have been successful catalysts, simply because the skill gap is difficult to plug and women do not usually get the flexibility they need on their return.

In April, Ingersoll Rand, an American industrial manufacturing company, rolled out a programme called ReLaunch for women to get back to work. It was launched at its engineering and technology centres in Bengaluru and Chennai. Re-Launch is designed for professionals who have taken a voluntary break from work for more than two years and are now ready to return to a full time career.

"The number of women in technology is less. For us, the difficulty is in finding mechanical engineers. Through this programme that is targeted at women with experience, we are trying to plug the leaky talent pipeline," says Shirin Salis, vice president-HR at Ingersoll Rand India.

Bengaluru-based IBM India is set to begin the second round of its Tech Re-entry programme, which was started 18 months ago to hire people who have taken a sabbatical or break from work. There are more women in these cohorts, but the programme is not limited to women as most policies at IBM are gender-agnostic.

"Under the programme, we create niche roles in technologies such as internet of things, [cloud computing](#) and blockchain," says Prachi Rastogi, diversity & inclusion leader at IBM India, adding, "Inclusion is a business imperative and women are a big part of our strategy."

Springboard is Microsoft's back-to work programme to relaunch careers of women. It hosts various initiatives that include a mix of on-boarding, training hours and careful mentoring, which help them gradually transition to focus on their career while balancing family priorities.

"Women who are hired through Springboard get the skills they want," says Ira Gupta, HR head at Microsoft India. In Gupta's experience, older women too leave for caregiving. While Microsoft gives four weeks of caregiver leave, it has backed it with an employee resource group that helps workers deal with problems and challenges. "Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being told you can bring your music. Everyone has to play to the strengths of others," says Gupta. Over the last few years, Microsoft has plugged the dropout of moms, she says, adding, "Flexibility is the key for this set of employees."

Deepa Narayanaswamy, IIM-Bangalore graduate and co-founder of FlexiBees that supplies part-time women professionals, concurs. Narayanaswamy, who is also a chartered accountant, had to take a break after becoming a mother, and found it very difficult to manage home and full-time work. She realised that many women were in the same boat, having to compromise between career and childcare.

There were not enough opportunities that would let them balance both. “Companies do not come to FlexiBees solely for diversity; they come for talent. There is a huge business benefit in hiring from this talent pool and in the flexible hiring models that we offer — part-time, contract based, etc,” she says.

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