



WOMEN EMPLOYEES IN RETAIL SECTOR

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Abstract: The retail industry employs more women than men – the ratio is 60:40 – and more women than men start their graduate careers in retail. Many women decide to stop at middle management when they have families, but there are still plenty who sit on retail operating boards. But the challenges facing women determined to make it as chief executives are greater than those encountered by men, both professionally and personally. Retail salaries for women in relatively junior positions are another issue; often it's not worth their while coming back to work after having a child, resulting in a drain of young talent. And a career break makes it very difficult to get back on the ladder. Evening events also come with the turf. Such networking opportunities are a valuable opportunity to help forge contacts. However, the wives of many men in senior positions don't work so are free to look after the children, which make it a lot easier for their husbands to give up out-of-hours' time. And, if a woman is able to attend events regularly, there is the worry that some people might question her commitment to her children. Standard maternity leave of about six to nine months is not an option for women who want to remain in their leadership roles, which is another factor that prompts many to question whether the sacrifice is worth it.

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1. INTRODUCTION

From meal makers to deal makers, bread bakers to bread earners, women in India are taking giant strides at the work place.

India's daughters are increasingly stepping out of home to join their brothers, fathers and husbands to bring home the moolah, help the family in and outside of the kitchen, a fact encouragingly pointed to by all research.

Nasscom and Mercer India conducted a gender inclusivity study last year to develop a better understanding of the women workforce. The joint research (involving more than 45 leading technology companies) on the status of women, their roles and the challenges they face, revealed that the large number of women working in urban India can be attributed to the growth of the IT-BPO industry, which is one of the largest recruiters of qualified workforce in recent times. While this industry itself has been a beacon in championing diversity and gender inclusivity initiatives, few companies have taken stock of how successful these programmes have been and what the road ahead should look like. According to Raju Bhatnagar, VP, Nasscom, women constitute an important economic force for the country and suitable enabling provisions must be made to harness their abilities to benefit the economy.

It's the same story in retail. Take the case of the \$350 billion retail sector employing 25 million people. Globally 60 per cent of those employed in this sector are women. In India however the percentage is 35 percent, but the industry believes this can go up to 50 per cent if labour laws are modified and there would be more women employed in modern retail. They will be the best assets considering they are naturally endowed with abilities to assist the service sector," says Kumar Rajagopalan, CEO, and Retailers Association of India. Bhatnagar concurs: "The laws should be aimed at providing a level playing field for men and women." Archaic labour laws need to be modified even for part-time working women, especially in a country where women's education is still lagging.

Retailing has made a lot of progress in career advancement for women. Women employees account for nearly 25-30% in the organized retail sector. According to Shoppers' Stop CEO "No wonder, retail is among the few sectors where the ratio of women employees is the highest in India". Women employees are considered to be far superior in terms of service standards and interpreting consumer mood.

Some of the biggest players in the organized retail turf are looking up to the fairer sex, especially when it comes to dealing with higher attrition rates. Reliance Retail, Future Group, Shoppers' Stop and RPG Retail are experimenting with a host of hiring models to improve the ratio of fairer sex in their workforce. Mukesh Ambani's Reliance has launched an initiative to encourage the spouses of employees to work in its retail venture. Accordingly, the employees' wives are being trained to take up jobs (full time, part time or on call) at Reliance Retail outlets. The Future groups plans to start stores, which will be manned entirely by women. The focus of this model is on offering flexi-career opportunities where women will be required to work for a maximum four hours a day.

Despite recent progress, women still don't get enough attention at retail firms. Retailers need to address some of the issues with regard to female employees:

- Equitable remuneration



- Meaningful training program.
- Advancement opportunities
- Flexible timings (to manage their family responsibilities)
- Job sharing among two or more employees who work less than fulltime
- Child care

The retail industry employs more women than men – the ratio is 60:40 – and more women than men start their graduate careers in retail. Many women decide to stop at middle management when they have families, but there are still plenty who sit on retail operating boards. But the challenges facing women determined to make it as chief executives are greater than those encountered by men, both professionally and personally.

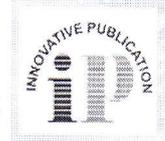
Argos managing director Sara Weller points out that many women would rather avoid the reputation that can accompany a female leader. “You have to be strong, decisive and make difficult decisions. It’s hard to do that without being accused of being hard and unfeminine,” she says. “Somehow, being perceived as a hard nut is fine if you’re a man, but not if you’re a woman.”

It has a lot to do with individual choice. Reaching director level on the operating board is senior enough for many women; they don’t want everything that comes with being a chief executive – not least being a figurehead and dealing with the resultant intense media interest. While some male chief executives may revel in a high media profile, women with young families would often rather avoid it.

In many ways, it is easier for women to opt out of the battle for a chief executive post. No one would question a successful female director if she said the prospect of a leadership lifestyle didn’t appeal. Yet some might question the commitment and drive of a talented, successful male director if he said the same.

1.1 Perception problem

- There is a danger that women’s lack of interest in senior positions is because they start to believe others’ assumptions. Moira Benigson, founder of Moira Benigson Executive Search, says she is amazed Kate Bostock’s name never crops up in conversations about Stuart Rose’s potential successor at Marks & Spencer. She may say she is more interested in product than a chief executive badge, but how many other women say exactly the same, simply because other people have pigeonholed them as “product people”?
- Many women also lack self-belief. As Theo Fennell managing director Barbara Snoad says: “Some women can be a little too self-effacing.”
- Exley Harvey Executive Search managing director Lesley Exley says a tendency to be self-deprecating is problematic at the shortlisted interview stage. “Some people think it’s human to present a rounded picture but, in general, men maximise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses and, when it comes to the crunch, men sometimes win because they project themselves with more confidence,” she explains.
- Benigson agrees. “In some ways, women create their own glass ceiling because they don’t think they can do it. They’re less good at promoting themselves and they don’t want to be in amid what can be perceived to be a rugby scrum for a job,” she says.
- Many might say the reason there are so few female chief executives is simply that those who have secured the roles are the best people for the job. But many women aren’t even getting through to the shortlists because those making the recruitment decisions are nearly always men.
- It’s not that they don’t respect women and it’s not that they don’t think they can do the job but, as Weller says: “Convention does come into it. The people making those decisions tend to be more conservative and slightly older.” Perhaps there is a subconscious element of thinking that being chief executive is a man’s game and it should stay that way. Fortnum & Mason chief executive Beverly Aspinall says: “Retail is an old industry and these things take time to change.”
- Weller believes the typical senior position does not work in women’s favour either. “There is undoubtedly a stereotypical view of what good leadership looks like. Strong, determined, able to take calculated risks: those are more often than not male characteristics,” she says. By default, men fit the job profiles better because such descriptions omit other qualities – such as teamwork – that are equally vital but instinctively less macho.
- Another issue, says Exley, is that during the recruitment process, some men are likely to shy away from an overconfident female candidate as much as they would from someone who wasn’t 100 per cent sure of her capabilities. In short, sometimes women can’t win.
- The situation is a catch-22. If recruitment decisions sometimes favour men, this isn’t going to change unless there are more women on the main boards. But the sheer amount of testosterone in the boardroom is likely to act as a deterrent to women.
- Crabtree & Evelyn managing director Catie Callender agrees that a predominantly male environment is not always appealing. “There is a bit of boys’ banter. I give as good as I get, but sometimes you hear some outrageous chauvinism, even if it’s joking. I think to myself: ‘I didn’t think that existed past the 1980s’.”



1.2 Tough decisions

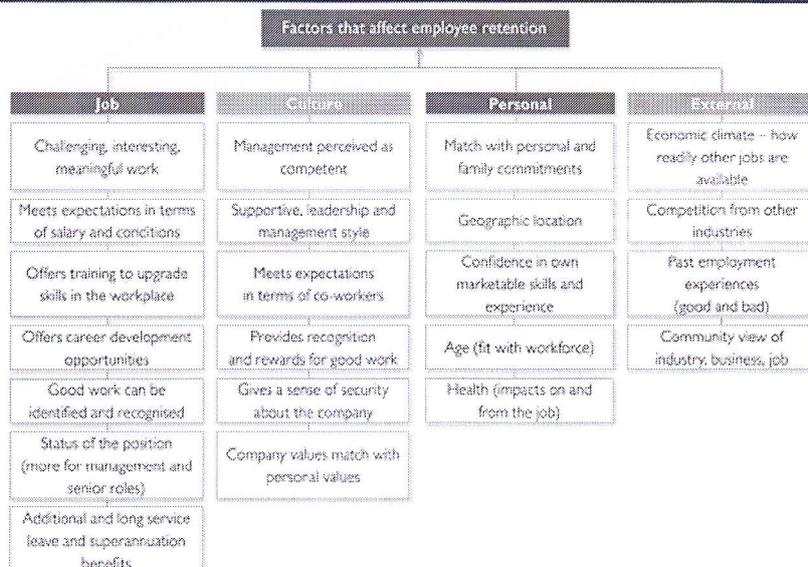
- One of the most obvious reasons why there are so few women employees in the business world is due to the difficulty with juggling family commitments.
- Retail salaries for women in relatively junior positions are another issue; often it's not worth their while coming back to work after having a child, resulting in a drain of young talent. And a career break makes it very difficult to get back on the ladder.
- Evening events also come with the turf. Such networking opportunities are a valuable opportunity to help forge contacts. However, the wives of many men in senior positions don't work so are free to look after the children, which make it a lot easier for their husbands to give up out-of-hours' time. And, if a woman is able to attend events regularly, there is the worry that some people might question her commitment to her children.
- Standard maternity leave of about six to nine months is not an option for women who want to remain in their leadership roles, which is another factor that prompts many to question whether the sacrifice is worth it.

A woman's touch

- Just as women bring a different dimension to the operating board, they also bring a different dimension to company leadership. It may sound stereotypical, but there is truth in the view that women are good at empathizing and multitasking. Some people also believe that women are often less egotistical and better at sharing success. But equally, they can be less gung-ho and less confident at leading from the front. Whether male or female, every good chief executive needs to have driven, self-belief and ambition – and some might question whether every woman on the operating board has this in abundance, particularly if they have a family.
- There is a risk that women employees of tomorrow will look at today's successful female retailers and question whether they want to make that level of commitment.
- Tesco is making a concerted effort to help the career progression of its female senior managers. In September, it launched its Women's Network – an internal web site. Through this and monthly themed events, it aims to provide a support network that it hopes will help utilize talent and improve recruitment and retention.
- Women are often subconsciously dissuaded from going for the top jobs. Whether this is because of company culture, a lack of self-belief, or fear of losing a healthy work/life balance, it needs to be addressed.
- It is also true that most women love shopping and, in some businesses, it may make good business sense to utilize this at the top. Ann Summers chief executive Jacqueline Gold says: "When you're talking about retail, women know far more than men. It makes complete sense that when you're trying to sell to women, you have women calling the shots in the boardroom."
- But when seeking to redress the balance, the key has to be choosing the best person, regardless of their sex.

2. EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN RETAINING WOMEN EMPLOYEES

Most business owners and managers think retention is based on compensation issues--wage and salary levels, incentives, and golden handcuffs--when in reality the drivers go much deeper into the human psyche to the actions and attitudes that make women employees feel successful, secure and appreciated. As a result, a sound retention strategy should focus on and tactically address four key elements--performance, communication, loyalty and competitive advantage. More and more businesses are using innovative "perks" that go beyond the traditional financial benefits characteristic of the past. Improved vacation allowances, gym memberships, pro-bono opportunities and family friendly policies are just some of the changes that are becoming vital in an increasingly competitive and dynamic market of recruiting and retaining legal talent. In fact, many companies are now offering women employee's health, wellness and green incentives. This has proven beneficial to both the employee and employer.



➤ **Increase Women-Employee Engagement**

Effectively implementing employee retention program by increasing employee engagement ensures that the women employees are satisfied with their work, take pride in their work, report to duty on time, feel responsible for their job, feel valued for their contributions, and have high job satisfaction. As women employees actively focus on their work, it increases the productivity levels in the organization and leads to improvement in several associated areas. Employee engagement ensures that the women employees have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the organization. Increasing employee engagement helps to develop emotional connection, enthusiasm among the women employees that promotes teamwork and healthy environment at the workplace.

➤ **Motivate Women Employees**

Motivating women employees by offering them better opportunities for career development can help in employee retention. Giving rewards, recognitions, promotions, and appreciation to employees can motivate them to increase their productivity, commitment to work, and loyalty to the organization. They feel that their contributions are valued in the organization. Giving incentives, pay hikes, bonuses can also help to motivate employees. Recognizing employee's contributions and aspirations motivates employee to work productively and increases his confidence that helps in employee retention. The top women have helped their companies grow and thrive in an unsettled retail environment, built and managed great teams, launched new strategic initiatives, mentored colleagues, and given back to the industry. The year 2018, will be the "Year of the Woman."

➤ **Focus on Team Building**

Promoting team culture helps to actively involve all women employees in achieving the goals and in overall success of the organization. Promoting team building imbibes a sense of belongingness among the employees that they are a part of larger goals or objectives of the organization. Team building promotes team work and team effort that help employees to tackle work pressure and thus provide a competitive advantage to organization. Focusing on team building activities can help to reduce workplace conflicts between team members as they work in a team. Organizing team building games, seminars, outdoor events help to promote team spirit, unity, and reduce stress.

➤ **Recognition of Performance**

Recognition of performance of women employees is an effective method of employee retention. Although monetary compensation can act as a motivating factor, openly recognizing the performance, initiative, and good work increases the morale and motivates the employee to work more productively. Appreciating the performance motivates the employee and they feel valuable within the organization. This helps in employee engagement and to increase the productivity levels.

➤ **Fostering Employee Health and Wellness**

Health and wellness trends are an exciting development in the employment market. Unlike traditional benefit plans which tend to focus on treating the illness, these new initiatives focus on the prevention of the illness in the first instance. In turn, these opportunities lead to positive consequences for the employer, through a happier, healthier and ideally more efficient workforce.



➤ **Personal Growth Opportunities**

Another popular perk offered by employers is the facilitation and encouragement of personal growth opportunities by increasingly placing value on providing high-quality learning and offering extensive professional development opportunities.

➤ **Corporate Social Responsibility**

Firms are also beginning to set themselves apart by providing workplaces that encourage respect for the environment and foster green initiatives. In this case, helping the environment is not the only payoff, as green initiatives can also help attract new talent, increase productivity and reduce costs. Preliminary studies also link eco-friendly workplaces to higher productivity and less absenteeism.

3. CONCLUSION

Women employees are said to be the assets for the organizations. Retaining the employees are said to be challenging task faced by most of the companies nowadays. The challenge of finding, attracting, developing and retaining the right talent is taking up a major part of management and once it is found the next demanding job is to retain the talent. There are lots of factors that influence the employees and make them to shift their jobs. The factors can be of intrinsic or extrinsic in nature and lot of novel approaches need to handle by the organizations in order to retain the employees. But anything worth doing is going to require effort, and there are several options for retailers hoping to improve the situation. What is clear is that a long-term drive is required. Women need to be mentored, managed properly and encouraged to apply for promotions when they are further down the career ladder. Furthermore, good maternity packages are a must. If the corporate culture isn't appealing to women, it needs to be tweaked – any business that wants the best applicants needs to appeal to them all.

While not every company can adapt to the needs of busy parents, sometimes retailers often can, especially now that the internet makes it easier to work from anywhere at any time. “Losing women because of an inflexible attitude is short-sighted. Employers must be careful not to pile too much pressure on working parents, and women must choose carefully who to work for. “Retail is one area where it’s easy to do things remotely, but there’s no point complaining about working hours if there is an environment where someone else is working around the clock.” It’s necessary to build up leadership skills and women’s confidence.

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