Factors impacting attrition of women employees post-maternity in IT/ITES sector and measures to curb it

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ABSTRACT

The Information Technology (IT) and Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) are the major and critical sectors that are contributing to the growth of Indian Economy, for the past few years. These have been able to elevate the value of the country on a global front. In the year 2017, the Information Technology and the Information Technology Enabled Services sectors represented around 8% of the country's Gross Domestic Product. The high proportion of women in this sector is favored by factors such as gender-neutral policies, IT jobs being white-collared, satisfactory pay policies, flexible working schedules in majority of the companies and almost no requirement of physical work. Today, attrition is one of the major problems that HR professionals in the IT industry face, while women workforce attrition is more prevalent. While the entry points for women into the workforce could be many, the exit points could be many such as Childbirth, lack of support from family and unsuitable work environment. Maternity is one of the most common reasons of women's workforce attrition, especially in the IT/ITES sector. This study is totally original and helps in understanding the reasons that force women to leave their full-time jobs after child birth

Introduction

The IT and ITES sectors have been able to provide direct employment to more than 4 million people and indirect employment to around 10 million people in the country (IBEF, 2017). The IT industry was the first one in the country to launch the concept of Diversity and Inclusion with a focus on gender equality. From an industry perspective, during the 2010-19 decade, there has been a positive acceptance for diverse teams at workplaces. The employers' perception towards diversity has transformed from "Good for women" to "Good for business" (Women's web, 2020)

Despite this, there are scenarios of gender inequality. Though women and men start their careers in the IT industry at almost the same age, men at senior positions in the organizations are often found to be younger than women at the same positions (Raghuram, 2017), which means that men progress in their careers quite quickly than women. This is because, the career breaks that women take for various reasons, though are genuine, adversely affect their career trajectory. Women participation in the IT sector is the second highest in the non-agricultural sectors in India (Raghuram, 2017). According to Varma, 2010, the employment opportunities that are associated with computers are often seen as "safe" for women and offer a career in software which commands the highest social approval (Bagchi, 1999). Still, women workforce attrition is one of the major problems that the IT industry faces today.

A woman is always believed to be an integral part of the society. According to the 2011 census, women contribute to 48.5% of the Indian population. Traditionally, since ages, women in India have been considered as homemakers. But with the advent of educational awareness, significant improvement in the literacy rate and increase in the cost of living, women have slowly begun to dive into improving their careers and supporting men monetarily. In fact, giving importance to women, valuing working woman and their work, is a noteworthy indicator of the country's all-round progress. Our country has also recognized the importance of having woman in the workforce and has been providing enormous opportunities to them in order to grow on that front. Also, India's GDP growth rate can grow 4 percent if women participation rates rise to 70%, according to UNDP 2010 Asia Pacific HRD Report. Research also proves that having women in teams fosters creativity, innovation and productivity in technology sectors. Women can bring in a different perspective to the table; enhance the collaboration and bring greater profitability (Bear, Julia & Woolley, Anita, 2011). While men have dominant traits like aggressiveness and orientation towards achieving more, women tend to possess behavioural tendencies such as weakness of both physical and mental space (Pande, Malhotra, & Namy, 2012). Women have been facing the glass cliffs and breaking the glass ceilings in their respective fields, in order to prove themselves. But, as we are approaching a Fourth industrial revolution, companies have no choice, but to be agile, flexible and with diversified teams. Still, the traditional and patriarchal Indian society expects women to be the primary care takers of the family. So, women have been shouldered with dual responsibilities of career and family, overburdening them. According to the 11th Five-year plan, creation of 500 million skilled work forces by 2022 is targeted, but it is quite a question on how this can be achieved, when the participation of "the other half" of the demographic dividend is declining at a bad rate.

Attrition can be defined as "Reduction in the number of employees through retirement, resignation or death". The phenomenon of opting-out, which implies that women leave their jobs to have kids or after having kids, is increasing gradually. Though the Maternity Benefits act that was passed in 2017 gives women a 26-week paid leave right from the early 12th week of pregnancy(Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, 2017), the attrition rate of women post maternity has not seen a positive improvement. Employers are growing apprehensive about hiring women employees for fear of cost implications that the inclusive policy might bring in. Though the focus on hiring competitive candidates is still there, the focus on increasing the diversity has lost its importance. On one hand, as low as 27% women join the workforce, but as high as 48% women depart from their jobs, within approximately four months of return to work post their maternity leave (Genpact Centre for Women Leadership, 2018). Also, women and men undergo an entirely different "career divergence" after childbirth. A research involving around 3500 new parents revealed that as low as 27.8 percentage women are continuing their full-time jobs three years after giving birth to child, while the same is around 90 percent for new fathers (Jayne Smith, 2019). One important reason for this is the Motherhood guilt, which makes working women feel that they are prioritizing their career over family and new-born babies.

While addressing the issues, the paper assumes the structure as below: In the initial section, it tries to offer a detailed review of existing literature that is related to attrition of women employees. The next section talks about research methodology adopted for the study. The third section explains the results obtained analysis of the results and further discussion. Ultimately, the paper ends with recommendations to reduce women attrition post- maternity.

Literature Review

The literature review evidently clears that a lot more focus is on women who are single, than on those who are married (Karl, 2009). The success and growth of a company belonging to the IT sector depends upon the knowledge levels and skills of its employees (Bhatnagar, 2007). The IT industry being completely Employee-centric has a direct impact because of employee retention. And hence, the greatest challenge for an IT industry is to control, if not be able to completely stop voluntary attrition (Bisht & Singh, 2012). The growth of the organization is indirectly slowed down by the employees leaving the organization. Replacement of an employee is time-consuming as well as a costly process (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2006). According to a study done by KPMG, companies around the world spend an estimate of $47 billion to hire, onboard and train new employees to compensate for those women who leave companies after delivery of child. Besides the tangible costs, employees take with them, tacit knowledge while leaving the organization. This becomes a competitive advantage for the competent company. Singhal (1995) is of the opinion that, "Participation of women in workforce is essential for economic development and population planning". Though it is emphasized time and again that companies focus on Gender diversity, the commitment has not been translated into a meaningful progress. Companies need to start taking Gender diversity as an utmost business priority (Alexis Krivkovich, 2018). Studies show that women are provided with fewer opportunities, but are supposed to to put in more efforts to prove their worth, when compared to men. Women bosses are not as respected and valued as men bosses are. Men prefer to have women as their subordinates rather than as superiors. Women are also kept aside form informal networks (Ahmad, 1979). Woman's age and her marital status are the major factors that play a key role in determining whether a woman should go out for work leaving her family, and what kind of work she can take up (Ahmad, 1979). Walsh states that "Stereotypes related to domestic roles of women are reinstated by parallel stereotypes that assume a lack of house-hold responsibilities for men (Walsh, 2010). Added to this, men also experience the social pressure of being the breadwinners, which force them to focus more on work than spend time with the family (Lattice Group, 2010). Women earn an average of only 65% of the earnings of their male counterparts for performing the same work (World Economic Forum report, 2018). Majority of women workforce suffer due to role conflict, work-life balance and family responsibilities (Salas- Lopez et al., 2011).

A working mother can be described as a woman who is believed to have the inherent ability to balance her professional growth along with the responsibility of raising a child. Though a lot of women take a break from their careers before/ after delivery thinking that it would only be a pause, but it most cases it will become a full-stop because of problems in regaining the self-confidence in order to pave another chapter in their lives. A survey by World Bank policy paper, The Motherhood Penalty and Female Employment in Urban India, (Maitreyi Bordia Das and Leva Zumbyte ,2017) also found that, "Having a young child in the home depresses mothers' employment, an inverse relationship that has intensified over time." One of the major reasons that prevent women or make them think twice about going back to their full-time jobs is the "Motherhood Guilt". New mothers often feel that they are missing out on many key memories and responsibilities of their new-born child. In order to return to full- time work, a woman as a worker-carer is required to go through a number of layers of negotiation- in terms of managing her paid work at workplace, unpaid work at home and arranging and satisfying for the new born requirements.

"In certain segments of the population, such as the educated and urban elite, the duration of breastfeeding is declining" (M.Sivakami, 2003). WHO recommends exclusive breastfeeding for new-born babies up to six months and a diet with complementary food up to 2 years and beyond (WHO, 2017). Breastfeeding contributes to the well-being of both mother and child. But, employed mothers who breastfeed their babies are way less than unemployed mothers or mothers employed part-time, who breastfeed (Ryan, 2006). Nutritional deficiencies of mothers may arise because they keep juggling between fulfilling their responsibilities at home, especially of the new-born and at the workplace (Finn, 2000). There are many other issues that are a concern to working mothers of new born babies (Better Health Channel, 2008), one of which is the income difficulties. If both the parents are working, there is a

significant investment for childcare and this will ultimately result in overall reduction in the savings of the parents. While this may not be the case in Asian countries, where generally, the grandparents or other non-working members of the joint family, offer to take care of the child, who significantly reduces the cost, incurred in childcare, this is not the case in other non-Asian countries. Sleepless nights, cranky babies and sore bodies also contribute to women becoming full-time mothers. Postpartum stress is one another major reason which impacts the lives of working women. The working mother has to keep the convincing stance that she is working not just for her own sustenance, but also for the betterment of the family (Wilson, 2006). Lack of social support increases the job stress, which directly impacts the already existing postpartum stress, leading to a negative impact on the mental health of the working mother (Pal S, 2014). Due to the pay gap that arises due to long maternity break, it appears to women that their chances of moving up the organizational ladder gradually decrease. They often fear that staying with the same employer would make them get stuck to the same role and pay (Jayne Smith, 2019).

There is a paucity of studies and very limited research work is existing that assesses the stress faced by working mothers and factors leading to women attrition post-maternity in Indian context. Hence, the main intention of this research work is to decode the reasons behind this phenomenon and come up with measures to reduce this attrition.

Research Methodology

The approach used in this study is a qualitative one.A secondary research is done to study the existing literature. The primary research involved undertaking in-depth personal interviews of women in IT sector, but who are working in different companies and in different states of the country, having varied work experience. The interviews were semi- structured, discussing three major aspects namely:

1.Support that is provided by the organization to women before, during and after maternity

2.Reasons provoking women to permanently leave their jobs after giving birth to a child

3.Suggestions for organizations, family and society that can reduce the woman workforce attrition significantly, particularly in IT/ITES sector.

Due to the pandemic, the mode of interviewing was strictly limited to telephonic interviews. A total of 12 women were interviewed. All the interviewees were assured that their responses would be highly confidential, would be used for the purpose of research only and their anonymity will be maintained at all costs.

A structured questionnaire has been floated across all the women employees of various organizations to understand the reasons of attrition post-maternity and understand their views on measures that could help women. A total of 90 responses were obtained. Purposeful sampling is used in the process.

Results and Analysis

Findings from secondary research

It is a general belief that if a man is earning reasonably well, then the married woman does not have to earn and if she goes back to full-time job post maternity, the challenges and backlashes she faces are manifold. Even though she has a full-time job, she is expected to take the complete responsibility of maintenance of the household. In IT sector where there are no proper timings, it becomes extremely difficult for women to manage personal and professional life. An online survey titled Second Careers of Women Professionals–The India Story, states that 45% of women took break from their careers due to motherhood problems, 35% of them due to maternity and 16% of them due to the responsibilities of elderly care. Even if a woman, after taking a long maternity leave, tries to come back to work, there are a lot of stigmas attached to their professional growth. They are considered less committed since they constantly think of childcare at the back of their minds, less dependable because they may require taking unplanned off from work due to health issues of herself or the child and less commanding in comparison to those who are not mothers. This has a great impact on the individual performance appraisals, recognition, promotions and monetary rewards. So, if she resumes work to gain satisfaction and a goal to grow faster in career, she ends up achieving neither. This is one of the reasons, that new mothers quit their jobs. Additionally, during the break, the skillset of the woman is not honed or improved. There is a chance that she tends to lag behind and once she returns to work, insecurity arises that other co-workers have reached farther than her. Also, according to world economic Forum's Gender Gap index, India ranked 142nd in the economic opportunity and participation sub-index. This is a result of the gender gap which arose due to women staying out of workforce, which clarifies the severity of the situation. While women would have started their work with pay levels at par with men, they usually have to get satiated to a pay less than that of men, because of taking a long maternity break.

Findings from the primary research

Total survey respondents were 90 working mothers and women who are expectant mothers, from IT/ITES sector across various cities in the country. The age group is between 26-32 years

Following are the demographic characteristics:

No of respondents: 90
Age group: 26-32 years
Women with 1 child: 48
Women with 2 children: 22
Women with more than 2 children: 12
 Expectant mothers: 8

The quantitative data that was obtained was evaluated using Microsoft Excel and was divided into three major demonstrations:

• Problems generally faced by working mothers
• Reasons provoking women to restart/continue work
• Factors that can help women to continue work post maternity phase

Figure 1. Problems faced by working mothers
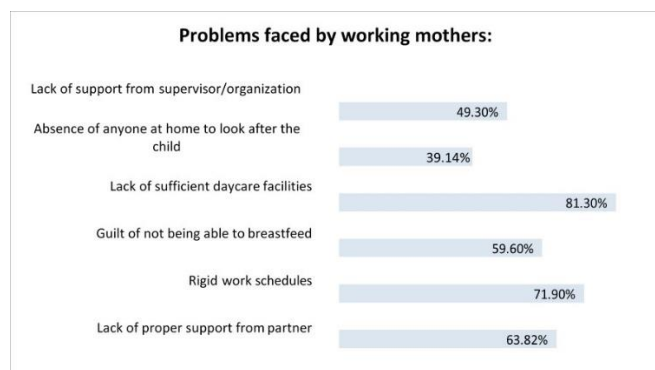
Around 90% of the respondents have 1 or 2 children only. When asked if they plan to have more kids, 82% of them responded in negation, with the top reasons stated as financial concerns and difficulty in managing professional work raising the child. Surprisingly, 72% respondents that society does not understand working mothers, while a whopping 67% of respondents told that their employer does not provide a positive growing environment after return from maternity. One in every eight respondents said that they clearly missed out on possible promotions because of their going on maternity leave. Most of the mothers, when asked, answered that they take the maximum responsibility of the kid as compared to their husbands. During interviews a few women mentioned that they feel that their kids are raised by the care-takers and it often makes them feel guilty. A few also mentioned that they have improper menstrual cycles, fluctuating blood pressures and other gynaecological problems. Particularly in the IT industry, there are long working hours, strict deadlines, and employees feel responsible for finishing the work before the deadline. A few employees also mentioned that there is an cut-throat competition amongst employees and a mother who has returned to work after maternity leave finds it difficult to withstand and make her presence felt in that situation.

**Figure 2**. Reasons provoking women to continue their work
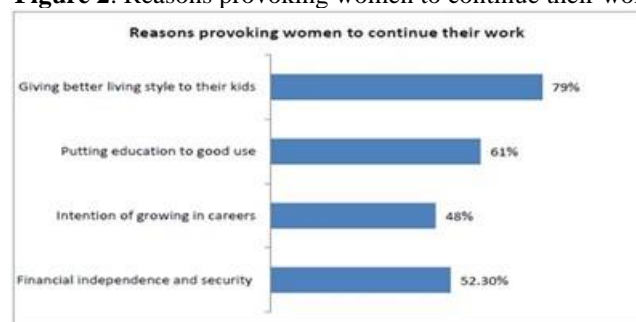
The primary survey also had a few interesting findings about what women want from starting their second part of professional career. Financial independence and security, intention of growing in their careers, putting their educational background to good use are the factors that stood out as the reasons for them to continue with their second innings in career. Respondent women were clear about what could contribute to making the

Following procedure has been implemented on the data obtained through interviews:
•The transcripts of interviews were analysed

•Bucket the questions based on themes.
•Frequency Analysis is performed to understand the occurrence of each response by the respondent.

An in-depth analysis of the questionnaire responses and the interviews resulted in the division of factors impacting the attrition into two major categories: 1. Factors that are attributed to intrinsic conditions and 2. Factors that are attributed to extrinsic conditions. Intrinsic factors include issues in maintaining work-life balance, post-partum stress and motherhood guilt, whereas extrinsic factors include pressures during work, stressful work schedules, lack of family support, pre-conceived notions from the society, not-so- understanding partners, wrong appraisal methods to women returning for work and judgmental colleagues.

Figure 3. Factors that would help women to continue work after child birth
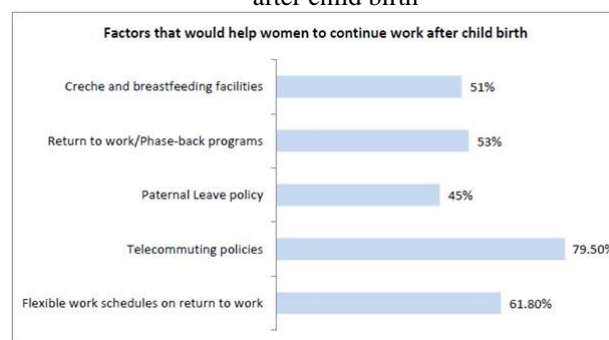
According to the results of the primary survey, around 79% of the respondents wished for telecommuting, while a whopping 62% of them voted for Flexible work schedules post maternity. The results probe us to understand that the major requirements of new- mothers are in terms of Flexible work practices, partner support, Childcare support and societal understanding in that order.

Discussions

Taking into consideration the above factors, following are the problems that probe women in IT sector to give up on their careers.

Work-based support is one of the important parameters that helps woman in taking decision on having children and to return to work after delivery (Brown, 2010; Leschyshyn & Minnotte, 2014). It is important to create a positive perception in women on the work-based support that the organizations provide to them. It bears a great impact on the behaviour and decisions of women after their return to work, which in turn improves the job performance and helps in retention of female employees. Work-based support for women

comes in three forms –Organizational support, Supervisor support and Peer support (Brown, 2010; Leschyshyn & Minnotte, 2014). While organizational support is perceived by the employees through how the company cares about their well-being, like offering family-friendly benefits (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), it is the immediate supervisor's and peer's support towards them that gives a positive or negative support towards utilizing

the benefits offered by the organization. It is the supervisors and co-workers who have the ability to make the mothers feel undervalued or confident at the workplace (Gatrell, 2013)

One major aspect that can help in retaining the key talent, is the provision of Flexible work practices. Even though organizations are able to provide flexible work practices to women post-maternity, it is only being limited to provision of access to Remote working. Even in the list of working women family friendly list of companies, the only aspect that took those companies there is telecommuting. Even today, telecommuting is seen as a lack of commitment from the employee and considered as a career-block for women. Until remote working becomes a more accepted way of work-life, there will be a loss of not only women, but also talented men employees from the workforce. Although, with the advent of technology, remote access to work has become more and more effective and with Covid-19 completely changing the working landscape, Work-from-Home is becoming the new normal.

"Affordable day-care is essential to empowering women. (Arijit Nandi, 2016). Childcare challenge is one of the hindrances at work especially to women. It is often viewed as a women's issue rather than a family issue. Lack of proper childcare facilities is urging women to take unplanned leaves more often. There is also negative impact of lack of childcare on the careers of women. They may tend to resort to lesser working hours, going on leave with loss-of-pay or completely leaving their jobs.

Undoubtedly, women need the support of their partners in returning to work post maternity or in continuing their careers. Childcare should be seen as a common expense to both men and women and the partner should contribute in activities like dropping the woman to work or requesting his employer for flexible working hours. Indian men spend an average of only 31 minutes a day on child care (ILO, 2018). This can be attributed to the social conditioning of both women and men that it is the complete responsibility of the mother to take care of the child and higher importance is attached to the job of a man rather than that of a woman.

Recommendations

Every pregnancy is different; not every new mother is in the same situation, so having very resilient pre- and post-maternity policies may not work for everyone equally. Adjusting the policies and tweaking them to suit the needs of mothers would create a positive impact on the employees. Organizations need to make efforts to stay in touch with the employee who has gone on maternity, not just to stay informed of her well-being but also to make sure that she does not lose the connect with the organization. She can subtly be informed of the organizational developments and on-going projects so that she will have a clear picture of how she can contribute on her return to work. A few Indian IT companies have launched applications which enable employees on maternity leave to stay in touch with the companies (Brinda Dasgupta, 2016).It is an ideal idea for employers can seek from their employees, before they go on maternity, on what level of communication would they like to receive on organizational or project updates, while they are away from work. Intermittent calls can be made, to

check on her health and the new-born's well-being. It has to be seen that this call should not be a work-related call.

Emotional and practical support from the organization is something that a new mother need. It is a fact that in IT industry, jobs can be modified according to the needs and employees are quite aware of it. Two aspects can be covered in this: Offering flexitime i.e., flexible work-schedule, for instance, in starting and ending times, focusing on deliverables rather than the number of hours put into work, would be an intelligent thing to do; and telecommuting, which is about giving them freedom on when and where to work (Eurofound, 2015) i.e., location of work, in order to retain the talent.

While extending parental leave policies or other incentives is the first step, instituting Return-to-work policies once those parental benefits have expired is also crucial to retain their workers, because this is the stage where mother of newborn children, find it difficult to fit in and prefer giving up on their jobs. Easing the transition for the mother helps her in adjusting to the changes. Many companies of late have introduced "Return to Work policies" to make this process smooth. Back in the Game, Career 2.0, Second Careers Inspiring Possibilities, Restart program, Career by Choice, bring her Back, reconnect program are some of such programs in various IT companies in India. Lesser number of working hours per week with full pay, providing them with family-friendly roles such as those not involving clients, or involving clients but without travel, addition of a designated number of family-emergency leaves to their paid leaves after return to work and provision of setting aside a part of their pay tax free so that it can be used for childcare costs are some of the aspects of return-to-work programs at various Indian IT companies that can be adopted by others.

Phase-back programmes with formal/informal mentoring sessions on handling post-partum stress, creating buddy-mother networks to discuss maternity issues are as much essential as maternity counselling for expectant mothers. Allowing her to work for brief duration initially, instead of making her have to work for longer durations, since returning back to normal working hours at once, makes the new mother feel like going from 0 to 120 kilometres per hour, overnight which mentally pressurizes her.

A good relationship between employee and manager is important and it has an impact on the return of employee after maternity. Having a career conversation with the employee who returns to work post-maternity helps the employer in understanding how she wants her career to progress and what her preferences are and assigning work to her accordingly also helps in making her love her job and creates a positive impact about the organization. It is important to communicate what is expected of them after their return. The organization and manager should have an accommodating attitude towards the mother. The supervisor should understand that she is still satisfying most of the domestic and child care needs back at home.

Creating a parent's community so that the mother who returned to work will not feel she is alone in this. It can just be a shared space to share information or to clear the queries about the benefits provided by the organization, or to help in transitioning back to work after maternity. In some organizations these working parent communities may be

already existent, but unheard most of the time. It's important to make everyone in the organization aware of these groups. Childcare costs are increasing at skyrocketing rates and it would be a wise decision on the part of the organizations to provide onsite day care facilities so that working women can visit their babies more often and stay rest assured that they are safe. But there are many key factors affecting the provision such as: Salary and level of employee when she is going for childcare, whether she is working part time or fulltime and the number and age of children in childcare. Also, to provide such facilities, a process has to be taken care of in dealing with licensing laws, initial investment on child-proof area with other requirements and quality caretakers. This proves to be economically friendly compares to the costs involved in the replacement of women who leave jobs.

Breastfeeding facilities need to be setup in proximity to their workplaces, so that lactating mothers can regularly feed their babies. It is a regular misconception that it is a huge investment to setup these breastfeeding facilities , but the fact is that these facilities can just be small hygienic areas with bare minimum facilities like clean running water, a curtain or a door for privacy and a chair. But the facilities are still not up to the mark; there are no separate spaces for women to express their breast milk. This is resulting in physical difficulties to the lactating mothers because of leaking breasts, psychological trauma created by not being able to feed the baby during hunger and resorting to formula milk. Women also had to resort to using rest rooms to express their milk, in order to relieve the stress on breasts. As a solution, onsite crèches and breastfeeding facilities can be provided so that working mothers can drop in, feed their babies, leave them in the crèches and proceed to work satisfactorily. This is very beneficial to companies, with fewer illnesses to breastfed children resulting in fewer days-offs by mothers, greater morale and loyalty and increased productivity. Apart from provision of facilities by organizations, a change should start from home. In India, Paternity leave is not taken as seriously as the maternity leave. Organizations should focus on providing a mandatory paternal leave, educating employees about it and structuring these programs accordingly. Still, men who want to take paternity leave face a lot of cultural barriers because of the social setting in our country. Overcoming this phenomenon is possible only when the work culture is supportive. The immediate supervisors should encourage their reports to make use of the paternal benefits, demonstrate that there won't be any negative impacts of taking leave and be a role model by taking such leaves as and when applicable. This is not just to help and take care of the kids, but also the new mothers.

Conclusion

The research on attrition of employees has secured importance amongst pedagogues and also researchers all over. In particular, the Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services profess to be favourable to women and thus also attract a huge number of women employees. Companies also are providing a number of Family-friendly HR policies for enabling women to work smoothly. The factors discussed above are some of those

that are ignored by leaders, even though they treat women at par with men. Why do men have the privilege of enjoying the feeling of parenthood without giving up on their careers, without any hindrances? A woman has to sometimes skip or delay motherhood to advance in their careers and earn equal status as men. It is generally said that it takes a village to take a child, so a mother alone does not have to give up on her career for childcare. The major challenge faced during the research is the data-gathering for the purpose of study. Since the requirement is to find out the negative factors, majority of women were unwilling to reveal their identity or names of organizations. However, this study is an attempt to understand those factors that are practically forcing women employees to leave their jobs after stepping into motherhood. If an organization can think that providing these facilities for woman is not a wrong investment, but an investment for the growth and sustenance of the business, the true meaning of diversity can be achieved.

Limitations

This study is limited to understanding the factors forcing mothers to leave their jobs after giving birth to a child only in the IT/ITES sector and does not address the problems women face in other sectors. It is limited to only India and does not specifically focus on other countries. The overall sample size is considerably small and there are many other IT companies which have not been covered during research, owing to time constraints and other limitations. The maternity incentives provided may be different from one company to other and hence the recommendations for organizations may slightly vary on that basis.

Further scope of study

Further research on this topic can be extended to aspects related to how these recommendations can be practically implemented, the financial implications and organizational impact. It can also be taken as a reference to study similar subject with respect to other countries.

Acknowledgment

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