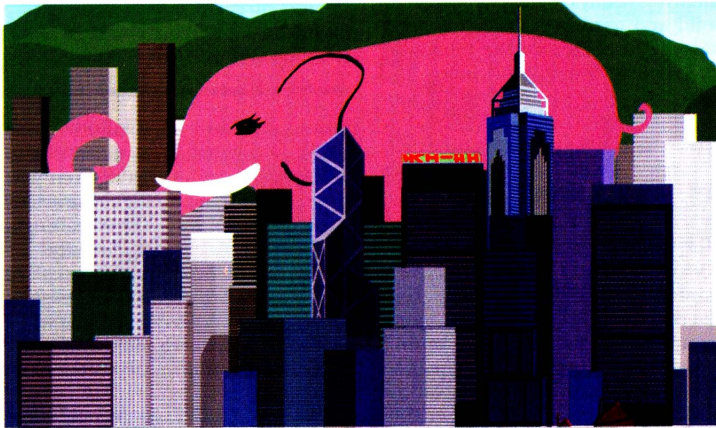




LGBT Inclusion: The elephant in the boardroom!

We are all different, which is great because we are all unique.
Without diversity life would be very boring" - Catherine Pulsifer,
author and motivational speaker

- BY TIM BRASWELL



“We must not overlook the facets of sexual orientation, LGBT and the differently abled talent- physical and mental, and, how these individuals are no different in their need to be empowered and enabled to succeed in a professional work environment”

An organisation's success depends on its people. Every individual is expected to bring a wide range of ideas, skills and abilities to the table; bringing innovative thinking, that will enable the organization to tackle problems creatively. With a dynamic and a rapidly changing consumer environment, organizations need to be diverse and nimble in order to adapt and thrive in a competitive marketplace.

When we speak of an inclusive workplace or diversity at the workplace, we often talk about gender diversity, and, how men and women are represented in a particular setting.

Nevertheless, we must not overlook the facets of sexual orientation, LGBT and the differently abled talent-physical and mental, and how these individuals are no different in their need to be empowered and enabled to succeed in a professional work environment.

Lack of a supportive environment

India has shown significant progress in its consideration of differently abled individuals and the LGBT community, a lot more still needs to be done - specifically in the area of LGBT. The social stigma attached to someone's

sexual orientation is one of the primary challenges that forces lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people to hide their true and complete selves for fear of discrimination by their colleagues or their managers.

This same community also faces biases when it comes to representation on a company's board, often being overlooked for top grade managerial positions, or even promotions to their next level. As of April 2013, 88% of global Fortune 500 companies have non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation. A recent IIM-A report suggests that as high as 98% of the Indian companies have not taken concrete steps to make their workplace LGBT-friendly! Largely, corporates do not have clear policies that address this in their recruitment processes, nor are there training and education programmes outlining the fact that diversity also includes the LGBT community. The progressive attitudinal change in India on inclusive policies is still at a nascent stage. The ambiguous legal framework in India around same-sex issues further deters companies from taking an open stand about creating more policies that are inclusive.

That said a few Indian corporates have begun to take the lead towards accepting the LGBT community, to the extent of providing a support system to assist them to be open about their sexual identities and preferences. Globally, IBM is a frontrunner among the multinationals in promoting workplace equality for LGBTs. It offers benefits including pension plans, medical insurance, leave for marriage

and compassionate bereavement leave to same-sex couples across several global offices.

MetLife's partnership with the National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce (NGLCC) is helping fuel the success of LGBT entrepreneurs who face challenges as they grow their businesses. MetLife has clear policies that prohibit discrimination, while also driving equality among the rights of its employees. In fact, one of the company's most effective campaigns is focused on 'bringing your whole self to work' - directly addressing the inhibitions LGBT individuals often feel about being honest with themselves or with their colleagues.

A recent media report suggests that India Inc is leading the path to champion LGBT rights at the workplace. Companies such as Godrej, Infosys, Intuit, ThoughtWorks, and Genpact and many others are working proactively to create a safe and an inclusive working environment for those from the LGBT community, not just within the company premises but outside as well.

Absence of Basic Infrastructure

Similarly, another important segment that faces difficulties adapting to a professional environment is the differently abled. According to data by the World Health Organization, India has more than 150 million differently abled people, out of which at least half are of employable age, but only about two percent have jobs. The unemployment rate in India for the differently abled is higher for women, 25.6% as compared to 11.8% among men. The number of differently abled people in the country is too high to

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ignore, as it directly impacts our GDP by at least three percent!

Speaking about the challenges faced by differently abled, India lacks basic infrastructure, which restricts

hassle-free movement. Most office complexes in India are not adequately designed to include ramps, wheelchair arrangements, etc., which makes mobility difficult. Secondly, employers are reluctant to hire people with disabilities, riding on the perception that they are less productive or less capable of carrying out their jobs than the abled. Executives need to understand and appreciate the value that people with disabilities bring to the workplace. Moreover, more importantly, there is often restricted access to appropriate education and training programmes for these individuals in gaining skills that are relevant to particular jobs.

Organizations are starting to take note of people with disabilities, the language of "access for all", "universal accessibility" has entered the business lexicon, and businesses are responding by creating accessible products and services.

Service sectors such as Banking and IT have a fair scope of jobs suitable for talent with disabilities. TCS has intentionally been hiring more such people, since 2012. Others from sectors like hospitality and retail, such as Lemon Tree Hotels and Cafe Coffee Day have also been fairly successful in recruiting such talent. Lemon Tree Hotels employs 400 employees with physical or mental disabilities, constituting thirteen percent of its workforce. It plans to increase the headcount to 2,000 over the next three years.

Companies such as IBM, Standard Chartered and CISCO too, welcome differently abled people in their ranks, and make sure that those with special needs are as comfortable and efficient at the workplace as anyone else. IBM

has a '3A' approach to engaging with people with disabilities - accommodation, accessibility and attitude. While at Standard Chartered, employees with disabilities get their



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own buddy-mentor: a colleague, preferably from the same team, especially if they are visually impaired or physically challenged. At Cisco, groups of employees within the 25-member core team are assigned to manage different functions that help integrate differently abled staff with the workforce.

The need to address the Elephant in the Room

A change will come if organisations listen, understand and implement solutions that will address the unique issues that the LGBT community and those with disabilities face. What is needed currently is to improve the level of communication, awareness and sensitivity within the organization and take necessary steps to 'change the language' in order to build a progressive and inclusive workplace.

Such initiatives will go a long way to not only create a strong pipeline of diverse talent, but also create opportunities to strengthen the brand of the employer - especially as millennials look to join and grow careers within organisations that are more inclusive. This transformation will not happen overnight, and is apparently a long process. And, that is why organizations must realise the importance of initiating these conversations now. HC