

Women power

Women are still the untapped workforce that employers often side-step – and need.

Women have infiltrated the gender barrier over the decades, and are now able to ascend the corporate ladder and start their own business ventures – previously male-only domains. But while the female labour force participation has been growing steadily over the last five years, especially in Asia, more can be done to encourage women – particularly those who have been out of the workforce – to come back to work.

Tapping onto the women workforce

Diversity in the workplace is key to maintaining competitive advantage of organisations. A diverse workforce promotes creativity; different voices encourage critical analysis – helpful in improving company practices and services. The positive vibe will help to attract the best talents and develops the company's brand as an employer of choice.

Besides bringing a refreshing change and alternative perspectives to the workplace in a traditionally male-dominated realm, women rejoining or entering the workforce can help to bridge skills gaps which may be prevalent in some industries. This is especially true to female professionals who have been constantly upgrading themselves.

However, many women face unique challenges such as the fear of prejudice from employers or how their skills in raising children and managing the household can be translated to the corporate world.

The glass ceiling

According to a study by the University of Texas in the United States, the top three reasons why women exit the workforce are family-centric. They leave because of personal obligations, excessive work hours that prevented them from meeting familial responsibilities, and personal choice to be a stay-home wife or mother.

Economic crises or family misfortune will compel many women to enter or rejoin the workforce to supplement the household income. However, many of them will find themselves disadvantaged at the job market: they have either been out of the workplace for some time or their skills are no longer relevant. These women also face fierce competition from the fresh graduates and mid-career switchers.

Women's obligations to family are also seen negatively by some employers who equate family priorities to lack of commitment. Such perceptions would hamper women's opportunities to advance their careers.

Attracting & retaining the fairer sex

A shift of mindset is required to attract and retain valuable women staff. Given a supportive work environment to help them manage work and family commitments effectively, working mothers and older women can still contribute to the workforce.

Flexibility can bring some of the best talents to fill in skills gaps, especially if hiring permanent employees is not an option. For women who are keen on returning to the workforce, part-time or flexi-work can also be implemented as a gradual transition to full-time work. Flexible working arrangements can help working mothers manage their familial obligations without compromising their work responsibilities.

A supportive network and family-friendly environment can help working women more easily attend to their personal lives and individual career goals. Being more focused and committed at work would mean they are able to contribute to the organisation to their best abilities.

This article is contributed by Mr Josh Goh, Assistant Director, Corporate Services, GSI Executive Search.