

Remaining on the ramp

“She’s been a Director at the firm for the past three years, and is well on her way to reaching the next level. But hang on....we hear she’s decided to off-ramp. Oh well, another one bites the dust...”

This is an attitude that every woman globally would have witnessed or personally experienced at some point in their lives — women come, women go, corporate life goes on. The phenomenon of off-ramping is a reality — part and parcel of most women’s professional journeys — after all, one cannot deny that women do have a unique and inevitable need to take a break for the physical and social responsibilities that motherhood, marriage, or family care bring. This is, in fact, almost the natural course that working women take globally at some juncture or the other. So what’s the problem?

Simply put, the career graph of all women is largely shaped by lack of opportunity at the workplace. This is not about maternity or perks and privileges. This is a much more deep-rooted concept, one of inclusive growth and balanced leadership — the lack of which creates an environment not conducive to the encouragement and retention of talented women leaders.

Why do women take a break?

Women who off-ramp often do so because of issues related to the workplace and not due to reasons external to work. As Poonam Barua, Founder, WILL Forum, says, “It is not a maternity thing — women just do not see themselves getting to the top slot and decide that they need to find another way to spend their time valuably, or spend time with children, or just open their own business.” Studies in recent years also suggest that child and elderly care are often demanding not just physically but also financially — care costs can often exceed the incomes of many working women, making it economically unviable for them to continue working.

Usually, women off-ramp not due to lack of ambition; more often than not, it is done in a bid to fulfill a pressing need for much-needed work-life equilibrium. This need for a sense of balance, in turn, is more often than not a byproduct of the high-pressure and male-centric environment women work in. Many research studies over the past few years have shown that talented women professionals are often driven to take a break not just for childcare or elderly care, but because the going just gets too tough in an environment that is not sensitive to her needs at certain given periods. Research has also proven that many women do seek professional fulfillment even after motherhood and off-ramp only for a brief period, with the intention of returning to the workforce. However, few are actually able to regain their positions, profiles and responsibilities.

Thus, the question we need to ask is: are women really opting out of their professional road trip, or are other dynamics at play to drive them out?

Driving talent away

One of the most common misconceptions is that women get married and subsequently lose interest in their careers. Many recent studies have revealed that gone are those days when women treated their careers simply as jobs until they found fulfillment in home and hearth. The majority of the female workforce is seemingly ambitious despite their familial responsibilities — according to a recent study by the American Institute of CPAs, approximately 31% of women professionals are likely to voluntarily leave their jobs over the course of their careers. However, 58% of this 31% of women who exit the workforce seek part-time, reduced-time or flexi-time roles for the interim.

Further, on an average, the women who off-ramped only took a break for less than three years, and 89% said they wanted to resume fulltime careers after this short break. Interestingly, only 40% of these women ultimately did return to fulltime work.

One must pause here and delve on understanding the reason for such a trend. If women want to resume from where they left off at work, why do they find it so difficult? What are the emotional stresses associated with off-ramping and then returning after a gap? A key driver of this emotional upheaval is the very deeply entrenched male/societal mindset prevailing at the workplace, even today. Typically, many male leaders — globally — perceive such ‘comebacks’ as a ‘second career’ and often label such women executives as either incapable or not focused enough at the workplace. Thus, off-ramping appears to be a perceptions-driven, emotional issue.

American Institute of CPAs study:

- 69% of women say they wouldn't have off-ramped if their companies had offered flexible work options such as reduced-hour schedules, job sharing, part-time career tracks or short unpaid sabbaticals.
- 54% of off-ramping women left without even discussing flexi-options with their supervisors.

Currently, organizations do not foster an environment that effectively manages off-ramping and is sensitive to the concept. The practice of on-ramping is also not prevalent as it should be, and overall attitudes towards the role of women as mothers first and professionals later continue to hamper the growth of women at work. If women do not receive a level playing field at work, especially when their multitasking needs are at their peak, their

self-worth will likely continue to be adversely affected, and they would effectively be driven out of their positions. Therefore, unless the mentality changes for the better, women are likely to continue struggling against the odds, which would reinforce their belief that “there is no place for a woman at the top.”

A major economic faux pas...

Corporate India needs to get serious and ask itself if it's ready and willing to lose its talented women professionals, who constitute 50% of the workforce today, and in whom it invests significantly in terms of training time, effort and resources. There is great potential here to view this problem from an financial standpoint and calculate the loss of economic value that companies can face as a result of women who off-ramp. As Poonam Barua aptly puts it, *“Women are the least used resource in the world, and that's just plain bad economics.”*

From the market perspective, women constitute a major proportion of consumer markets. In fact, according to the Harvard Business Review (HBR) in its article 'Financial Categories Where Untapped Sales to Women Are Worth Trillions (2011)', women collectively represent almost double the market size than that of India and China combined. This can be gauged from estimates cited in the HBR article — women earn about US\$13 trillion annually and control about US\$20 trillion of consumer spending.

The contribution of women to economic gain cannot be refuted, as many studies have proven over the years. According to the *2013 WILL-KPMG Survey on Balanced Boards for Good Governance*, lack of opportunities with respect to networking and visibility; excessive gender bias across levels and industries; and lack of operational flexibility within organizations are some of the primary factors limiting long-term and meaningful progress for women professionals aspiring for leadership roles. More than 90% of the respondents to this survey believed that cultural perceptions and the social profile of women as family and homemakers hampered their rise on the corporate ladder. So it is more often a case of women being pressured to the point of no return.

Interestingly, based on a recent study by the Center for Talent Innovation, Indian women spend less time off-ramping than their counterparts in countries such as the US, Japan and Germany — about 36% of the 775 college-educated women surveyed off-ramped. This is at par with the U.S., Japan, and Germany, but the time the Indian women spent out of the workforce was less than a year. The study also suggests that as much as 91% of Indian women want to return to work and many succeed in on-ramping. The explanation for this, of course, is economics-driven. As the Indian market has been growing and is still relatively new, the number of experienced professionals falls short of the need. This tends to create on-ramping opportunities for Indian women. That said, the study also reveals the following:

- 72% of women who want to on-ramp do not want to return to the company they left.
- While many organizations offer flexible work arrangements, more than half (54%) of the women professionals surveyed believed they would hamper their growth prospects if they chose that option.

Thus, on-ramping may be easy, but regaining professional progress remains a challenge.

Keeping talent on the ramp

So what can companies do to prevent the off-ramping of women and eventually retain talent in the long term?

One hears enough about the perks and support measures that companies are increasingly providing today. Yet, it is important to first address some very fundamental changes, which need to become a part of the very cultural ethos of most enterprises.

First, the very language that constitutes the foundations of a company's approach needs to change. Top management must understand that concepts or phrases such as 'second career,' 'female benefits,' and 'support' will continue to hamper their true understanding of the subject altogether. For instance, the word 'career' means long-term or life-long job' and 'professional progress.' Instead of terming returning mothers' stints as 'second careers,' organizations need to consciously change their mindset and vocabulary and refer to these as 'uninterrupted careers' instead. Similarly, the word 'support' is comforting, but management could perhaps consider using the word 'respect' in this context—women are not victims of motherhood and family care; rather, they deserve respect at the workplace for managing so much at a time! Thus, women need to be celebrated for their personal courage and loyalty to their companies.

It is equally important for organizations to appreciate and promote the thought that careers need not be ladders — where growth is only vertical. Leadership messaging with respect to the perceptions around career progression needs to change. More leaders need to promote alternate, horizontal opportunities for increased job satisfaction and inter-organizational movement.

Organizations can also help through culture training initiatives. Just as organizations need to change, the perceptions and attitudes of women, too, need to evolve. It is important for young mothers to free themselves of the often clinging need for everything to be perfect — which is not an attainable goal with a demanding career and a demanding child. Women, and particularly young mothers, are deeply afraid of being perceived as "putting their families above their work". This is where company-wide cultural training and counselling can provide the required balance and clarity of thought a professional would likely need. For men at work, too, it is critical that organizations impart training on gender sensitization, gender disparity at work, and balanced leadership.

If a professional does take a career break, it is critical for their organization to sustain ties with that professional during the off-ramping period. This provides the highest-possible chance of a successful re-engagement at a later stage. Lack of continued connectivity and

Booz Allen allows employees to "ramp down" their working hours to work on project-only basis for as long as two years. This provides employees (both women and men) with time and the mental space to manage other responsibilities while staying in the workforce and keeping their skills upgraded for when they "ramp up" and return to fulltime responsibilities at work.

knowledge sharing are among the biggest roadblocks to professionals returning to the workforce. Some of the ways to keep the connection alive are continued mentoring, skill-development programs, invitations to office events and team updates on a regular basis.

Another group that plays a pivotal role in providing an environment conducive to on-ramping or talent retention is the Human Resources (HR) department. The HR team often serves as the face of an organization and its people culture. HR can be instrumental in providing guidance to leadership on what works and what does not work for employees. HR can drive far-reaching policy changes for the improvement of work culture. These changes could pertain to flexi-options such as working hours/days and relaxed maternity leave time periods. It could also be related to the provision of family benefits or training programs for women and men who may want to off-ramp for a brief period.

Organizations can also consider implementing some of the following innovative measures:

Measure	Description
Pregnancy parking	<p>This is common both in India and overseas, with the childbearing age increasing and as more and more women drive/afford a car.</p> <p>Typically parking is reserved for senior management and the rest if any is on a first come first serve basis. It is unfair to include expectant mothers in advanced stages of pregnancy in this equation.</p> <p>Organizations should, thus, reserve a few parking slots for expectant mothers who are at an advanced stage of pregnancy.</p>
Peer mentoring and counselling	Peer counselling is more effective than a top-down approach to mentoring. Given that “all advice is autobiographical” a peer is more likely to give realistic/relevant/acceptable advice than a senior.
Project term flexibility/options	<p>Organizations should have a mechanism to factor child-bearing plans into account when staffing/promoting/assigning large projects. Otherwise a woman is forced to opt out of plum projects simply because she cannot talk about this challenge.</p> <p>The environment needs to allow her the option to be off large/travel-intensive/long-duration projects so her pregnancy does not disrupt the project or adversely affect her health</p>
E-learning	E-learning is an excellent and cost-effective tool for organizations to deploy for young mothers. Not only can talent be kept “connected” in a highly knowledge-driven workforce; this is also an opportunity to offer job rotation to expectant and young mothers.
Project-based work	Project-based work provides many benefits to both businesses and those re-entering. Freelancers don't hit the bottom line as hard as because they aren't paid benefits. With clear project descriptions, deadlines, and compensation, more moms who may be overqualified for a position might decide that they are willing to help out with a project because it meets their needs in the short term.
Work from home/flexi-time options	This is one of the most common and popular mechanisms that companies today offer professionals flexibility.
Sabbatical leave	At times, people may need only a few months off from work for personal reasons. This is a convenient option for such professionals and enables them to devote themselves to their other goals and also stay connected and in the company network.
Friday groceries	Organizations can tie up with grocery stores whereby employees can simply order their groceries online and these are delivered to them at the workplace on Fridays.

Thus, many companies are already on track to enhancing work culture to facilitate flexibility for professionals who really need it. Globally, organizations are becoming increasingly cognizant of the available talent pool of women professionals, as well as its potential to drive innovation and diversified organizational growth. Many companies are already on track to revisiting their policies and processes to support women professionals – and in many cases men as well. In fact, some enterprises have adopted a creative and sensitive approach to making their environment conducive to diversity and inclusion. For example, Barclays offers support in the form of dedicated nursing rooms and footrests and special rest chairs at the workplace, as well as special cab routes. It also allows reductions in travel-centric assignments for expectant or new mothers.

“We have introduced dedicated nursing rooms for new and expectant mothers. These can be used for short rests, sessions with gynaecologists, or for the purpose of expressing milk.” — Sumit Kumar, Assistant VP, Diversity & Inclusion at Barclays Shared Services Pvt. Ltd.

Many companies also offer financial support to women in their time of need. According to R.M.Vishakha, Director, Sales and Marketing at Canara HSBC Oriental Bank of Commerce Life

Insurance Co. Ltd., *“In addition to ‘work from home’, we have a tie up with a day care centre, an international agency, where a portion of the day care costs are picked up by the company.”*

EY Global Shared Services (GSS): Following the incorporation of their Global Shared Services (GSS) team in India in 2002, Ernst & Young (EY) has been extremely focused on attracting and retaining talented women professionals. In its endeavor to do so, it has overhauled its workplace culture completely to make it increasingly woman-friendly. Some of the initiatives undertaken at EY include the establishment of crèches; employees can also work at the crèches. EY GSS also set up the Working Women’s Network, which focuses on providing a support system to expecting and existing mothers. An on-ramping program has also been put into place.

Hope of a new vision

The need of the hour is to validate that women who return to work are given equal opportunities, and are not relegated to a “plateau” for the rest of their careers. For this, companies need to revisit their attitudes towards women and give them not a farcical chance at a “second career” but a level playing field to resume their great work before they left – to give them uninterrupted career growth and offer them the promise of lifelong careers. Companies must work towards narrowing the gender divide, as well as the deficit that women face in visibility and networking opportunities at the workplace.

It’s time to celebrate women for the courage they show by returning to take on professional challenges along with those they manage at home. It’s time to recognize their expertise and accomplishments and not focus on their leave plans. It’s time to focus on benchmarking and validating if companies have the appropriate eco-systems in place to respect, progress, and advance women on the professional front. It’s time to off-ramp Corporate India from its age-old approach and on-ramp it to respect and nurture professionals — not male, not female, just great talent —and consequently reap the rewards of its investment.