

Creating diverse, inclusive workplaces: Good practices go a long way

The evidence is compelling: diverse and inclusive workplaces result in increased profitability and performance. Yet, many businesses don't seem to make diversity and inclusion a priority in the workplace.

Instead, women are significantly absent in leadership positions within organisations, even though they make up half of the workforce.

But building a gender-inclusive workplace isn't just about hiring more women or even promising equal pay, though these are important.

Gender inequality is a deep-rooted systemic problem that requires foundational changes in workplace policies and in legislation.

Companies need to implement policies that mandate fair practices and creating an inclusive culture where all employees regardless of their gender or identity feel supported. Among others things employers must ensure equal pay, prevent and eliminate violence and harassment at work, encourage work-life balance for both female and male employees, promote women's equal representation in leadership and invest in what works for women.

While social justice is the main impetus behind diversity and inclusion (D&I), some companies have begun to realise that being inclusive gives them a competitive advantage and is a key enabler of growth, according to a 2018 McKinsey report titled *Delivering Through Diversity*.

The report "reaffirms the global relevance of the link between diversity – defined as a greater proportion of women and a more mixed ethnic and cultural composition in the leadership of large companies – and company financial outperformance".

However, despite the evidence on the benefits of such practices, there is still a pushback among employers. In Malaysia, for example, the recent amendments to the Employment Act that allows for seven days of paternity leave for fathers in all sectors was not met positively by all employers. A group of small and medium industries in Penang have even urged the government to reconsider the increase in paternity leave as it would impact their business.

Companies that already have D&I policies, however, report that investing in policies and practices that support all their staff, regardless of gender or ethnicity, has had positive outcomes not just in terms of employee morale and loyalty but company performance.

Shell Malaysia's vice president of human resources Shazmi Ali says that the company's emphasis on D&I has resulted in a low attrition rate among their women staff.

Data from the **Department of Statistics Malaysia** shows that many women leave the workforce in their 30s and above – about the time they are starting a family. Most (more than 60% according to a 2018 World Bank study) leave because of the "double burden" of household work and child minding that they bear.

In Shell, says Shazmi, the women don't leave.

"We have a very low attrition among our female talent. These family-friendly policies have helped the company retain its female staff. Very often, the young women that come in through our graduate training programme end up staying for 20 or 30 years," he says.

Furthermore, about 40% of the company's senior leadership is female.

"We are an engineering organisation which is historically very male dominated. But in the last 10 to 15 years, we have made significant changes and we now have women in leadership positions across all functions, from legal to engineering. We have been lucky to get good women talent but also, our policies support and nurture our female staff," he adds.

Among other things, all employees are allowed to work remotely and they are also accorded flexibility in the hours they work. For example, if they need to take a couple of hours off for school runs or to see to family matters, they can.

"These kinds of arrangement became more commonplace since the pandemic but we have been practising this for years.

"Of course working remotely doesn't apply to those who work in offshore platforms as it is just not possible," says Shazmi.

The company also offers childcare support not just to its women staff but also the men.

"We realise that we can't just have policies that support women. And because of this, although we have two weeks paid paternity leave for fathers, the take up is low because of the flexibility that already exists," he says adding that mothers are entitled to 120 days paid maternity leave.

The company also has mentoring circles for its female staff because "unlike men who tend to network easily, women often don't have the time or opportunity, he says.

"We have also collaborated with other energy companies to form the Women in Energy group for women to networking among their peers in the industry, not just in the company," he says.

The senior leadership also go for online D&I training annually to "review ourselves, check to make sure there is a balance not just in terms of internal jobs but the graduates we hire or even scholarships we offer".

"In order for such a culture to exist, we know that we can't just promote good behaviour (inclusion), but we must also rectify bad behaviour. So we must call out those who behave badly. I have seen policies fail because companies close an eye to bad practices like sexist jokes, harassment, misogynistic comments about how women employees focus more on family and so on.

"We also have a global helpline for employees to report – anonymously – any grievances which will be investigated," he shares.

During lockdown, Shazmi says the company held online webinars to help staff deal with the challenges of working from home, like having to take care of their children while on the job.

“We are pragmatic. We are aware that women play a larger role than men at home and we want to help them, and this includes helping them manage their mental well-being.

“We had our male staff join these sessions, which are all voluntary, too. As many as 1,000 to more staff attended these sessions,” he reveals.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/family/2022/06/03/creating-diverse-inclusive-workplaces-good-practices-go-a-long-way>