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## BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Sudha Jagadish  
COO, Dax Networks

While corporate India Inc is increasingly placing more women employees at key decision making positions, the channel community has a lot of catching up to do

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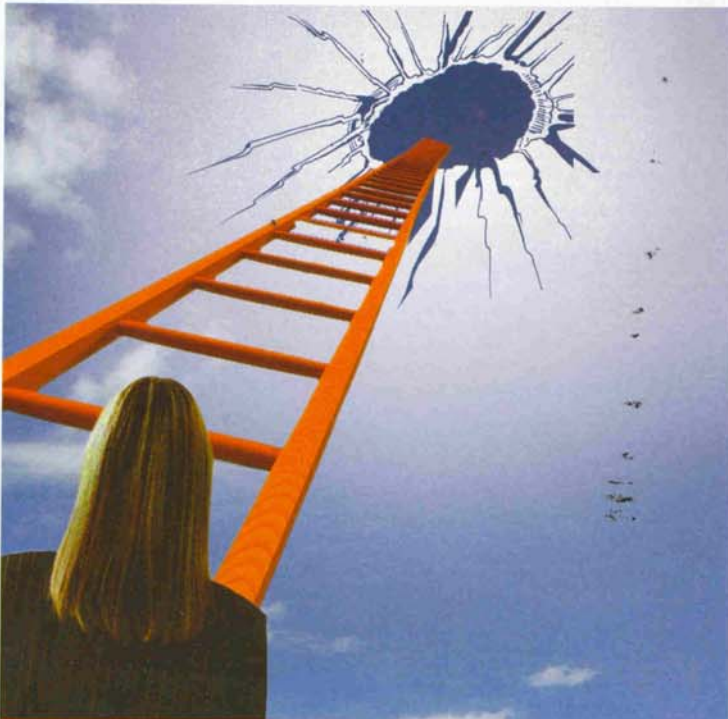
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Director—IT Business  
Samsung India



## BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

**While corporate India Inc is increasing looking at having diversity in their workforce by placing women employees at key decision making positions, the channel community has a lot of catching up to do**

**S**om Mittal, President, Nasscom, is of the belief that gender inclusivity is a must for the longterm success of the IT industry. "India will play a key role in future transformation," he claimed. "Women are a key and vital part of our workforce, and the industry will continue to work towards creating a conducive environment and attract more women employees and leaders," he added.

With such a rich pool of well educated and talented women currently available with the scope of their participation in corporate affairs increasing, most companies are keen to have a mixed gender ratio. This is why you have Neelam Dhawan first heading the country's biggest software company, Microsoft and then moving on to be at the helm of affairs at Hewlett Packard. Dhawan is just one of the many women who

have become synonymous with the companies they work for.

But sadly the same can't be said of the Indian IT channel companies in the country. Barring a few there are hardly any women who are in the key decision making positions in most big channel companies. In an industry that has been largely male dominated, women have been able to make a mark, but not at the same speed as is seen in the rest of corporate India.

### A level playing ground?

Most people spoken to would like to believe that the Indian channel business is a level playing ground for women to participate in, as an entrepreneur or as an employee at a channel organization or a vendor company. Sapna Agarwal, Director—Global Alliances, EMC Corporation is one of the believers. She feels that there is no disparity between men and

women and the industry can be challenging and demanding on both the sexes.

"There exists intense competition and you have to manage partner relationships in order to successfully market, sell, and provide service to end customers. It is not an easy business as you have to deal with very demanding and competitive partners and customers," Agarwal pointed out.

Manisha Sood, Country Manager, Sandisk India agreed with this contention. "I don't think gender has anything to do with the work a person has to do, either in a vendor company, a distribution house or at a dealer's shop. It all boils down to the person's capabilities to quickly adapt to the environment and learn the tricks of the trade, because at the end of the day, the targets and challenges remain the same, whether you are a man or a woman," she noted.

Giving a man's perspective, V Murali of Precision Infomatics said, "There is no entry barrier for women in the channel industry or in vendor companies." But he did admit that despite this, there is a dearth of women executives in this industry.

### Why so few at the top?

So given that the IT channel industry is open to all—gender notwithstanding—then why are there a lot of women in the mid management level of an organization, but very few in the key decision making teams? Surprisingly the women spoken to felt that this was not by default but by design and that by the women themselves.

Agarwal stated, "It might appear that there are fewer women at the very senior levels of organizations. But the reason for this is not the proverbial glass ceiling. It is more to do with women's individual choices." This is the reason behind women often voluntarily moving to less challenging job roles in the middle of their careers to keep up with their commitments as home makers.

"There is always the commitment towards the home and the family which often results in women not being able to put in the long hours typically required to break into the top management jobs. Women who decide to continue find that corporate in India provide a very fair environment for women to grow as much as their men counterparts," she added.

This sentiment again finds an echo in Sood's thoughts as well. She too noted that most women choose to stick to job roles which are more stationary with limited traveling so that they can devote better quality time to their family, especially their children. "The job on the top can involve putting in long and unpredictable hours besides the possibility of frequent relocation, which might not be possible and feasible for most women," she added.

Subhasini Prabhakar, Chief Technology Manager, Dax Networks blamed the gender lacunae existing in the top hemisphere of corporate on the strategies used by women to arrive, survive and excel at mid-management levels which prevent them from moving up. She feels that there are specific things women must start doing and stop doing if they are to position themselves to break through the glass ceiling.

This fact is borne by some numbers as well. In India, only about 25 percent of the business leadership comprises women. In China, on the other hand, women comprise nearly 60 percent of the business leadership.

"Women get so accustomed to their existing job role, which

prevents them from reaching the top level. Moreover the organization also has a feeling that it is not worth investing in because, they would get married, have a baby and quit," she noted.

### Female representation

The challenges might continue to exist, but there is no doubt that a greater representation of women at the workplace is vital today. At its third annual IT Women Leadership Summit in Bengaluru in November, 2008, aptly themed 'Transforming Enterprises and Societies' Nasscom representatives stressed on the fact that "workplace diversity in industry gives it a leading edge in the marketplace, and is therefore of even greater importance in these times of economic recession and slowdown. Gender inclusivity is no longer corporate social responsibility but a business imperative."

Helping push the pace in having a better representation of women in the IT industry is the fact that there are many educated women from tier-2 cities and smaller towns who are not averse to the idea of leaving their home and hearth to make a mark in the business world. Agarwal noted that there are more women making headway in the industry and in the process are gaining the respect and confidence of their peers.

She advocated that increasing female representation in management increases the fairness and equity of the organization. "By increasing the representation of women in senior roles, organizations can be seen as employers of choice by women and the wider community," she noted.

An interesting survey conducted by Nokia has shown that women are better at multi-tasking than men with 60 percent of respondents, both men and women. Only six percent of women feel that men are better at doing more than one task at a time. The study was carried out on over 5,000 respondents, where 79 percent consider themselves multi-taskers, with 50 percent describing themselves productive and 31 percent busy.

Besides there are several much needed positive attributes that women bring to an organization. They are generally more committed and dedicated. And Sudha Jagadish, Chief Operating Officer (COO), Dax Networks says this from personal experience as well as her encounters in her company as well.

"In our organization women play varied roles right from front ending sales to handling back office responsibilities. Moreover Dax supports its women associates in managing work and

yet meeting the family and social demands and help in arriving at an ideal work-life balance," she added.

### Women in the channel

One reason why the channel business however is not such an attractive destination for women with a fire in their belly is because most of them feel that their potential will be limited to the geography that the partner operates in, since most channel companies are more or less localized in nature, as pointed out by Murali. This is why they prefer to try in the bigger companies first and settle for local organizations as a last resort.

He also added that since the channel trading business has been traditionally dominated by men, women could encounter male chauvinism. "Channel business being low margins, huge volumes, high transactions might not give the women the right parameters to look at participation. They might perceive this to be a no brainer and hence the reluctance to join the industry. The second class citizen positioning coupled with lack of proper financial infrastructure would be the dampener," he explained.

This is probably why women in key decision making capacities in most channel organizations are either spouses of the entrepreneurs or someone who is affiliated to the family that is running the show. Be it Simran Mulchandani, who manages the finances for Mumbai's Aarvee Computers or Rita Budhay of Business Algorithms, Nagpur, who is responsible for client handling—both have their husbands handling the business from the front. Vinod Mulchandani and Sudhir Budhay however are very quick to admit that their wives are the strength behind their respective business houses, and are very supportive about their dedication to the companies.

There is also the gutsy Ayesha Villait of Bitsy Infotech in Mumbai, who was busy chasing payments till the day she delivered her second child, and was partially managing the company's accounts even from home, while her husband Satish increased the clientele. There are very few women entrepreneurs barring those like Manasi Saha of Kolkata's Macaws Infotech or Prarthana Gupta of Cache Technologies from New Delhi, who get into the channel business.

One of the reasons could also be that most dealers still are unable to adjust to the idea of having a woman as an equal,

feeling that they are more emotional and therefore might not be able to take a more prudent decision. "While women make better bosses, because they have a higher empathy for their colleagues and subordinates, they are also easily swayed by an emotional appeal, which might bode well for business," said one partner.

### Workplace diversity

While most people feel that workplace diversity is something that most coprates in India are seriously contemplating, if they have not already factored within their HR programs, it is more a question of individual choice over organizational matrix creation.

Agarwal noted that almost all organizations have a uniform entry-level policy for men and women. "It is for the women to decide if they want to continue and reach management positions or they want a blend of domesticity and corporate. Neither of these choices is wrong," she said.

But there is no denying the

She recalled how she had a very supportive family as well who helped her cope work and the familial responsibilities well. "There are a lot of companies in India which offer flexi-hours for their women employees. Organizations can do a lot of other similar things to make their female workers perform better without compromising on their responsibilities at home," she added.

Prabhakar advised that workplace diversity can be achieved by developing strategies to identify desired outcomes. The easiest way to achieve this is to up the involvement of women in key decision making processes and ensure that there is a fair treatment meted out to all.

### Stereotypes

There are some stereotypes that are attached to women workers and bosses, which comes out in the TeamLease survey on 'Gender Preferences in Bosses'. While announcing the results of the survey, Surabhi Mathur-Gandhi, General Manager,

## WOMEN AS BOSSES

TeamLease Services, an Indian staffing company, undertook a survey 'Gender Preferences in Bosses' to understand perceived gender preferences among bosses across major cities in India, as well as its implications at the workplace. Across all the cities where the survey was commissioned, the common trend was that most respondents had male bosses. There was almost an equal split in the respondents' gender and the average age was around 28 years.

### Key findings of the survey:

- ◆ Two thirds of the surveyed workforce across cities agreed to women being more expressive about their emotions with only the cities of Bengaluru, Mumbai and Pune disagreeing to this.
- ◆ 75 percent of the respondents say 'being a woman' is reason enough not to take up senior level opportunities.
- ◆ More than half of Chennai, Ahmedabad and Kolkata respondents prefer to have bosses of the opposite gender.
- ◆ Pune's focus is work and not the gender of the boss! 'Really, it does not matter', say over 70 percent of Pune workers when asked about gender preference for their boss.
- ◆ Over 80 percent of Ahmedabad respondents favored women for better administrative, people management and target aggression skills.
- ◆ In Hyderabad over 80 percent gave five-stars to women bosses for time management, administrative and mentoring skills. However, respondents in Delhi were not very happy with women bosses for decision making, administrative and target aggression skills.

Source: TeamLease Services' survey 'Gender Preferences in Bosses', 2008

balance their work life and home responsibilities as well.

On the positive side, most of the surveyed respondents did admit that women were better multi-taskers with better administrative, people management and target aggression skills.

Agarwal points out that there are no specific IT industry stereotypes for women but some that are by-products of our societal ecosystem. "There was a time when people were uncertain about women's abilities to perform at senior levels. People used to make assumptions when confronting a woman in management. But over the last 10 years most of the biases have crumbled. As the number of women in management roles increases and organizations place a greater emphasis on diversity, a subsequent change in perceptions of women in leadership roles is expected," she claimed.

Jagadish on the other hand, noted that while hiring women employees most managers harbor bias about offering low salaries, concern about their parenting responsibilities and making quick assumptions about their lack of knowledge about the industry. "Gender stereotypes block women's advancement, the recurring reproduction (even by women) of expectations of an intra-gender homogeneity based on a traditional female role.

Stereotypical notions show highly successful women managers as imitators of male characteristics and physical appearance," she added.


But all of them agree that whatever be the bias, employing smart women is a smart decision. As organizations increasingly look for the right candidate to fit a job description at the time of hiring as well as for subsequent progression, the doors have opened for women employees. "Moreover with women proving to be efficient managers and excellent in multi tasking, employing women would always be a smart decision," Agarwal added.

It is heartening to see that organizations today are more focused on performance and qualification as they look increasingly towards profit figures, global competitiveness and overall growth rather than fixating on gender bias. As in the West, it is only a matter of time before there will be a proportionate ratio of men and women taking India's Corporate Inc ahead. After all, India is the only democracy to boast of a female Prime Minister and a female President, which shows that when it comes to getting the job done, genders do not matter. Soon this opinion will percolate to the grassroot levels of the channel industry as well.

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fact that organizations can go out to provide women friendly policies such as work from home and flexible working hours; traveling arrangements, especially at night; and better facilities for pregnant women, nursing mothers and those with young children.

Agarwal feels that with such arrangements, not only will the organization retain its women employees but also bring out the best in them since the women will realize that their company really cares for them and encourages them to perform even better. "In fact I feel that organizations in India are far ahead in encouraging women to grow as compared to a lot of other countries," added Agarwal.

Sood too agreed with this.

Permanent Staffing, TeamLease Services said, "The increased role for women in the workplace today seems to reflect a pragmatic but sometimes reluctant change in attitudes, objectivity and aptitudes. Women are seen as bringing different skills but despite equal competence continue to battle unfair and dated perception issues."

Display of their emotions is what most people expect from women workers, with over two thirds of the 470 surveyed workforce by TeamLease across various cities agreeing to it. 75 percent of the respondents also noted that 'being a woman' is reason enough not to take up senior level opportunities, which could denote that they would want jobs that help them