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Diversified Hiring: The Way Forward

HR managers often complain over the difficulty in filling open positions with people of competence. The innovation around recruitment usually involves efficient technology for collecting and processing resumes and designing and conducting assessments. Many managers seek the assistance of external agencies to help them do this, to leverage special expertise as well as to cut costs. Some companies even outsource the entire recruitment responsibility. These are, no doubt, good things to do but one wonders whether hiring managers are casting their net as wide as they can and should. It is possible that Indian corporates are, perhaps unwittingly, excluding eligible hires and making things difficult for themselves.

Take women for instance. In a recent piece in the Economic Times, Sutapa Banerjee of Ambit Wealth Management has pointed out that the percentage of employed women stands at a mere 30% and shrinks from 16.4% to 10.6% as one moves from middle management to senior management. This is in no way a suitable representation of the demographical presence of women in the population. There is a reason to believe that this reflects a bias against women, conscious or otherwise.

There is a shared belief among many hiring managers, mostly men, that women would be distracted by

their responsibilities at home, may marry and move out of their jobs, or may disrupt work by taking long breaks before and after childbirth. Of course, there are some who go so far as to believe that women would disturb the homogeneity of work groups and may not even be able to do certain categories of tasks. Banerjee fears that the well-intentioned move of the Ministry of Labour to amend the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, to

clearly a lost opportunity. Instead of reforming the workplace to first confirm and then manage each of the issues associated with women hires, managers often take the easy route of not hiring them at all, thus throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. There is some evidence of companies, notably TCS, making an effort to actively correct this distortion. As they say, one swallow does not make summer.



increase maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks, may only make things worse.

In fact, corporates may hold back from hiring women who could eventually become eligible for six-month stretches of paid leave. This is

Now consider the case of Dalits. While Indian corporates would be indignant even at the suggestion that they practice any sort of caste-based discrimination, repeated studies have shown otherwise. According to the 2011 census, Dalits and Adivasis

(Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) account for around 25% of the population. Aakar Patel of Amnesty International points out that this amounts to around 300 million people. If they were a country they would be the fourth most populous in the world. Their representation in the workplace is nowhere near this. Furthermore, it is confined to the lowest rungs of the organizational ladder.

Some time ago, Adarsh Kumar, in an article in the Wall Street Journal reviewed field studies that confirmed a hiring bias against Dalits amongst hiring managers who claimed to be merit-driven and caste-blind. In a sample covering 1.9 million full-time and 63,000 sub-contract workers, S. Jodhka and Katherine Newman found that subjective requirements like "cosmopolitan attitudes" and "family background" effectively screened out Dalits. Newman and Deshpande found that Dalit post-graduate students in Delhi felt compelled to modify "family background" in their resumes to avoid being screened out of job interviews.

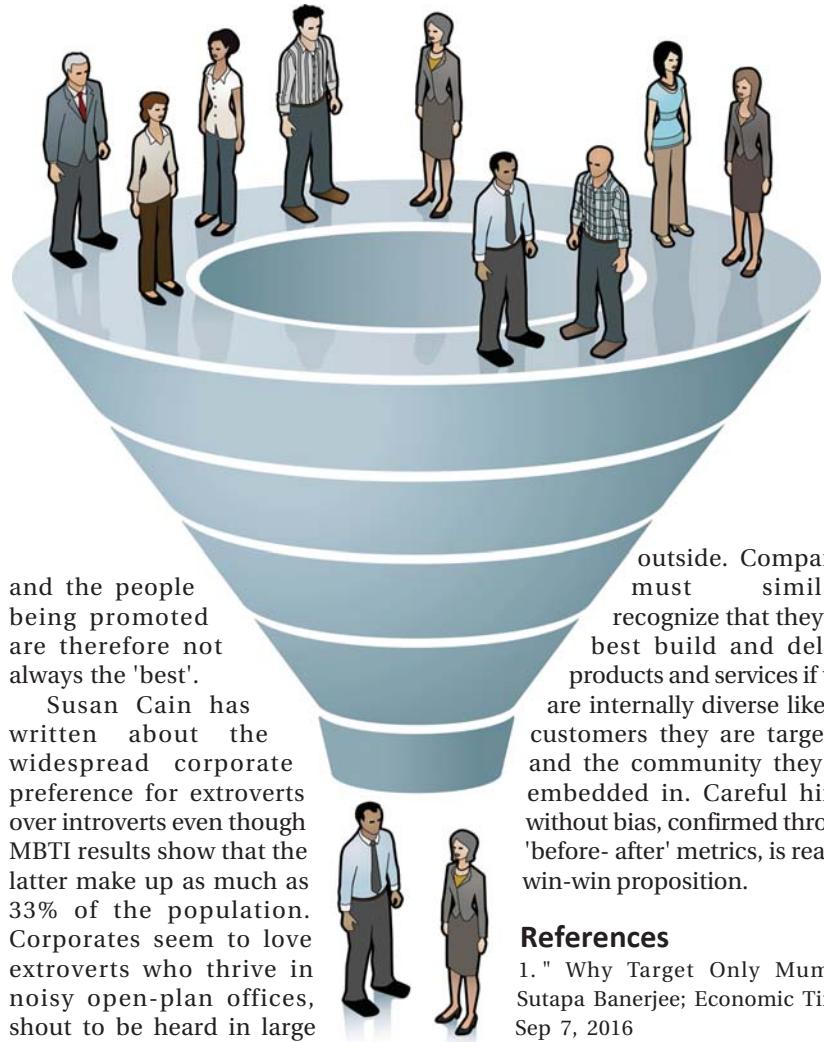
P. Attewell and S. Thorat tested the first-stage hiring process of private companies in five Metro cities. They sent several fictitious applications against advertised jobs, taking care to repeat identical resumes with high-caste Hindu names, Muslim names and Dalit names. They found that compared to high-caste Hindus, Dalits were 33% less likely to be considered for the next stage of hiring. Muslims were 66% less likely to be considered. This is a damning study. Without necessarily being even aware of it in totality, hiring managers are losing the opportunity to even test and interview a pool of eligible applicants.

The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) did launch an affirmative action initiative around 10 years back, but apart from getting some companies to sign a voluntary code of conduct, it is not clear what has been achieved in the headcount. One is not aware of any 'before and after' studies of improved representation. Worse, many managers who signed up may be fully ignorant of their unconscious bias.

As if this shrinking of the pool for hiring was not bad enough, many

companies are also screening out eligible promotees, or internal hires, based on a false understanding of what attributes are required for productive contribution at the workplace. This is artificially narrowing the list of people who can be moved up the organization

favour of a less qualified student belonging to a racial minority. The court held that universities were required to prepare students for the world outside the campus. To do this, it was essential that the campus reflects the diversity of the world



and the people being promoted are therefore not always the 'best'.

Susan Cain has written about the widespread corporate preference for extroverts over introverts even though MBTI results show that the latter make up as much as 33% of the population. Corporates seem to love extroverts who thrive in noisy open-plan offices, shout to be heard in large meetings, talk animatedly with eye contact during interviews, love to sing the company song and revel in 'team-bonding' activities. All this while there is evidence that CEOs successful over a long period are introverts and that introverts are best at managing workers who are expected to think for themselves. Some correction is clearly required.

HR managers must take time off to read the judgement given by the US Supreme Court in the case brought by a student Barbara Grutter against Lee Bollinger, the President of Michigan University. Barbara believed that she was wrongly denied admission in

outside. Companies must similarly recognize that they can best build and deliver products and services if they are internally diverse like the customers they are targeting and the community they are embedded in. Careful hiring without bias, confirmed through 'before- after' metrics, is really a win-win proposition. **HC**

References

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