



VAAHINI CONNECT PODCAST|SEASON 2|EPISODE 3 WHY DO MOTHERS LEAVE PAID WORK? IT'S LESS OBVIOUS THAN YOU THINK!

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to the Accenture Vaahini Connect podcast. In Season Two, 'Meet the luminaries', we bring to you the unique stories of women luminaries who share how we can all play a role in furthering big goals that impact societies.

Whether you are a salaried employee, an entrepreneur, a student, or just someone looking for a way to contribute to society, in each episode, we hope to bring to you inspiring stories and effective ways on how each one of us in our powers can make this world a better place for all.

I'm Savitha Nanjappa, Success Coach, Founder of Success with Savitha, and your Podcast Host. In this episode, we meet Priya Arunachalam, Managing Director, Advanced Technology Centers in India, Talent Strategy and People Programs, Accenture. She has been involved in creating strategies and policies that enable Diversity and Inclusion at the workplace.

Join me in discussing why mothers leave paid

work and how workplaces can step up to mitigate this issue.

Hello, and welcome to the Vaahini podcast Priya. I'm looking forward to hearing from you today. Our topic is one that's really close to my heart. Welcome aboard.

Thank you so much Savitha. It's a pleasure to be here.

Great! Starting off with our conversation, let me begin with this. Many promising women professionals in India leave the workforce to raise their kids. While they may have the intention of returning to work, they face roadblocks when it comes to childcare and allied responsibilities. My question to you, Priya, is how can this gap be bridged? Tell us how you, or your colleagues maybe, overcame this conundrum faced by many career-oriented mothers.

That's a great question to start this conversation,



Savitha. I want to start by saying, I know you said, 'many women professionals in India' – but let me start by saying this leaky funnel has not played just India, but it is a global issue. And studies in Global Studies have told us that men and women both enter early career jobs in a 1:1 ratio, but as the seniority rises, women drop out about 2 to 3x times faster. It is voluntary, when compared to the men, and the life stage changes, when women become mothers or primary caregivers, is a key driver. And, of course, this problem has only aggravated during the pandemic. Despite a lot of, I would say, global awareness going up, I think our stereotypical mindsets are deep rooted, aren't they? For example, there are many, many cultures and families in which it is still believed that homemaking is a woman's job; a working mother has the guilt, or the stigma of neglecting children, and that women and men's roles are different. And sometimes, there are also stereotypes around some jobs that women can't do and can do. And, many times you will see somebody else making that decision about what a woman can or can't do. In terms of, how do we deal with this, right, when we are hiring, or when we're really engaging with returning mothers or women in general. What workplaces can do I mean, I think one is really sort of building awareness around gender equal hiring, and gender equal leadership.

In Accenture, what we do is when we're doing the gender neutrality training, we ensure the men are there – it's not only the women who need to know, right? I mean, it's not all about the women, it's also the men who need to be allies. And then you also follow it up with ensuring that all your talent processes in the organization have an equal opportunity like promotion, succession, rewards, and also, you have strong role models – men and women in leadership and champions. And then of course, you also have to tell people that there is zero tolerance for discrimination. So, some of these, I think, are the ways in which we are dealing with it in a systemic way. But, the change actually starts

with the self, and with changing how we look at candidates. So, for example, Savitha, when I talk to a candidate today, I have to be very conscious, to not make a conclusion that if it's a man that he can do a particular type of job really well – maybe it requires travel, for example, and similar notions if it is a woman; maybe we should stop making those assumptions of what he or she can't do.

I think challenges, like you rightly said, are universal no matter where in the world we are. I think we all can relate to what you have shared. Moving on, I'm curious to know, what are some meaningful ways to help women balance the load of equally important responsibilities such as childcare and career obligations? What is the scope of company endorsed affordable childcare facilities in easing this?

Again, a great question Savitha. I think virtual parental benefit programs have really taken shape over the last two years, as the pandemic caught us unawares; I think most companies have really tried to bring that balance. And all of us know this. The pandemic forced all daycare centers to shut down, and that posed a much bigger problem for many women. At Accenture, what we tried to do was to offer a plug and play model, partnering with the vendor and allowing virtual childcare services, like online camps. All of us know that summers, when there are holidays, are tough times for parents.

We also had a very, very unique idea in which we enlisted the help of all Accenture people and their families to take care of children; For example, my mother is very good with kids. So, I had the opportunity to have her volunteer, to take care of somebody else's child, or spend a little bit of time – virtually, of course – with somebody else's child. So, that is a small innovation, you can say, but it took the weight off a lot of parents.

In my view, what a woman or even a man



needs—given many men are single parents today—what they need is the understanding of their teams and their immediate ecosystem. I myself have been a beneficiary of this; not during the pandemic, but when I was raising my daughter, there were several occasions when I had to really bank on my colleagues to support me through the journey. And that was one of the, sort of, fantastic experiences that I had, right? We built friends along the way. And I really feel like they were so invested in my children, as they were in their own. So, just that supportive culture, I think, is the biggest sort of meaningful thing that we can do. I think organizations are also thinking creatively in this hybrid way, working on ‘how do we support parents.’

Yeah, I can so relate to this. And I do want to ask you this, women are often the ones who have to adjust their work schedules and make compromises when childcare issues arise. But we believe that today, fathers are supposed to also be equal parents. So, are there any specific policies that encourage fathers to play an equal role in parenting that your organization or you recommend putting in place?

I think the concept of paternity leave is really sort of shaping up in our market as well. In some of the other countries, it is quite popular to extend paternity leave, and I know that there is legislation that is on the cards to do this. I think that could be a big game changer, really allowing men to be available to share duties of a new parent. Until that happens, I think more than anything, like what I said earlier, basic leadership sensitivity to accommodate requests, work-life balances that actually treat men and women equally, allow them for caregiving responsibilities, and also, sort of ensure that they are able to take up the time equally, will be important. For example, I know that there is one organization which actually thought about bringing in paternity leave, but not upfront. I mean, I think the men can take paternity leave upfront when the child is born, but that's for a small number of days. But, imagine that you

have a wife or a partner who's working and needs to go back to work in six months. So, at the six month mark, you can take on some leave, so that you can support the family equally. Imagine how supportive that would be because, for six months, the mother is with the child. And then of course, there is another support coming along with the father being available and the flexibility that organizations are offering today. For example, returning mothers get the option of working from home for extended periods of time. With that flexibility, I think we're getting there – aren't we – on the load sharing? Attitudes are also changing, I see so many good ads about sharing the load. So all of those, we'll bring it together, I'm hopeful, so that the struggle is not for our future generations.

True, yes, it's really changing. And we can all sense it and feel it. And finally, we've already kind of touched upon this, but I want to go a little deeper into this. What are ways in which all of us as individuals can have women who are on a career break but want to return back to work? How can this be taken into consideration, as an individual as well as a societal responsibility, to help mothers on a career break get back on the career trajectory?

That's a fantastic question, Savitha. One of those ‘be the change’ kind of questions, I would say. The first thing is not to make any assumptions about the returning mothers that we meet or encounter, that we sort of look at as candidates for various roles in our organizations. There are several assumptions that go around, isn't it, like ‘returning mothers can't travel, returning mothers can't work long hours, returning mothers are not going to be as committed to the job as a man might have.’ So, making sure that, initially, we don't do it to that person. And we start by not making the assumption of what he or she can and can't do, but engage and understand what their reality is, and try to support them through that. I myself have been the beneficiary of such an open attitude, which my supervisor showed me— when



I was a returning mother, I was given a very big job. And, it was for me, I was second-guessing myself on whether I would be able to do that job. But, based on the support and the confidence that my entire team and my supervisor gave me, I was really able to make that role mine and be successful and kind of also proved to myself, and also to the others that 'you can do it'. So don't keep second-guessing yourself. So I think it is important not to make assumptions, if you are a returning mother, about yourself. The second is, if you encounter a returning mother on your work day, not to do that.

Then it starts by becoming role models, and allies, visible role models in our lives, talk about it, integrate and embrace it. I mean, honestly, these are beautiful opportunities to experience life. I have a young mother on my team. She has a baby who is six to nine months old, she's just returned from her maternity break and when she's working, the baby is right next to her. So initially, we were all trying to figure out how this would work. And then, now, just the coo-cooing sounds of the baby are part of our weekly calls, we even talk about it. So I see that the men and the women and the team, they really embraced it. And then of course, becoming sort of champions as, as you take on leadership roles, really thinking about 'what are the flexible work schedules that would work for people on your team? What are some of the staffing support that they need?' etc. I think those are some of the things that I can think of.

Perfect, I love the heartwarming story about having the baby in the workplace. My takeaways are, like you said, visible allies, flexibility, being sensitive, and being okay to experiment and see how something works. Like you said, you thought about how it would be to have the child around and then everybody has just taken to it. So I think these are great examples. Thank you for sharing that.

These are the questions that I had for you today.

I love that you shared your experiences, insights, and the specific action steps that you're implementing to help mothers come back to the workplace. I have enjoyed this conversation, and I hope you did too.

Likewise, Savitha, thank you so much. The pleasure is mine.

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Thank you for listening to this episode! Remember, we may not turn into changemakers overnight, but all of us hold the power to lead small, incremental changes that can eventually make the world a more equal and fairer place. You can join the Accenture Vaahini Network, a networking forum for women professionals enabled by Accenture. The link to join is in the description of this episode. Also, don't forget to send in your feedback and thoughts to us!

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