



SEASON 2, EPISODE 7: CAN HYBRID WORKPLACES HELP US CLOSE THE GENDER GAP AT WORK?

VIDEO 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 society. Whether you are a salaried employee, an entrepreneur or 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 place a better place for all.

I'm Savitha Nanjappa, Success Coach, founder of Success with Savitha and your podcast host. In this episode, we talk to an HR leader on how adopting a hybrid work model with human connection in the office & remote work on some days, can help more women stay on and succeed at work. Shruti Swaroop is the Founder of Embrace Consulting - an organization that enables organizations to become more inclusive. With over two decades of international Human Resources management experience across US, UK, and India. Shruti brings a global perspective to her Inclusion interventions, coaching practices, and consulting engagements. She is a certified coach with over 2500 hours of coaching experience a TEDx speaker and speaks on stage often. Shruti's articles have been published in the HR director magazine, UK and her blogs are published in the NASSCOM community regularly. Listen in as we talk about the Hybrid Workplace & Closing the gender gap at work.

Savitha

Hi, and welcome to the Vaahini Connect Podcast Shruti. Thank you for joining us today to talk about hybrid workplaces and closing the gender gap at work. Welcome. And I'm looking forward to this conversation.

Shruti

Thank you so much for having me here Savitha, it's wonderful to be here and to be discussing such a pertinent topic.



Shruti

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Savitha

Of course, and with that the first question coming to you right now, for me, which is, the hybrid workplace, as we all know, it has been around in some organizations pre COVID. But today, it is the norm in many places, whether in terms of a combined physical virtual work model, or, you know, increased time flexibility. While it has many benefits, which I have definitely benefited from, it has also been tricky, because of the challenges that come with it. How are female employees as well as organizations calculating the pros and cons around it, when it comes to productivity and work satisfaction? What have you observed?

Shruti

Let me take a step back; you started by saying that it has been around for a while in many organizations, and yes, it has been around. In fact, when we look at a global workforce, organizations across the globe have had flexible working hours for years and years. I have worked abroad and I know the kind of flexibility we've had, the kind of work environment we've had. And we've never had those questions about how productive somebody really is while being at home or flexible working hours working from home and questions like that. Pandemic has changed the way.

A few things that we are seeing is that there are quite a few organizations that are very focused on bringing people back into the workforce, because it does make a difference into the collaboration, the informal get-togethers, the cultural aspect of it, you know, the company culture, it does make a difference into overall performance, productivity, cohesiveness, so the positives are huge. And right now I'm talking general, not just women, I'm saying a few things that will happen; so one is access to information and resources, people who are at work will obviously always have more access to information and resources as against people who are working remotely.

The other thing that's going to happen is that like all of us, there will be a power play that is going to be there. And the biggest thing in hybrid is that power play, you know, I am looking at the boss, every day I am coming to work every day I have more access to information, versus somebody who's not going to be there. And hence the dynamics between somebody who's remote working and somebody who's there is going to be huge, it will be a clear power play there. It will need a lot of effort on the part of people who are remote working to understand that this is a conscious decision I have taken and hence I may not get certain things, but I am getting certain things as a person.

So I think that is the first thing that people need to be aware that it is a bargain. It will happen and I'm doing it for a reason and then be very clear about why you've picked up that opportunity for a reason. That's one. From an organization point of view, I think even for organizations having people who are remote, there are many organizations globally who have roles, which are only remote roles. And so even when they advertise, they'll be like, okay, this is only a remote role, this is not going to be a work from office. So, it's very important that even for organizations, once they are aware that this role is like that, the expectations are according to that.



Now, even from an organization perspective, I think, the moment you're advertising something, which is a remote role, having the same kind of expectations that you would have, from someone who's working from office, I think it's an unfair expectation, one has to understand as, as a manager, as a business head, that this role will be remote, the person will have different kind of turnaround times, the output will need time. And we've seen that in the pandemic, you know, the two years of pandemic where you can give outputs, to people to deliver, but it will take slightly longer for people to adjust, to settle and to come around with the output that they are expected to deliver and the output may not be the way it is going to be. So that expectation will have to be there clearly from a manager's side as well.

When we give a piece of work to be done, obviously, if I have somebody in front of me, I can actually just sit across the table, have a whiteboard, draw it out, okay, this is how it's supposed to be. But in a remote working, you can't. And you will use those whiteboard tools in all the technology forums to express that, but there will this always be a gap.

So I think those are some of the things one needs to keep in mind that there is going to be a pro, that there's a there's a cost benefit to it, there is a time benefit to it. But the con is that there will be some lag, some performance, some productivity, and some belongingness. And I speak a lot about diversity inclusion, and I keep saying you will have certain gaps. You know, there's one more diversity now with the hybrid work. So one has to keep all of those things in mind. I hope I was able to answer.

Savitha

Yes. I think what you rightly pointed out is all those subtle gaps that is not so obvious when you think you think okay, everything is a prototype, but there are these subtle cons that do exist. And I want to move on to my next question with that, which is when adopting a hybrid work model, technology can play an important role in ensuring efficiency and team connectivity. How is the human connection at work maintained? And how can that translate to more women staying on in the workforce?

Shruti

We have all seen that side, when the pandemic started, I remember in one of the webinars, I had made that statement, that what the world is going through, the world went through in those two years was unprecedented, not a living person had seen that kind of a life. And so now we have that precedent. So when we talk about technology, and then we talk about human connect, I think that two things here, one is we know for a fact women bring more emotions to work than men. Irrespective of the level irrespective of the geography globally, we know women do bring more emotions to work. So the need for a human connect for a lady is far more than that for men.



So we have technology to connect. But I think the part which is most important is that having somebody to talk about those fears, talk about the doubts, talk about the uncertainties that come with any rule and having the ability to reach out. I think what my recommendation has always been to my clients, if you can ensure that there is a proper roster in terms of reaching out to people who are remotely working, irrespective of who the person is man or woman doesn't matter. Where you're able to reach out to people and ask them, okay, what are some of the challenges you're facing? What's going right? What's not going right?

What is that little extra that we can do for you? Where are you filling the gap? What is the gap? Why do you think that there is a gap?

So that need in the coaching parlance, what we call just, you know, reaching out to people and helping them understand their own gaps. Most of us are not aware of why we react the way we react, most of us don't know our triggers. So just having those conversations with people to help them figure out the gap both as a person and as a profession. You know, the power play that we were talking about, most people won't even realize that they are reacting in a different way, because there's a power play at work, and it's making them feel insecure. And hence that my insecurity is going to make me behave very differently. In a meeting on a call, when I attend my office once in like a week or once in a month, whenever I'm coming to work, how am I behaving my triggers, I could be treating somebody differently, or I may want to be treated differently, because on most days, I'm not here. So that understanding on both sides needs to be there. I think businesses also need to understand that this person may need a little more human connect, may need a little more understanding. And that's where we need to reach out to people who are remotely working as well. That you may be out of sight. You're not out of mind, you're not out of consideration, you're not out of our thoughts, and you're not out of opportunities.

Savitha

Your response is a great segue to my next question, which is in a hybrid model, therefore, there's a challenge to ensure that everybody's involved, you know, not only from work, but as part of the work perspective, but also as part of the team and culture building activities that can impact women's careers. How can a hybrid model what's your recommendation. What's your recommendation for, you know, how you can inspire managers to think differently, build organizational culture, making sure you know, there's diversity, making sure women are a key part of it? What are some recommendations that you can think of, or that you'd like to share with us?

Shruti

I think one is that it will be very easy at this point in time to overlook the need for diversity. You know, we are working very hard, we have been working very hard to bring in more women into the workforce. And we know by numbers that the number of women who've left the workforce during the pandemic is huge. It's a point of concern that even senior leaders, middle management they have left because suddenly the workload was too much. And we've seen the numbers dwindle. I mean, it's been a huge setback in terms of the number of years for women in the workforce.



One should we that we need to ensure that diversity is still maintained, irrespective of what kind of diversity we're talking about. So I am not just specifically talking about gender diversity here. I'm saying, we know that diversity leads to innovation, performance, productivity, let's ensure the numbers are maintained. Let's ensure we are doing and we are going out of our way to bring women back into the workforce to bring more to bring different kinds of diversity into the workforce. So that's one and create an inclusive work environment. So focus on creating an environment where people are accepted. And you know, the conversation we've been having where we are creating the human connect, where we are providing infrastructure where we are going out for way to ensure that all kinds of people and this hybrid diversity is taken care of. So that's one.

My second thing for business leaders and for organizations would be that the whole hybrid model needs a lot of support from the families. There are people out here who are using, or they were leveraging this opportunity of hybrid because they want to do something and they have not been able to do it because of whatever – whether it's children, being a caretaker for parents, whether it's opportunities, whether it's timings whatever could be the reason. So if someone is coming back and leveraging that opportunity for hybrid, how can we leverage their strengths? Rather than saying, okay, this is my role, this is a strength it does not fit in - organizations will always have different opportunities for different kinds of people, it's a question of finding those gaps and trying to find an opportunity for people.

So I think point two before it sounds very convoluted, is leverage people who are out there trying to come back and bring in their families with them. So you know, how do I create a connect not just with the individual, but with the families. Because without a family support, this person will not be able to deliver. And ultimately, there is something that you need to be delivered, which is why you're leveraging a hybrid workforce or a gig economy, or flexible working. So that's two. And I think my third thing is, and very, very important. And again, I'm talking from an organization perspective is out of sight shouldn't become out of mind and we will have to ensure that we are reminding ourselves, so the power play can be felt by people, but should not be done by organizations.

Savitha

Which is a challenge.

Shruti

Which is a challenge. I think people have biases, their own thoughts, experiences, value systems, stereotypes, whatever, right? People have insecurities, so people will have those feelings. But if your actions are speaking a different language, then there's data out there, there's fact out there. So then, so people can feel something, but let's not create that difference.

Savitha

But great, great responses, put in diversity, like make them focus and leverage people and their families.



So you know, it can work, it's a win win for all, and so now I want to ask you a very different question, right? So today, when we talk about balancing work from home, it's quite different from what we have experienced from the office, what are some things women will have to relearn? I know you've touched upon this in your, in our first question that I asked you, where you have to know the pros and cons. But what are some things that you think women, as an individual will have to relearn with within this hybrid model space that we are all working in? On? What are some factors that can hinder or enable progress in a hybrid work environment?

Shruti

I am kind of thinking how to frame this because having been in that model myself for many, many years, I'm kind of I'm also thinking from my own perspective as to what went right and what went wrong. I think from an individual's perspective, and this will need a lot of courage, courage, for lack of any other word, I'll use that word courage to actually first understand why am I doing what am I doing whatever I'm doing.

I guess my first question to any individual would be, why are you choosing this model? Is it family? Is it work? Is it convenience? Is it flexibility? What is the real reason behind it? Most of the times people don't even know why they're doing it. It's just convenience. I have been home for so many years. And hence, I don't want to live that nine to six job. That could be one reason, it could be that as a woman, I want to be there for my children. That could be another reason. It could be that I really don't want to travel, the only job available is like 40 kilometers away. And I don't want to make that travel. And hence I'm comfortable being whatever may be the reason. And there's no right and wrong. But unless you know why you're doing what you're doing, it will always create a dissonance.

I think my first thing is, do you know why you've chosen whatever you've chosen? Work from home, work from office, wherever, whatever, whatever? Second thing is, what is it that you want to give away to get what you're getting? So what is the sacrifice? What is it that's at stake? Okay, it's very important to understand that. Sometimes we put ourselves into a situation and then, and I am like that, let me tell you this, I jump and then I figured out, you know, we'll jump into the swimming pool and realize, Oh, my God, it's very deep. Oh. But a lot of times people do that. Even when they have done that Excel sheet. And they've thought it through. A lot of times, the reality of the situation is visible only once you're in the situation. So what is it that you sacrificing? What is it that? And is the sacrifice good? Are you happy with what you're sacrificing? Because you may not be comfortable with it. So I think the first two things for any person, irrespective of the gender is, is this. Why am I doing what I'm doing? And what am I going to sacrifice for it? It's very difficult to live with a sacrifice that creates dissonance.

Savitha

But I think what I'm taking away from everything that you've said is take time to reflection, and really take some time to understand why you want to do what you want to do, why making these decisions, but also on the flip side is that a lot of people take these decisions, and then you learn from experience, of course. And then as we come towards this interview,



I just have one last question for you.

I know that the hybrid model is making organizations realize that more work needs to be done like you rightly said, you know, because of the pandemic more women are left the workplace. And so they need to really work hard on closing the gender gap. Have you already seen some changes being made in your experience? To encourage the Hybrid culture, to be inclusive of all, have you already seen that on the ground?

Shruti

We have seen organizations working hard to ensure that managers are better equipped to deal with a hybrid work model. So managers were trained, they were coached, they were learning programs that were rolled out biases, you know, coaching, how to be a mentor, and all of those which we have seen, even during the pandemic, even during the pandemic. I know the number of organizations that reached out to us saying Shruti we really need to help in terms of figuring out because you have a manager here, you have people spread all across, how do you create that cohesiveness? How do you create collaboration, and now with a very different thing where somebody's in front of you somebody's not there, I think we are noticing, far more emphasis on being a coach than being a mentor for leaders. So yes, organizations are doing that.

Whether organizations are doing that specifically for women or not, I think it's too early to say. I think hybrid is here to stay. Even though I have to also admit the number of times in a week I hear some leader says in another six months, we got to get everybody back, another year, everything is going to be back to normal. The number of people who say hybrid is here to stay, and we prefer it this way is also huge. I know for organizations that have let go of their office leaves, who have let go of office spaces and all of that, and we like work as long as your output is being delivered. You're fine, wherever you are. So yeah, organizations are doing their bit how long it stays, how well it works, is actually dependent on each one of us doing our bit.

Savitha

Yeah. Yeah, I think that's a great way to end this interview. Because I think where options weren't there, we now have so many options. And people have the choice to choose what kind of model that they want to work and it's not just a one size fits all. Thank you for sharing and shining the light on this whole hybrid workplace. So thank you for being so open and you know, sharing your thoughts thinking aloud even with us. Thank you for your time today.

Shruti

Thank you for having me here and it was wonderful to have this discussion with you.