

**inclusion includes all:
shifting mindsets
beyond HR teams**

abstract

HR teams are the flag bearers of inclusion in all organizations. But, inclusion is not an activity that can be decentralized unlike other activities like recruitment or onboarding. Creating a culture of inclusion involves appropriate behaviour and actions by each member of the organization. It involves a complete mindset shift. This article will explore the common roadblocks that the HR community faces in their inclusion efforts and what can be done to nudge and shift the mindsets of all employees.



Ramesh (name changed to protect the identity of the individual) works in the HR team of a multinational company based in Bangalore. He is a cis gay individual, and has been out for the last 6 years. Before joining the HR team, he was working in an MNC in a non-HR role. He shares that he constantly tried to break into the HR team of a multinational organization with inclusive policies, because then he would know that at least the 'team is inclusive' and there are higher chances of avoiding biases at the workplace.

Shreya (name changed to protect the identity of the individual) is a trans woman who works in a global IT firm. Her life, journey and struggles are very unique, and as she unfolds her journey, we realize that lack of acceptance from family, working with a NGO in an unknown city, not finding a place to live in and even begging on the streets are some of the hard life experiences that she had to face before she reach this position at work. One would expect that her coworkers would also admire

her resilience and help her achieve more. Sadly, this is not the case.

This is one of the many situations that LGBTQ+ members face at work. And so, they look for support from the ecosystem. There is a clear expectation that the HR team will support them through the process and also sensitize teams to broaden their mindset. Talking about the expectations, Rene says, "There are policies, but HR should focus on better implementation of them and not take them lightly. People should talk about them repeatedly to put them in every employee's mind."

However, this is easier said than done. Let's flip the narrative and understand it from the HR perspective now. Zainab Patel is the HR Director: Inclusion & Diversity, KPMG in India, an organization that is known for its inclusive policies. Yet, there are challenges. She says, "There are always going to be biases, people's attitudes, culture, religion, perspectives coming into place. And as a people's manager, this is a challenge that we all deal with."

She says that while the HR teams are very friendly in her organization, things change when she interacts with her co-workers. So much so that they come for PRIDE marches with her to showcase their allyship, but forget all about it the moment the spotlight is switched off.





the roadblocks to inclusion: from an HR perspective

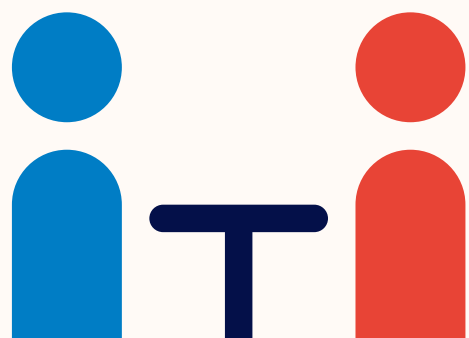
As part of Randstad's recent study, '[Inclusion Without Exception: Where India Inc. stands with respect to the LGBTQ+ community](#)', we spoke with leaders in the HR fraternity and understood various aspects of inclusion at their respective workplaces. As they shared more about the tangible policies and practices, they also highlighted the questions many employees have while they implement inclusion initiatives at work:

will my team accept it?

HR teams are sometimes faced with a situation where the team leader fears negative reactions from team members towards a new joinee from the LGBTQ+ community. While smaller teams can still be managed, it becomes difficult when

the resistance comes from business unit heads, who are themselves not sensitized.

"Hiring a member from the LGBTQ+ community is the least of my challenges. The bigger question to ask is if the leadership team in India would be comfortable sitting with them in the same spaces...in the cafeteria and in informal forums?" - a senior HR leader who works in an IT MNC



let's hire for so that we have a face of inclusion

This is a situation where HR teams may not be able to provide a fulfilling job to the members of the LGBTQ+ community, because the intent behind hiring may only be to showcase inclusivity to the ecosystem. In such cases, both the hire and HR teams feel disengaged with the D&I agenda.

This aspect was brought forth by an anonymous respondent in the qualitative survey. She reveals that, "I am the face of inclusion for the organization. I participate in all events around D&I as the company representative. But, beyond that, there is no growth in my role that I am offered here."

let's offer her anything... who else will hire her?

As shocking as it may sound, this is a common sentiment that members of the LGBTQ+ community have to counter when they apply for new jobs. Rekha V, Head of HR, Siam V, talks about one of her previous employers and says, "When I tried to get rehired into my previous org they offered to pay Rs.12000 as salary when I was drawing 12 lakhs per annum before my transition at the same organization." This is also a sentiment that HR teams face with some business leaders.

we are already stretched, why complicate hiring further?

If there were challenges outside of HR teams, there are challenges within also. Geetha Thiagarajan, Geo HR Head, APAC for Finastra provides a perspective here. She says that when HR teams are entrusted with the task of hiring from the LGBTQ+ community, their immediate reaction is not always positive. Recruiters already have defined gender diversity targets and specific Turnaround Times (TAT) and to add another dimension to their work is initially daunting, until alignments are brought about.

Taking into account all of the above perspectives, from the LGBTQ+ community and from the HR community, it is evident that what India Inc. needs is a shift in the mindset when it comes to accepting diversity. As Shruti Chakravarty, Chief Advisor, Mariwala Health Institute says, "In the corporate world, LGBT is collapsed together. People are not looking at it individually – the sexualities and genders. It's basically us and 'all of them'."



so, the big question to ask is what does it take to shift this mindset? Here are some starting points:

focusing on the individual

It is important to create a culture that looks at individuals in terms of their unique value. This is irrespective of their gender and background. This will help in removing stereotypes, unconscious biases and any other preconceived prejudices that may emerge while viewing the person from the 'societal' lens. This is a long-term change, and the mindset shift may take long to appear and get infused with the culture of the organization, but the conversations need to begin. As your organization evolves in its zone of focus of LGBTQ+ inclusion ([hyperlink Equity vs Equality article](#)), the shift will be organic.

"We are trying to educate people to graduate beyond labels - emerging from casteism, regionalism, racism and the ethnic disparities. The focus of our work is to recognize different narratives about individuals, experience them as a composite of identities and it shifts from geography to geography. This nuance gets completely lost as soon as you attach a label to them" - Pallavi Tandon, Senior Manager, Global Learning, Expedia Group

assurance of problem-solution approach

Employees feel that one group is being favoured over the other when they are apprehensive that their problems/issues are not being addressed by the organization. When you assure employees that irrespective of any 'label' of the employee, all situations will be heard and managed, then the mindset shift begins to happen.

Assure employees that while policies form the broad framework, provisions within the policies can always be created for unique solutions that address unique problems.

"The policies are designed and reviewed with the intent that anybody and everybody who's coming from any background, culture, mindset or orientation, is able to utilize one or the other policy for their unique situation. The idea is to have policies which are addressing as many unique situations as possible." - Shikha Gupta, Director HR, Schneider Electric

"There are specific spaces for people to timeout, if they need to timeout, but it's for anybody because a human being may need that time and not because you are specially abled or are not cis-gendered." - Pallavi Tandon, Senior Manager, Global Learning, Expedia Group

sharing more, caring more

Create forums for everyone to share and making sharing a part of the culture. Members of the LGBTQ+ community feel empowered if they can openly share about their feelings at work, and 'come out'. "There were a couple of other colleagues I came out to, they were pretty excited about it because they didn't have friends from the community. But that's again stereotyping – being too cool about it.", says Swapnil, a 28 year old bisexual software developer at Virtusa in Bangalore.

Becoming allies at work (hyper link to Allies by Force or by choice article) means committing to the concept of sharing and caring for all co-workers.

The thumb rule is that if the LGBTQ+ members are expected to share their experiences and expectations, then so are all the other employees, irrespective of their gender orientation and expression.

We have hired a couple of lawyers and senior people at the firm and call it the 'Chamber of Acceptance' where all PRIDE related issues are escalated." - Alok Kulhar, identifies himself as a gay man & heads Talent acquisition at AXA XL in Gurgaon



leaders take the lead

Leaders play a great role in shaping the culture and thought process of the organization. Based on the qualitative survey, leaders in India Inc. can be categorized into the following types:

- **Passive**

These are the leaders who are following the mandates set by their global teams for the diversity and inclusion agenda, but are not personally invested in it. However, this is visible to all the members of the LGBTQ+ community, those who are employed in the same organization and outside of it too, since the community is close-knit.

"A company is trying to show that it is inclusive, but hiring at a lower level. That doesn't work for me." - Tanvi, a TEDx speaker and a trans woman working as a consultant for a multinational financial servicing company"

- **Supportive**

These are leaders who are supportive of the D&I agenda, and take initiatives around inclusion, but it is mostly the HR teams that are driving the inclusion efforts.

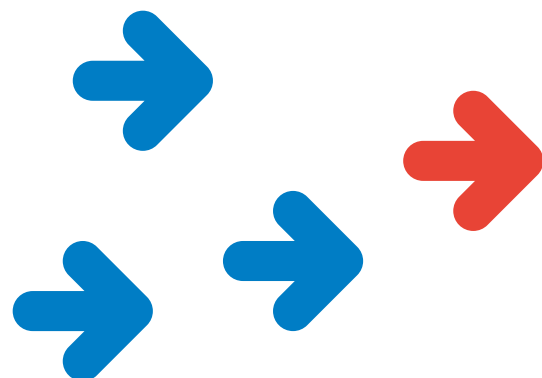
"...anyone from leadership doesn't insist on even attending the seminars." - Swapnil, a 28 year old bisexual software developer at Virtusa in Bangalore

- **Facilitative**

These are leaders who may not necessarily be from the LGBTQ+ community, but are committed to making workplaces inclusive and fair for them.

"A global leader wrote a book around inclusion and during an event, our MD moderated the panel discussion where the book and other aspects of LGBTQ+ inclusion were discussed." - X, who identifies himself as a trans man and currently works in a corporate based in Bangalore

The efforts of inclusion by the HR community or other groups can only succeed if all the employees think alike when it comes to shedding prejudices. As simple as it may sound, the task ahead is arduous. Randstad's latest report 'Inclusion Without Exception: Where India Inc. stands with respect to the LGBTQ+ community', is a good starting point to understand the authentic views of the LGBTQ+ community members employed with Indian Corporates and learn from the best practices of other organizations.



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