

making glocal work for
the LGBTQ+ community:
how to better adapt
international mandates for
India Inc's unique challenges

abstract

As more employers in India strive to be LGBTQ+ friendly and inclusive, global policies and best practices seem to show the way forward. Yet, in practice, not all such policies work well, and nor does the Indian LGBTQ+ community unhesitatingly applaud all of them. While global mandates can result in the D&I function gaining additional funding and prominence, it does not automatically repeal long-held prejudice. We look at going beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to consider policies as well as implementation mechanisms that take into account the reality of Indian society as well as workplace dynamics.





As India Inc. gradually begins to make inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community an explicit part of its Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) mandate, one thing is clear: much of the push towards this still comes from 'global HQ'. This is a double-edged sword; on the one hand, given that Indian society still has deep-rooted prejudices against the community, a global mandate is perhaps necessary to help Indian employers make faster progress. On the other hand, when global policies are pushed through with insufficient understanding of the local cultural context or in fact, the specific challenges of the Indian LGBTQ+ community, the implementation is bound to be lacking.

Based on our new study at Randstad, '[Inclusion Without Exception: Where India Inc. stands with respect to the LGBTQ+ community](#)', we look at how you can adapt

your employer's global policies on LGBTQ+ inclusion, to work in the Indian context.

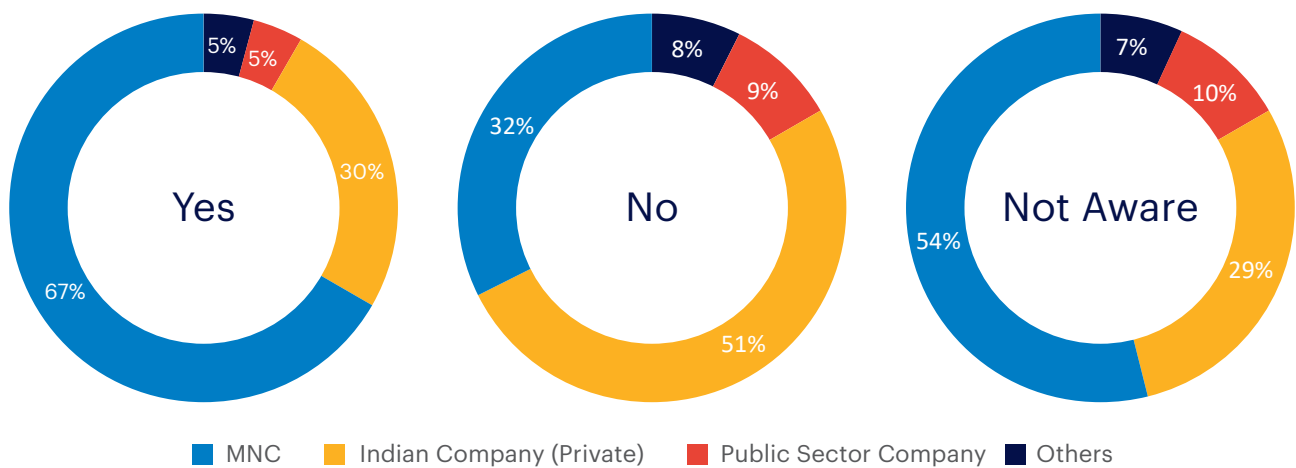
First, some numbers to set the context; as part of this study, besides in-depth conversations with community members and HR leaders, 201 Business and HR leaders also answered a quantitative survey about their inclusion efforts.

Talking about the efforts made by the organizations in Indian Industry to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, about 44% respondents agreed to having specific policies for LGBTQ+ inclusion in place of which 70% were from MNCs and 26% were from Indian companies.

Clearly, global companies are doing better vis-a-vis Indian companies as far as LGBTQ+ inclusion at the workplace is concerned.



does your org have policies / processes for LGBTQ+ inclusion?



global policies, local barriers **policies don't eliminate bias**

Global mandates for LGBTQ+ inclusion typically emerge from business imperatives which could be tangible (e.g. legal compliances on non-discrimination, growing links between innovation and diversity) as well as intangible (e.g. need to build a positive employer brand, good corporate citizenship efforts).

In India too, there is growing awareness of the need for inclusion policies and efforts to go beyond the gender lens. Why then, can global policies and best practices not directly be rolled out into Indian workplaces? There are a few reasons.



While India is certainly not the only country to have a history of prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community, the truth is that even today, it is widespread. The striking down of Article 377 was a watershed moment in terms of the community's very right to exist being acknowledged; yet, this is only a beginning and much work needs to be done in terms of eliminating bias and ignorance at a societal level. Employees, including senior leaders are very much part of this society and thus, subject to the same biases.

While global mandates can result in the D&I function gaining additional funding and prominence, it does not automatically repeal long-held prejudice. As some of the HR leaders responsible for implementing global D&I policies told us (confidentially), the first uphill battle they had was to convince leaders in India of the need for and rightness of such policies.

Without strong leadership support, policies are rarely well adapted to the Indian context and moreover, others take their cues from the leader's attitude.

Geetha Thiagarajan, Geo HR Head, APAC, Finastra, when talking of her company's growing focus on including the LGBTQ+ community, attributes it partly to the commitment at the senior-most levels, saying, "With things like this, you need the senior most person in the management or the board member to have an equally, equally invested agenda." The same situation holds good at every level in the workplace.

where are the legal frameworks?

Some legal frameworks that exist in many Western countries are still absent in India - indeed, they may still be long in coming. For instance, same-sex marriages or even civil partnerships are not recognised here. When it comes to the transgender community, Indian law does not make it easy for people to affirm their chosen gender identity, leading to many trans people facing major problems with legal documentation. There are many such barriers for which benefits and other such policies need to be adapted from their global avatar.

the community's needs may be different

The Indian LGBTQ+ community is not a monolith. Cis-gender gay and lesbian people, for e.g. face less explicit bias, especially if their sexual orientation is undisclosed. Many transgender people, on the other hand, may have a history of family and social exclusion, denial of education and employment opportunities - all leading to their reduced employability and need for additional training. Another point to note is that compared to the workplace environment in some Western countries, in India, there is often an expectation for colleagues to also be one's friends. What this means is that when LGBTQ+ people feel excluded, it hits them doubly hard - there is no rigid compartmentalization between the workplace and one's personal life. What Indian LGBTQ+ community members need from employers therefore will also vary, and global policies including benefits cannot be dropped here in a standardized manner.



5 good practices to adapt global policies in the Indian context

Including LGBTQ people in the policy and the implementation

Perhaps the first step to adapting a global D&I policy is to ensure that you have community members on board. This helps to make your policies relevant to their realities in the Indian context, rather than well-meaning but impractical.

As Ritushree Panigrahi, a lawyer and D&I professional who works in this space says, “If you want complete inclusion, then first before making the policies, form a committee which has representation of everyone, the non-binary, the transgender, the lesbian woman and the gay man to gauge what their community is feeling. You cannot have binary people making policies. It is like seven men sitting in a room deciding about women’s rights.”

Adapt training to the reality of widespread ignorance

D&I and HR teams in India will need to take the lead to develop culture-specific gender sensitivity training that goes beyond mandated formal programs. The reality is that many employees (and leaders) come from a place of ignorance and unexamined homophobia. As one HR leader who preferred to stay anonymous says, “Our first challenge was to align the leadership and now the leadership comes to the HR team and asks them, How would people react? Will they be ok sharing coffee spaces with people from the community”

To enable people to question their own biases and assumptions, we need creative training that includes alternatives such as film screenings and discussions, role playing and opportunities to listen to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Otherwise, sensitivity training only results in employees who may either hide their homophobia or be superficial allies who don’t actually enable change.

As KVJ Dr. Sumitra Prasad, Founder, General Secretary, DORAI Foundation (which works to support LGBTQ+ people from their teenage years until employment) says, “Everyone’s driven by the need to do something good for the feel-good factor. They don’t get out of the comfort zone to actually understand the community.”



Make inclusion a clear and recognised part of leadership goals

One of the best practices that has worked for companies to make LGBTQ+ inclusion part of their culture, is to make it part of the KPI for all leaders so that it is recognized as an essential part of leadership and business. Moreover, it is important to recognize time spent on inclusion activities for all employees, not just leaders, and to account for this time spent in a concrete way, such as making it part of performance conversations.

Pallavi Tandon, Senior Manager, Global Learning, Expedia Group, who says that the approach of inclusion is interwoven in everything that people do at Expedia, adds, "Focus is on the human part and not the job title etc, so volunteering is a big thing at Expedia where people commit upto 10% of their time to D&I also."

Adapt your ERGs to the local context

Creating Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) is a common practice in companies that are active in the D&I space. There are groups specific to women, certain minorities, for members of the LGBTQ+ communities and other groups. However, there are two aspects of creating and maintaining these groups that need to be adapted at the local level.

First, it is important to rework for Indian ERGs the guidelines and actions

suggested in Western contexts. For example, gender-fluid dressing may not be as common a practice in Indian workplaces as it would be in American or South East Asian countries. So, if you want to enable this practice in your Indian office, what would be the steps to follow? Would you need a formal sensitization drive or would you need a role play for the team? These are points to consider as a member or as an initiator of the ERG.

The second aspect is that sometimes groups may exist in India without the explicit presence of core group members - or if they exist, they may not be comfortable enough yet for disclosure. The HR Head of a Financial Services company who chooses to stay anonymous says, "People do not know how to react to specific situations pertaining to minority groups. I am deliberately using the word minority because they are actually in very small numbers in organizations. When you handle an ERG of the minority group (caste or religion also in India), you first need to have that set of population also."

One way to look at this could be that some ERGs are initially led by allies, but keep in mind the goal of including members of the target group as leaders, as more people become comfortable with disclosure - in fact, ERGs need to play a significant role in making such disclosure comfortable.

Help create an emotional connect

It's also important to ensure that these conversations happen at the team level, and not just at organizational level. Zainab Patel, HR Director: Inclusion & Diversity, KPMG in India says, "Inclusion conversations are now being drilled down to business unit levels, especially those teams where there are members from the community. There are conversations with managers and teams for sensitization and a buddy is assigned to the new joinee."

Companies can create more opportunities for people who have voluntarily disclosed their identity, to talk about it in company forums, company podcasts and videos or even in small groups if they are comfortable.

Shikha Gupta, Director HR, Schneider Electric highlights a podcast by a community member on "the human aspect of being a member of the community and the emotions experienced" which has been very helpful in this regard.

Ultimately, true inclusion happens when people accept alternate ways of being genuine, whether it is in the context of gender or sexuality or anything else. This happens when there is an emotional connection and the opportunity to see that others are also "just like us" despite the differences we may have. That is when we get closer to bringing our unique selves to work - safely, comfortably, and creatively.



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