Chapter 17
ODL Systems for Women Training in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Bridging the gender diversity gap has become a key KPI for most organizations today. Diversity teams are constantly planning interventions to recruit and retain women in the workforce to increase their representation. One of the most common interventions is to provide women with training to equip them with the necessary skills and competencies (e.g., career management, social, management, and leadership) to stay and grow in their careers. Corporates today are relying on online learning to offer these training programs for cost-effective, flexible, and long-duration learning. However, there is a lack of guidelines for the successful implementation of online women training programs. This study aims to provide a framework to guide the planning and implementation of these programs. The framework is arrived at based on insights and best practices from a leading Online University that offers women training programs in India and south Africa. Participant feedback from the programs and participant perceptions on online training programs are also used to further refine framework.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender diversity has been gaining a lot of attention lately from organizations and governments. Gender equality has in fact been identified as a sustainable development goal (SDG5) by the United nations. Several measures, programs and initiatives, including initiatives for the use of ICT for gender equality are constantly being put into place to help bridge the gender-diversity gap, since studies have shown the significant economic, financial and social impact that can be realized if more women are in the workplace. For organizations, the challenge is not as much as to bring women into the workforce but also to retain women in the workforce and encourage them to 'lean in' (Sandberg 2013) to grow in their careers and assume leadership positions. Women tend to quit their jobs during the middle of their careers, due to family commitments. This creates a break in their careers, significant loss of knowledge and talent for the organization and is a struggle for the women to reenter the workforce. This trend is

especially so in emerging countries where the socio-cultural expectations are that women are the primary care giver for children and parents/parents in law and in countries where gender discrimination is still woven through legal and social norms (UNwomen.org). So what can be done to retain these women in the workforce while they tide through the stages of their life – marriage, mobility, maternity (Kumar 2015) that cause them to leave their jobs? How can gender diversity in the workforce be sustained in such emerging nations?

To address these issues, organizations now have exclusive diversity teams to look into sustainable and low cost interventions. These interventions include setting up of women forums, women communities, speaker sessions, child-care facilities, work from home and flexible work-hours options and last but not the least, training programs (Evans et al, 2014) to help develop competencies and skills that women may need to grow their careers while managing their family commitments. Research indicates that training and professional development opportunities should be made available for women throughout their careers for retaining them in the workforce (Davis 2012, Knight 2012). Studies also support that women only training and development programs provide opportunities for women to develop self-awareness, undertake challenging assignments, improve their self- confidence, develop leadership skills, learn strategies for balancing work and personal life, and build strong support networks (e.g. SixlDaniell and Wong 2015) all of which are critical for them to grow their careers.

Women training programs are across all levels and vary in content accordingly: for entry level and young women professionals to help them build necessary work-life balance, social and communication skills and for senior women leaders to equip them with leadership and management skills. These programs are offered in tandem with their regular work and are limited to one or two training programs a year lasting for two-three days each time. Providing continuous training in tandem with regular work, for women who already juggle multiple responsibilities and who may quit work during the different stages of their life, is a challenge and not a sustainable option. In addition, in some organizations the women may be located across continents and to bring them all together for training is a logistical nightmare and a non-sustainable solution in terms of costs and effectiveness.

Many organizations, therefore are now leveraging online platforms to provide training programs for their women employees. The UN has also advocated for the use of ICT to help in gender equality and to make education, knowledge, resources more accessible for women and girls. Specifically, to advance women's leadership and participation, the UN has an online platform where women can connect and get information on how to run for office and get elected. They have a global Knowledge Gateway to empower women with knowledge, resources, networking and training. They strongly believe that technology can be a game-changer for women and girls and will be a powerful means to advance women's rights, empowerment and gender equality (UNwomen.org).

Online programs are now offered by several universities, training institutes, organization's training departments over their own platforms. Examples include Coursera, GlobalNxt University, EdX etc. These platforms and programs have gained prominence all over the world for their benefits such as scalability, flexibility, cost effectiveness, access to education, global content and faculty and have emerged as a sustainable option for women and organizations to support continuous training. However, there are limited studies that can guide organizations in the implementation of this sustainable option of online training programs for the women employees with the aim of bridging the gender diversity gap. Although there are studies on online learning and online education, several questions exist concerning the design and delivery of such online courses for women in the corporate environment.

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