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"Unlocking the potential of Person with Disabilities during Lockdown by IT & BPO Industries"

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Abstract

"Persons with disabilities (PwDS) are particularly prone to the rigours of disasters. It is our social responsibility to acknowledge and comprehend their needs....and make response mechanisms adequate and inclusive." - The Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2019)

PwD face multiple challenges to survive. No way, Covid 19 and its impact was a welcome move in India. Its impact and suffering is wider in nature and disappointing in concern. It has badly impacted on lives, businesses, and employment. The Covid 19 has brought all together the different future of work. As many industries recorded the severe losses in their businesses on the other hand, it may have brought some positive steps for some workers with disabilities to make them work from home easier and acceptable. As we all aware that pandemic has shaken the traditional work structures and forcing the employers to redraft their organization policies to make their staff more productive and regular. It is helping an organization to broaden their workplace accommodation. According to census 2011, 26.8 million people in India were categorized as "Person with Disabilities (PwD) which means 2.21 % are under this category. 15.7 million were in the age group of 15-59 years i.e. which is considered the official age for participation in the workforce. Among these, around one third (5.8 million) were employed as main workers, of which less than 20 % were women. The rest are marginal workers, or seasonal employees. Before pandemic, Compared to people without disabilities, people with disabilities (PwDs) have very poor participation in labour force which results in their unemployment, underemployment, and lower wages earned and lower educational attainments. However, it is stated in various research that PwDs find it difficult to travel and reasonable work accommodation is a crucial factor for their employment, the work from home option may be beneficial for them and helps to unlikely reduce wage gaps between person with and without disabilities. The purpose of this study is to assess whether Covid 19 impacted to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities and offer them suitable

workplace accommodation to perform their task effectively in IT & BPO Industry. It will also highlight some of the practices adopted by companies in ensuring the inclusion, safety and well-being of PwD during the pandemic and changes adapted by organization towards their employment. The significance of the study is to list ways to strengthen the inclusion agenda. Other companies may find this study relevant to adopt, replicate and scale up some of the practices mentioned in this research to create a more inclusive and diverse workforce. The research methodology will be based on quality content analysis of published primary and secondary reports of company and governments to analyze unlocking the potential of people with disabilities during Covid 19.

Introduction

The Impact of Covid 19 had a swift and agile impact on people's lives and livelihoods across the world. In India, the nationwide lockdown in its all states was announced on multiple phases to contain the spread of disease. There was not a single communities across the boundaries who did not face the challenges, but the challenges faced by people with disabilities (PwD), found itself more vulnerable than others. According to Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment – department of Empowerment for PwD for PwD communities, it is estimated that there are around 1 billion PwD globally.

When we talk about the new normal in workplace, working from home is a unanimous consent. There are several discussions, webinars and restructuring of organization policies are being created to make work from home, the future of work. The organization which was at initial level, was uncomfortable to adapt this practice, are now widened its policies and practices towards working from home. Adaptation is crucial for survival and growth. Employees are finding their own way to be more relevant in digitized world and minimizing the boundaries at across world.

Millions of people currently staying at home, and working remotely. The use of internet, and digital technologies have gone to manifolds. People are connecting to their colleagues through email, mobiles and video conferences. Though, no one will deny the impact of Covid 19 on destructive side, the fact is also needs to accept it that this has also pushed us to adapt the accommodation at workplace at this stage which was either declined earlier or not thought of. Many companies are changing their organizational policies and practices to include PwD.

There are many facilities and training provided to PwDs for being into the mainstream employment.

As the Census report 2011 is not encouraging in terms of PwD employment at workplace, it is reported that organizations are striving to create a balance work policies so that PwD also get an opportunity to earn their livelihood with dignity. The work from home upswing during pandemic may have long benefit for many workers, especially people with disabilities. The main advantage for working from home is that it provides flexibility, frequent breaks, avoid commuting, sort of stress free environment and frequent leaves for health purpose. However, there is a potential side of disadvantages too such as greater social distance, imbalance between work-life, promotion and training opportunities physically along with peer learning and physical environment. All of these impacts more could be seen on

marginalized group of communities especially PwD however, there is a policy interest in expanding work at home options for work with disabilities. The World Health Organization specifically endorsed telework for people with disabilities during the pandemic. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment – Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) issued Comprehensive Disability Inclusive Guidelines for the protection and safety of PwD (Divyangjan) during Covid-19 and issued a clear instruction to the organizations for allowing PwD from work from home.

The corporate India was agile and quickly devised the system to enable community. The new systems and processes were created to keep PwD in minds and their needs are addressed by the organizations to give them more inclusive workplace. Physical barriers create a hurdle for an organization to hire PwD. Due to Covid 19, the option for working from home was available, therefore organization dived to utilize this option at fullest to offer employment opportunities to PwD at workplace. Companies also focused on the safety, well-being of the employees along with career continuity of their employees.

This research paper highlight some of the best practices of select companies and highlight their effective organization policies for inclusive employment during pandemic.

Literature Review

Schur Liza & others (2020) concluded in their research did pre and post covid 19 analysis related with work from and the productivity of employees with and without disabilities. In their research they have found out that, rates of working primarily at home are higher among workers with disabilities across broad occupational, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and education groups. Though working from home is a desirable concern for employing people with disabilities however, it should not be used by employers to avoid making reasonable accommodations or

to avoid incorporating workers with disabilities into workplace cultures and making efforts to ensure an environment that values and respects all employees.

The CII India Business and disability Network (2020) (IBDN) report highlighted good practices by industry during Covid 19 for tapping the potential of PwD. In this report, IBDN conducted a survey of National Business and Disability Networks (NBDNs) among their member organizations on the support they are providing to company members to respond to Covid 19 and to include PwD. The survey captured the best practices adopted by the business organizations for PwD employment during Covid 19.

National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) (2020) published a report on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in India during the COVID – 19 Crisis. The report highlighted the critical issues faced by people with disabilities during the COVID – 19 crisis in India; and advocated for a comprehensive and coordinated government response to meet the issues and concerns of people with disabilities during this crisis (and any subsequent ones), protect their rights, and secure their access to protection and safety. The report also

presented a DATA FROM NCPEDP'S SURVEY of 1,067 (approx. 73% male, 27% female) persons with disabilities which showed that over 73% of those interviewed were facing particular challenges on account of the lockdown. Out of those facing particular challenges, 57% said they were facing a financial crisis, 13% spoke of challenges in accessing rations, while 9% were facing obstacles in access to healthcare and medical aid.

WHO Report (2020) found that due to Covid 19, PwD faced many challenges and it has impacted them physically, emotionally and financially. Reports revealed that Persons with Disability, some patients with chronic diseases and the impoverished were severely affected by this. This study was done to understand how the lives of these populations has been affected by doing a countrywide telephonic survey. The common general issues included being confined to a small space and Loss of Job/ Loss of income. Food was the next issue with the disabled. Partly because of finances but partly also because of access issues. Disruption of familiar routine was one of the issues faced by the person with disability. Safety and behaviour issues were common to those with autism and intellectual impairment. Closure of healthcare facilities for rehabilitation disrupted the normal rehabilitation of the PwDs. Procuring assistive products and their maintenance/ repairs were problems across the physical disability sector.

Arindam Bhattacharya, Sameer Agrawal and Meera Shenoy (2015), in their research work identified six practices for employment of PwDs which creates a sustainable environment for employment of PwDs. These six practices are: - They are vision sponsored by CEO/Board, Organization responsibility, organization sensitization, workplace adaptations, specialized recruitment and training and lastly recognition, rewards and celebrations. Apart from six practices, the study touched upon the various other factors which are essential for hiring PwD employees in any organization such as – sensitizing employees of an organization, setting up a proper communication channels to voice the concerns of PwD employees, to build a strong foundation and involvement of their organization practices for enabling the disable people along with regular interventions and systematic involvement and follow up for the social and economic inclusion of PwDs. The study believed that there is a need of multiple elements to fall into place for the successful inclusion of PwD employees in the organization which includes: initial motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) of the person, enablement and training availability to employment and career development. A successful organization should incorporate all these ideals into practice for the employment of PwDs.

America India Foundation, New Delhi (2014) propounded in a detailed way from employer and employee perspective and benefits to hire PwD in the private organization. This study proves that an organization who employ PwD in their organization, always have a positive image in society and among their stakeholders. In this study, 105 companies from across industry such as retail, IT & BPO, FMCG, Manufacturing, Hospitality etc. The study has made a detailed analysis to understand about the background of company, number of PwD hiring and its impact on their business and society. The study advocated that those organization that have employed PwDs in their companies, have made a consistent and systematic efforts

from top management to collaborating partner organization for building the skills among them.

Mukta Kulkarni –Janhavi Kote (2013) study advocated that PwD remain unemployed not because they are not capable but due to lack of leveraging facility of disability training and placement agencies. Training agencies are crucial to build up the confidence of PwD employees and train them as per corporate expectations. In their analysis, the researchers found that, if given the right environment, PwD employees will do their best to get employment in the organization. Training agencies can provide them job training, counselling, and placements. They can play as effective intermediaries to prepare PwDs as per corporate requirements. Such organizations through their company and community sensitization programme may leverage the ability of disability and motivate, build and capable them to be mainstream and productive employee of an organization as per business sector requirements.

Objective of the study:-

- 1) To identify the best practices adopted by business organizations for promoting employment for people with disabilities (PwD) during Covid 19 in IT & BPO Industries
- 2) To suggest the important factors to be built by the business organizations for employing people with disabilities (PwD) post Covid 19 in IT & BPO Industries
- 3) To suggest the suitable recommendation to organizations for inclusive employment post Covid 19 in IT & BPO Industries

Research Methodology:-

The research methodology is based on quality content analysis of published primary and secondary government, private organization records, and company to analyze to identify the best practices adopted by the business organizations for employing people with disabilities during Covid 19 in in IT & BPO Industries. The data was searched through research depository sources like Proquest, EBSCOhost, Elsevier, CII report, Government reports, Scopus Indexed Journals, Web of Science and Myloft library tool. 43 research papers were identified related with key words out of which 13 were found relevant to the study. Data from internet related with PwD employees and best HR practices/voluntary organization's contribution are also studied based on the subject.

Three Case studies to highlight the best practices of business organizations for employing Person with Disabilities during Covid 19:-

1) Barrier Break

Introduction – Barrier Break is the leader in off-shore digital accessibility testing and consulting. It was founded in 2004 with the firm belief that technology can empower people with disabilities and the elderly to live independently. A pioneer in accessibility and assistive technology in India and with a global footprint, Barrier Break is recognized as a global expert for accessibility testing solutions. It has large number of workforce comprises PwD. It has around 60 % to 65 % workforce are PwD. During lockdown, the company has given the option to its employees to work from home and understand their requirements for successfully executing the task from work from home in the areas of technology, training, communication and

social skills and infrastructure.

The company has undertaken the following initiative during Covid 19:-

Technology

- The company has transferred all necessary devices and provided laptops to their employees.
- Live Captions feature provided by Microsoft teams was made available for hearing-impaired employee for communication purpose.
- To provide work break, MYBBLIFE portal was given to employees.
- A sign language interpreter based on request, IT helpdesk was set up on teams for visually impaired and hearing-impaired employees.

Communication and training

- The company has conducted weekly accessible activities to engage teams while working from home.
- For training to new joinee of hearing impaired, company has extended their training time and adopted a peer learning method along with trainer and sign language interpreter. And for visually impaired employee, the company has also adopted the online demonstrations to build similar understanding.

Outcome

- Employees felt safe and healthy due to work from home.
- The efficiency of work increased because of digital technology and exposure to various portals.
- The employees were engaged, productive and loyal to the organization.
- The company kept on hiring more employees during pandemic.

2) ANZ India

Introduction: - ANZ India is at Bangalore set up 30 years ago and largest banks in Australia. The company provides technology, operations and services to group entities in Australia, New Zealand, Asia Pacific, Europe and the Americas. Today, the company has around 7000 employees providing support to the bank's network. The company has started its accessibility and inclusion journey in 2010 by hiring six persons with hearing and orthopedic disability. Since then, the company has expanded its hiring for PwD with diverse disabilities (such as cerebral palsy, autism, muscular dystrophy) across various departments and it has around 2 % workforce are people with disabilities.

The company has undertaken the following initiatives during Covid 19:-

- The company has provided laptops/desktops to their employees.
- MS teams live caption option was provided to help in video calling for communication purpose.
- The what's app group with the name of 'Abilities Warrior Group' has been created to connect with the PwD staff.
- **Employee Assistant programme:** ANZ offers short-term well-being support services to employees and care givers. The support is confidential and delivered by an external provider. The service is designed to support employees, through individual well-being coaching and advice on either work-related or personal matters. During this time, our people are being supported on issues such as work-life balance and managing stress and anxiety.

- Regular webinars on health and well-being, especially related to mental health, were conducted not only for staff but their families too.
- Under the Mission 1000 project, ANZ financially supported PwD housekeeping staff even though they were not engaged in work then.
- **Leadership Connect:** Given the challenges of WFH due to Covid-19, regular informal sessions with members of the India Management Team were conducted to check mental and physical well-being and to stay connected.
- Medical teleconsulting services were provided through local hospitals during the lockdown.

Outcome

- The various initiative undertaken by the organization has created a very confident, energetic and engaged employees.
- The employees became more loyal to the organization
- The support given to the employees at various less made them feel cared for reduced their anxiety levels and more productive in this current times.

3) Startek

Introduction - Startek is a leading global provider of technology-enabled business process outsourcing solutions. The organization provides Omni-channel customer experience management, back-office and technology services to corporations around the world across a range of industries. The organization has more than 42,000 outsourcing experts across 49 delivery campuses worldwide that are committed to delivering a seamless and transformative customer experience for clients. The organization offers services such as Omni-channel customer care, customer acquisition, order processing, technical support, receivables management and analytics through automation, voice, chat, email, social media and IVR, resulting in superior business results for its clients. The company has around 2 % of its employees are PwD, more than 550 plus employees are PwD in the organization.

The company has undertaken the following initiatives during Covid 19:-

Requirements of PwD	Action Taken
Security, stability and adapting to a virtual work-at-home (WAH) environment	Steps taken to protect employees, new policies related to WAH and motivational stories were shared with PwD regularly to address anxiety and concerns.
Sensitizing peer group and supervisors	Virtual sessions were conducted to sensitize peers and supervisors and relevant information shared through online platforms to promote inclusivity.
Virtual engagement	Online platforms like Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Telegram, Zoom etc. were used for sessions focused on leadership and feedback as well as to update people on policies; reward and recognition or to simply chat to help PwD resolve their queries and to address their grievances.
Emotional well-being	Webinars such as 'The Road Never Travelled: Integrating Mind, Body &

	Wellness'; 'Motivating Teams with Emotional Intelligence', 'Covid-19 Employee Advisory Webinar Session by Fortis Hospital' etc. were conducted.
Availability of HR SPOCS	A dedicated HR Helpdesk was set up to help PwD connect and communicate easily.

Outcome

- Lower down the attrition
- Enhanced skill development with virtual learning.
- Productive workforce and wellbeing of their health mentally.
- Self-development and financial independence developed more confidence and enthusiasm.
- The employees got engaged to the organization.

Conclusion

To employ PwDs in business organization is imperative for social and developmental perspective as an individual employee, firms and nation at large. The effective engagement of PwD in an organization will not only boost their confidence but it is also crucial in terms of labour market in India. It will also bring growth in Indian economy, optimize human resources of the nation, and break the vicious circle of poverty. It will build the positive mindset, dignity and social cohesion of the citizen of India on the basis of equal opportunity to work.

Limitation of the Study

The study was based on published primary and secondary sources. The focus of study was only to identify the best practices by business organizations for employing persons with disabilities during Covid 19 in IT & BPO Industries. The other factors have not been considered in study.

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