[Bloomberg Businessweek](http://www.businessweek.com/)

**Keeping Women on the Job in India**

By [Mehul Srivastava](http://www.businessweek.com/authors/1801-mehul-srivastava)March 03, 2011

When Preethi Mohan Rao quit her job following the birth of her first child in 2006, the 28-year-old tax professional thought she might be putting her career on hold for a long while, if not forever. Her bosses at Ernst & Young's Global Shared Services in India would have none of it. E&Y's Indian operations had grown from some 200 employees in 2002 to nearly 4,000 in 2010, while at the same time accomplishing something rare in India: having an equal number of male and female workers. The company had spent thousands of dollars training Rao and was not about to give up on its investment. HR folks kept in touch, calling monthly to see how she was doing. They enticed her back with a flexible schedule and a nursery on the ground floor of the company's glass-and-steel building in Bangalore. At first, Rao worked just two hours a day, then four, and after a few weeks went back to full time. "In spite of all the time we spent transitioning, I held on to all my projects," says Rao, now a manager.

That kind of single-minded pursuit of an employee might seem out of place in the U.S., with unemployment at 9 percent. Not in India, where the economy has grown 8.5 percent on average for the past five years and companies are plagued by chronic talent shortages. Keeping female employees on the job has proven difficult in a male-dominated society that often frowns on women working outside the home.

At 34.2 percent, India's rate of female participation in the labor force is the lowest of any of the BRIC countries, according to U.N. statistics. Women make up 42 percent of college graduates in India, yet even those with diplomas are expected to let their careers take a back seat to caring for husband, children, and elderly parents. "The measures of daughterly guilt are much higher in Indian women than in the West," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, a Manhattan think tank, who headed a study last year on the challenges Indian women face in the workplace. "And since taking care of elderly parents usually becomes a reality later in their careers, it takes them out of the workplace just when they should be entering management roles." In fact, gender disparities at Indian companies grow more pronounced in management's upper ranks.

For multinationals, these issues require some creative thinking. Google ([GOOG](http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/snapshot/snapshot.asp?symbol=GOOG)) has taxis on call for employees, a particular draw for women who may need to rush home to care for a sick family member. German drugmaker Boehringer Ingelheim, mindful that families frown on young women traveling alone, will pay for an employee to bring her mother along on longer trips. Indian outsourcing giant Wipro ([WIT](http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/snapshot/snapshot.asp?symbol=WIT)) runs on-site day camps during school holidays in the spring.

Infosys ([INFY](http://investing.businessweek.com/research/stocks/snapshot/snapshot.asp?symbol=INFY)) offers its women employees sabbaticals, extended maternity leave, and enhanced training when they come back to the office. This has boosted the percentage of female workers returning after childbirth to about 88 percent, from about a third in 2006. Infosys also tracks women after they return to make sure they are being used effectively by managers and not just being back-benched. "A lot of men believe maternity is a disease, and we have to teach them," says Nandita Gurjar, senior vice-president for human resources.

E&Y has found that keeping women on staff requires more than just making them happy—the company works on their families, too. It regularly sponsors family visits where hundreds of parents and in-laws crowd the office, shaking hands with E&Y's India chief executive officer and other high-level managers. The purpose of this exercise is to help them understand what their daughters do at the company—and that their work is valued.

Whether such initiatives are good for business is unclear. Losing institutional talent is a problem for every company, and men quit jobs for reasons that have nothing to do with Indian societal values or maternity. Mahendra Jain, CEO of E&Y's Global Shared Services in India, is the first to admit that his company's push for gender diversity is not profit-driven. "If you asked me if there's a bottom line benefit to having an equal number of male and female employees, I would say the answer is no," says Jain. "But it's something we have held on to as part of our culture, and it's always been part of how we do business here."