

**Integrated Career Pathways a Solution to Aid Second Career Women Professionals in India to On-Ramp Successfully**

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**Abstract**

Women who have an interruption from their high-flying career in corporates but are prepared for a career re-launch represent the group of second career women professionals who bring with them augmented loyalty, maturity and diversity which provide the much needed competitive edge for the corporates who employ them. Understanding the diverse kind of challenges encountered by these women professionals helped the researcher to explore the exclusive and complex aspects of women professionals' career. The paper intends to elicit the intricacies of women careers and carve out a potent solution to help them make a successful comeback after the inevitable career hiatus. The study was conducted on a diverse set of potential Indian women professionals from different domains which ensued in bringing out thought provoking acumens into the underlying reasons for opting for a comeback along with identifying the challenges they face in their second innings or career boomerang. This study provides recommendations to the prospective women by providing them with information of what lies in store for her in future so as to support her to be better equipped to keep thriving the luminosities that kindled her career in the very beginning. In this process the espousal of Integrated Career Pathway (ICP) Model would help these women curtail the challenges they encounter during their career trajectory. The detailed components of this model along with the various pre-requisites are extensively discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Second Career Women Professionals, Career hiatus, Career boomerang, Integrated Career Pathway Model*

**Introduction**

Technological transformation supported by liberalization, privatization and globalization has altered the Indian professionals approach towards work. In the last couple of decades, career paths of the Indian personnel have gone through remarkable makeovers as a result of increased career prospects available to them. In the preceding centuries women have relished a more conspicuous role in the world, progressively swaying communal, ethnic, pecuniary and political domains. The number of women force at work has augmented extensively around the sphere with women exemplifying in a variety of professions. With the advent of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the emerging markets have observed an upsurge in the number of women advancing towards key positions which were formerly monopolized by the men at work. With efforts of the government to bridge the gap between educational fulfilments of both genders experiencing success, the prospects are very promising for many women professionals to attain a fast track career. From sectors as diverse as IT to banking, women at the entry levels seem to be doing justice to the gender inclusivity and diversity. In the last couple of decades, career paths of the Indian personnel have gone through remarkable makeovers as a result of increased career prospects available to them. But, in a report published by McKinsey in 2013 titled "Gender Diversity in top Management-Moving Corporate culture, Moving boundaries" it was identified that a number of women professionals in the executive and corporate levels was largely pipelined and disquieting.

An Indian woman professional's role could be best termed as multifaceted in the context of Indian society and culture. The traditional career model defined for man was created with a full time aid usually a home maker who take care of all the domestic chores, nurtures the children and above all supports her spouse's career ambitions so that her husband could give his 100 percent to his career and job. While these models were exceedingly successful in supporting and enhancing men to climb the corporate ladder, they couldn't address the concerns regarding the slow increase in women participation into the corporates. The kind of components required to meet the career aspirations are distinctively different from the traditional systems for they need to factor a lot of social, individual, familial and organizational variables. With the talent crunch mounting up across countries, organizations need to emphasise on modifying the already existing policies to be more inclusive of women. In the present day scenario, many organizations have become sensitive to women issues and have made an attempt to understand the challenges faced by her in terms of effectively balancing their

family, work and individual responsibilities (Rajesh S., 2013). The study sketched in this paper explores the prominence of various components which go into a woman's career model to ensure a progressive mounting career trend. The adoption of such a career model would definitely create a win-win situation for the corporates as well as the women since pre-emptive attempts from the employers' end to curb the brain drain of talented women workforce can address the dearth of expertise and labour by broadening the pool of recruited women and improving the return rate of working women professionals from maternity leave and those with child care responsibilities. Companies also reap profits in many ways from improved goodwill of personnel, enhanced staff morale, decreased absenteeism, and boosted productivity. The study attempts to analyse the career paths of the women professionals in the Indian context. The outcomes of this work would help in identifying the processes/policies desirable to facilitate and empower the NextGen Indian working women and make their careers a sustainable one. This study suggests a workable career model which when integrated in an Indian woman professionals' environment will make sure that her potential is properly explored while permitting her the liberty to take up the responsibilities to be shouldered by her owing to her multifaceted roles in the society.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Indian Women Careers**

There are multiple reasons as to why the traditional career model of male employees cannot be applied to the women professionals. The out-dated career model is applicable to the linear continuous career of individuals, lays a huge emphasis on face-time work and considers monetary benefits as the sole motivating factor for individuals (Rajesh S., 2013). But these features stand out as complete opposite with women's interests. Research conducted by various organizations have shown that majority of women are less motivated by authority and money but more motivated by relations and excellence. Further there are multitude factors which force her to take a decision to opt out of her career, making her career a discontinuous one. Generally, these women professionals stretch to the next stage of their career trajectory mostly after a decade of experience in their work front which is usually in their early or mid-thirties. This time phase parallels to peak motherhood and child raising years, which makes sure that work and life balance conflicts arise and affect her career in most awful ways.

Primarily there are two key dissimilarities in the job front experienced by men and women which affect their careers and hence require diverse work models for career advancement. Firstly, a lot of research has identified the special hurdles women professionals go through owing to gender differences (Konrad, 1997). Phenomena like glass ceiling and leaky pipeline still prevent in the upward advancement of women in the corporate ladders creating a void at the mid and top levels. Secondly, in many socio-cultural contexts, women are habitually the key care takers for both children and aged parents, and hence womenfolk tend to shoulder additional non work responsibilities. Most companies although branded as women friendly provide miniscule flexible work options which further discourage a woman professional to continue her career (Burud & Tumolo, 2004). Since most models which were suggested fit exceptionally well for traditional career of women professionals in western contexts, this study aims to suggest a model suitable for women returners in the Indian context. With studies on this endowed women workforce gaining momentum, this study seeks to contribute and fill the existing gaps in this area.

### **Indian Women Professionals**

Women, although being academically highly proficient and capable of freely paving their way in the corporate world, seldom make a place for themselves when it comes to corporate and executive boards where their representation is still daunting. Further, in a recent study conducted it was found that the societal expectations from Indian women to work was a bare minimum of around 4% which proves the fact that Indian society doesn't have any kind of expectation from women to contribute to the expenses (Rajesh S., 2013). The architecture of male bread winner and female care taker has been round the corner in most urban towns but all this is slowly changing. Families and women themselves are warming up to the options of opting for a career owing to the qualifications and the need for financial independence. These women who join the corporates at the entry levels are termed as Indian women professionals who play a vital role in contributing to India's GDP (Jennings & Mattei, 2008).

## **Research Methodology**

The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire that addressed questions related to career breaks of women in their respective industries. The respondents were women belonging to diverse age cohorts and were remarkably different in financial and educational profiles which amplified the sample

diversity. They included women working at different levels in the organizations from junior managers to deputy managers, all of them who had taken a break from their career at least once for diverse reasons.

**Key Findings**

Respondents included 70 women returners who had at least once taken a break from their careers. Further, nearly 52 per cent of women had taken a career break more than once which implied that most of the women who tend to take a break owing to the various push and pull factors seek out a second innings to pursue their careers. The decision to opt for career over family or have a career besides having family responsibilities depends upon the women professionals. In this study the attitude of women professionals towards their career decisions was compared with different variables like age, marital status, job designation and number of children.

The set of questions chosen to measure these variables are given in Table 1

TABLE 1

Career Re-entry Attitude Assessment

| S.No | Questions to measure women returners career re-entry attitude  |
|------|--|
| 1    | I feel that taking a break has impacted my career  |
| 2    | I feel that women who have career interruptions are less successful than those with a continuous career  |
| 3    | I feel an increase in the number of women at workplace would affect families in the long run             |
| 4    | I feel work-family role conflict may disproportionately affect a mothers’ or a woman’s work satisfaction |
| 5    | I believe that educational qualification affects a women’s decision to leave the workforce               |
| 6    | I believe that there is a need for re-skilling/ Up-skilling for women prior to joining after a break     |

Source: Questionnaire on Returning Women

**Age and career re-entry attitude**

A Chi- Square test conducted between these variables showed that there is no relation between these variables since for N=70, Chi-Square= 4.690 and p=0.790. This implies that age had no effect on the attitude of these women returners towards their career exit and re-entry decisions. We can thus infer that immaterial of the age, women possess similar attitude towards their career decisions. All age group women face work- life balance issues with varied complexities. These complexities make these women phase in and phase out of their careers. The understanding that age has no dependence on their attitude concerning their careers makes it clear that women take dynamic decisions based on the career challenges and barricades they face in their career path. Hence, age doesn’t play a very significant role since the challenges faced by them are innumerable and seldom wait for the right age to strike.

TABLE 2

Age and Career re-entry attitude

|                              | Value              | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 4.690 <sup>a</sup> | 8  | .790                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 5.367              | 8  | .718                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .114               | 1  | .735                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 70                 |    |                       |

Source: SPSS Output Editor

**Marital status and career re-entry attitude**

A Chi- Square conducted between these variables showed that there is relationship between these variables since for N=70, Chi-Square= 11.598 and p=0.021. This implies that marital status has an effect on the attitude of these women returners towards their career exit and re-entry decisions. From this analysis it is understood that women who are married and those who are single take career decisions differently. This could be due to the fact that the kind of support system available for a married woman returner is very different from that of a single or separated women returner. For married women, at times of need the in-laws and spouses’ support plays a crucial role, because of which they can be flexible on their career choices and return decisions. But in case of a single or separated returner the support from family or spouse is lacking which discourages their career dreams and thus inadvertently halts their careers. Another reason for this difference in attitude could be the fact that single women tend to have comparatively fewer domestic responsibilities than her married counterparts. Thus the entire ecosystem of a women returner should support her to change her attitude to work towards building a prospective career. The psychological and physical support from children, parents and spouses’ thus play a very significant role in building their attitude and their decision regarding their careers.

TABLE 3

Marital Status and Career re-entry attitude

|                              | Value               | Df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 11.598 <sup>a</sup> | 4  | .021                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 10.476              | 4  | .033                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .111                | 1  | .740                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 70                  |    |                       |

Source: SPSS Output Editor

**Job Designation and career re-entry attitude**

Chi- Square test was performed to identify if there is any association between the designation they held at work and attitude they had towards their careers. The result of this analysis showed that there is no relationship between these variables since for N=70, Chi-Square= 2.743 and p=0.254. This implies that job designation does not affect the attitude these women returners towards their career exit and re-entry decisions. Hence whichever cadre women belong to, her attitude towards her career remained unchanged. This brings to light the fact, that be it a top executive or a clerk working in the lowest levels the kind of career challenges encountered by them and the work- life balance issues faced by them remained similar. Thus we could infer from this analysis that the attitude of these women returners seldom depends on their cadre and hence the enablers to be provided by the organizations need to be spread across the levels than limiting them to managerial levels. Although this is happening in many organizations, these women need to prove their worth and make their employers understand that the flexibility offered to them wouldn’t be misused in any manner.

TABLE 4

Job Designation and Career re-entry attitude

|                              | Value              | Df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 2.743 <sup>a</sup> | 2  | .254                  |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 2.389              | 2  | .303                  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 1.714              | 1  | .191                  |
| N of Valid Cases             | 70                 |    |                       |

Source: SPSS Output Editor

**Suggestions**

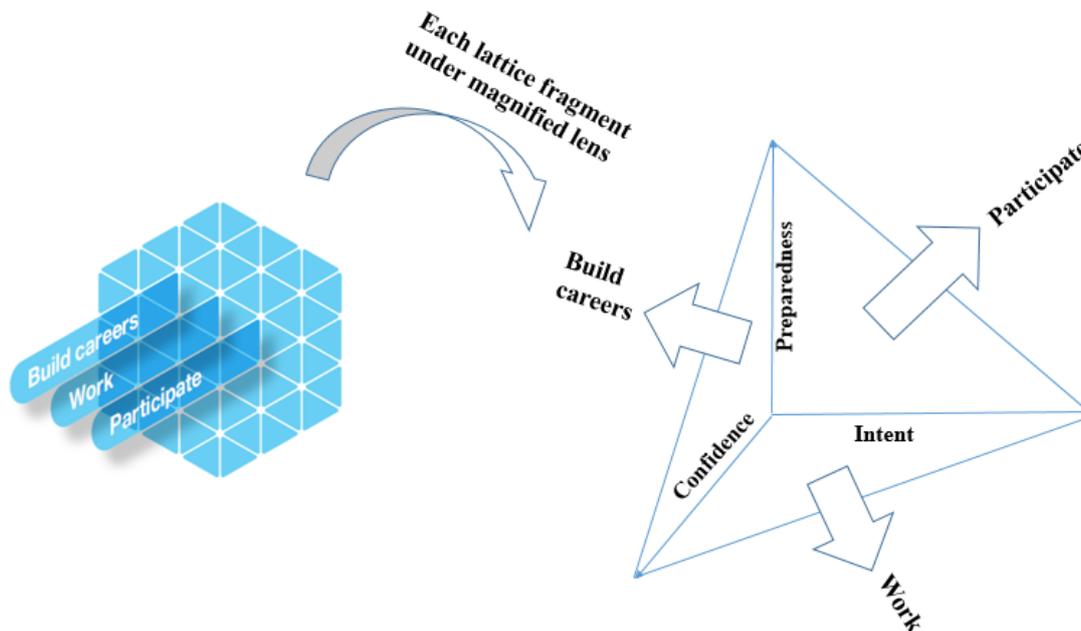
The work style for women returners need to include all the contingencies which women encounter through their life cycles. Women in almost all capacities felt the need of being self- motivated towards

pursuing their careers in the first place. For this she needs to build the much needed confidence to keep trying to achieve her dreams regarding her career. She needs to make constant efforts to rejuvenate her career and at the same time prepare her ecosystem to accept and promote her career. It becomes essentially important for her to understand that she cannot “have it all”. She has equal opportunity and right to aim for dreaming big and having a career of her choice. After preparing herself, she needs to prepare her entire ecosystem including her family, society and organization as a whole. Since the factors impacting women careers are sporadic we cannot define a long term solution for her career. Instead it is advisable to have a short term career work style which could be designed considering the immediate goals and desires she wishes to accomplish considering the support systems she is currently equipped with. Fulfilling these short term goals would drive her careers further. Also we suggest an alternative “Lattice Career Model” also termed as “Integrated Career Pathways” (ICP) which could be used by second career women professionals. The model takes the shape of a lattice crystal which has multiple entrances and exits. Also there are multiple pathways to trace within the crystal to reach the desired destination. Similarly a women returner’s career needs constant phasing in and out due to the innumerable barricades she encounters in her career trajectory. A lattice career thus provides opportunities to these talented women to opt for alternative pathways depending on their interest and skill set they possess at that juncture.

The Integrated Career Pathways as suggested by the researcher helps to provide alternative paths for her re-entry within the career enablers and support systems she is equipped with. Also this model gives her an opportunity to re-enter avenues based on her current skills and interests. In lattice models, career progression is not measured with the heights one reaches in careers but by how far one goes in the avenues opted. Figure 1 developed by the researcher represents the intricacies of each lattice fragment as viewed under a magnifying lens and is suggested for a second career woman.

FIGURE 1

Integrated Career Pathways magnified



The model rests on three axis i.e. Intention, Confidence and Preparedness which together contribute to the various career decisions she makes. ‘Intent’ refers to the intention she possesses towards making her career successful and realizing how important it is for her. The enduring courage and ‘confidence’ she displays form the second most important base for a successful career. The third most important component is the preparedness she induces in all the stakeholders of her ecosystem. With each of these underlying forces acting in unison, a women returner can successfully On Ramp to her career and easily make it to the top. With a combination of each of these factors these women tend to perform functions like ‘Build their careers, Participate and Work’. A relentless effort and intention backed with enduring confidence would facilitate her self-confidence, and gives her career the much required impetus. With energized confidence and intention she would be able to ‘Work’ towards building her self-confidence. Further, when she intends to involve her stakeholders to join hands and makes them

understand the importance of her career she is able to 'Participate' and contribute to both family and work simultaneously. Well equipped with support from stakeholders and a high self-image built out of confidence in her she is further able to 'Build her career' and speed her way into professional realms.

The model provides her opportunities to work towards building her careers and work towards their goal. These women need to actively participate in working and building their careers. These lattice models are very different from career ladder which are traditionally prevalent in most corporates. These women can re-enter at any level based on their skills and support systems. Also these women can decide to re-enter at whichever level they are comfortable based on their skill and readiness. Hence, the suggested Intentional Career Pathways of lattice career model can definitely help women returners in having a successful re-entry.

### **Conclusion**

The suggested model heavily depends on the life stages to which these women belong and their ambition in life. Potential companies prepared to utilize the women talent pool can also help to gather acumens and make these women's' work environments more friendly towards by promoting ICP. For an Indian woman employee, at the onset of her career, information of what lies in store for her in future can definitely support her to be better equipped to keep thriving the luminosities that kindled her career in the very beginning.

### **Scope for Future Work**

The study considers role of women returners in Indian corporate considering responses only from on ramp and off ramp women. Perspective of her colleagues, employers, in-laws, spouses and children would help in providing a detail analysis of the challenges from their perspective. A focused and in depth study on one particular industry would help to provide better inputs to enhance her career and provide a model of career specific to the industry characteristics. Further, better structures and models could be suggested by considering roles of NGO's and government in promoting women education and careers.

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