

In time of quotas, India's Silicon Valley takes lessons in diversity

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Bangalore, Aug 27: Far away from the epicentre of the reservation debate, international firms tucked away in Bangalore are focussing on how to make workplaces "diversity-friendly".

Companies are setting up senior-level committees on diversity, holding workshops and even taking professional help to tackle the issue. Says Nirmala Menon of Interweave, a Bangalore-based diversity management firm,

"The trend is four-five months old. There is a need to prepare people to be more open and accepting. We need to teach people to optimise diversity and not to see it as a challenge. Even for the ongoing reservation

issue, people need to be prepared for inclusion with more openness."

She holds workshops on diversity at Hewlett Packard, IBM, Motorola, Texas Instruments, UBS Hyderabad and many others IT companies in the city. Many companies have made these workshops essential for all employees.

The classes in diversity focus on making employees more open and acceptable to all kinds of diversities – gender, caste, religion, region, class and physical ability – at work place.

Companies say these efforts are not triggered by the reservation debate but admit the need to generate a sense of integration and inclusion. "We want our employees to believe that different backgrounds bring richer experiences to the organisation. As an organisation,

globally we believe that there are lots of advantages from diversities and in India if we can iron out the traditional

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and cultural differences that have been ingrained in our subconscious, we all stand to benefit from it," says Pearl Abraham, country delivery manager, Learning and Development, Hewlett Packard (HP).

HP holds Wet Programmes for its employees, which are compulsory and try to motivate people to have di-

versity in their teams and increase inclusion. "It has been a very fashionable thing for companies to talk about being diversity-friendly in recent times. However, taking action has been a lot more recent. We want

larger integration among people and want them to break the social barriers to become more open through these measures," adds Abraham.

IT company Sun Microsystems has formed a senior management committee three months ago. "It has become a very nice thing to talk about but we wanted to take concrete measures. The committee focuses solely on increasing diversity in the company. While in the US these teams focus on gay and racial issues, in India the largest focus is on gender," says Hemant Sharma, Human Resource Director, Sun Microsystems.

Companies have also opened up to take professional help to achieve this. "Research tells us that homogeneous groups work well together but there

are rarely any big breakthroughs. You need people from different backgrounds and experiences in the decision-making processes. Through the workshops we have tried to sensitise people about discriminations even if it is jokes on one's gender, age, caste or religion," says Nirmala Menon.

She adds, "In India, the focus is more on regional (North India-South India) discrimination, gender, caste and religion. Here our surnames give our identity away and therefore we need to be more sensitive about it. The aim is to try and change the mindset of the people from thinking of diversity as an addition to our experiences and not as something which takes opportunities away from us. That is the biggest challenge."