

Second innings

Avtar Career Creators helps women find work-home balance, by finding part-time work for them

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Gone are the times when taking a break, maternity or otherwise, implied the end of a woman's career. In fact, today, they can get back and choose between working full-time or part-time. Things have changed, as Vidya Ramkumar will testify. Vidya, 35, a cost accountant by profession, had taken a long break of four years and was unsure if she could ever get back to work. She had spent five years with Shriram Investments before she was forced to quit and move to different cities with her husband. When they finally settled down in Chennai, she wanted one thing: a job that would allow for a work-life balance. That was when she read about Avtar Career Creators, an HR consultancy, and the flexi-time opportunities it could facilitate.

"I did not want to get back to the long hours at office. But I found only full-time jobs were open to me," says Vidya, who was on the verge of considering a full-time job. Avtar changed all that. "I sent my resume across, and within 10 days I was on board with Tamil Nadu Financial Services Limited as Manager, Project Finance. I work from 9.30 am to 1.30 pm, and I get ample time for my family," she says with a satisfied smile.

Vidya Ramkumar is one of many women who have scripted a turnaround in their

careers, thanks to Avtar. The company was formed with the idea of helping women professionals get back into the workforce after a break. In particular, it focused on helping them find jobs with flexi-timings. "With industries growing at a rapid pace, there is an increase in the rate of attrition. We came up with the idea of hiring people in a non-conventional way. This model can be used as a retention tool by companies," says Saundarya Rajesh, the firm's CEO.

Birth of an idea

Saundarya says she thought about starting Avtar after going through some tough times herself. "After my MBA, I joined Citibank, but had to quit my job after my son was born. I approached many people, and most suggested I take a full-time job since I had lot of experience. Part-time work was an alien concept back then," she says.

She then worked as a lecturer at a management institute for seven years, until 2003. It was during this period that Saundarya realised that there was a large pool of talent in society that was going idle. She decided to do something about it, and that led to the founding of Avtar. Saundarya borrowed Rs 60,000 from her mother-in-law and rented an office.

The company tasted success in its very first project, a turnkey assignment for Scope International in 2006. Saundarya approached the company, asking them to take in a flexi-time employee in the role that had the highest attrition. Scope International, took things further, giving Avtar an entire section—the call-centre. The department faced 45% attrition, as most of the women in it were not comfortable

Facts And Figures

Business Enabling flexi-timing careers for women

Based Chennai

Year of inception 2000

Clients MNCs, SMEs, IT/ITES firms, FMCGs

Entry barriers Unique profiling methodology exclusive to women working on flexible timings

putting in long hours of work.

After scanning more than 1,200 profiles, Avtar short-listed 125 people for the assignment. Once the flexi-time employees were hired, attrition dropped to 10%. The effort proved to be a success both for the company and Avtar. Scope International had batches of part-timers working for five hours in the morning and five hours in the evening. They were paid half the salary of regular employees. The company also had the reassurance that employees would stay, as the women were comfortable with the part-time arrangement. On its part, Avtar knew it was on to a good thing.

Rapid growth

Since its initial success, the company has gone from strength to strength. Today, it has offices in three cities: Chennai, Bangalore and Coimbatore. Its workforce has risen to 55 employees.

Avtar has about 250 clients across different verticals. Its client roster today is a veritable who's who of India Inc, with names like ABN Amro, GE Capital, HSBC, Coca-Cola, Wipro, Bharti Telecom and Cadbury's India, among others. Its reputation has grown, and unlike earlier, when it had to make pitches to corporates, today many organisations approach it if they need part-timers. Still, it has a team of business development executives who approach various companies and offer its services.

Some of the jobs flexi-timers can opt for include HR, customer services, finance, tele-marketing operations, as well as content and technical writing. Before a candidate is recommended to a company, a lot of work goes on in the background, wherein the suitability of the candidate for the job is assessed.



With industries growing at a rapid pace, there is an increase in the rate of attrition. Our hiring model can increase employee retention
Saundarya Rajesh, CEO, Avtar Career Creators

"We look into the background of the applicants and the kind of work experience they have built over the years—it would be useful if they have proven expertise in a particular field. We also ascertain why they quit their earlier jobs and seek to work in flexi-time jobs," says Saundarya.

Some people do project-based assignments. For example, there is peak-load balancing time, when companies need more hands to handle work, but only for that period. "The key things people look at when they opt for such jobs is flexibility, followed by job role, timing and then location. They do not like to travel long distances," says Lakshmi Radhakrishnan, who has been with the company since its inception.

The company bills its clients on a per-project basis, and revenues vary, depending on the size of the project and the number of employees required. Importantly, Avtar has a database of 4,500 women it can place in various projects.

Recently, Avtar was involved in a project with the Future Group, where there was a requirement for customer service people, store managers, HR recruiters, merchandisers and purchase facilitators among others. "We placed 3,000 employees across Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune, Kolhapur and Bangalore," explains Lakshmi, with pride. Needless to say, the project was a success. Today, companies are moving away from the concept of 'presenteeism'. Says Saundarya: "The top management should actively engage in enhancing this trend, and see it as an opportunity to get talented people."

Saundarya Rajesh is the epitome of the new Indian woman, confident and in control, both at work and at home. In addition to her busy schedules with Avtar and at home, she's also pursuing her PhD in women's employment from SRM University, Chennai. Clearly, this is a woman who can wear many hats at the same time.

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Employees 55

Initial capital Rs 60,000 for rented office space

Profitability indicator Broken even

Plan Increase the network of women employees to 100,000 by 2010