

'HR is no longer a back-office function' - Devashnie Singh, Grey Group

This Women's Month, Devashnie Singh, chief people officer at Grey Group, shares her journey toward a career in HR, her take on how HR has evolved during the Covid-19 pandemic, and steps and policies that organisations can implement to support and help women succeed.



Devashnie Singh, chief people officer at Grey Group

Why did you decide on an HR career?

I studied information technology, which essentially is about getting disparate systems to work together. In my very first job, I had the opportunity of working closely with human resources and that naturally spurred an interest. HR does with people what IT does with systems, gets them to work together. Development is also a common theme between these disciplines and I continue to be inspired by the amazing things people can do when the right team comes together. It wasn't like a Plan A or Plan B, I just happened to be in a place where I could use the skills I learnt to develop people. It's now a passion.

Why do you think HR is a more female-dominated role than male-dominated?

It could be because women simply have an awesome influence on building positive workplaces, fostering diversity and inclusion, encouraging collaboration, and facilitating conflict management. But on a more serious note, it's a stereotype. Did you know two of the world's top 3 HR managers are men! We need to stop associating gender with roles and start asserting the fact that it is the best person for the job. By the way, the continent's biggest stock exchange, the JSE, is run by women.



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Evan-Lee Courie 12 Aug 2020



What are the advantages and benefits of working in HR?

HR professionals have a unique perspective into businesses. Not only do they have a strong understanding of an organisation's priorities and challenges, but they also can influence the future of the organisation based on the support they provide. All world-class companies follow a simple template - people, culture and processes. Companies that fall short do so not because of a lack of ambition but as the result of poor execution. The big benefit of working in HR is that you can influence all of the above to build a scalable business for ages. HR is no longer a back-office function; people are an organisation's biggest asset and this recognition has elevated HR and earned it a seat at the boardroom table.

What is special about working at Grey when it comes to your type of work?

I could be accused of being biased but I must say our people. I work with "in the moment" leaders who are change agents and rainmakers. At Grey, women in leadership is not a nice-to-have but a must-have, as they can influence through empathy. This is evident in some of the best people we have in our CCO, MD, FD, CPO, strategy, creative and social disciplines. They take a collaborative approach to working, leading from behind and helping everyone feel they are relevant and valued.



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How is Grey managing to work remotely, as advertising is quite a collaborative effort?

Before the lockdown, we reverse engineered our processes to ensure our people had all the tools (besides the coffee machine) to work remotely. We used this new way of working as an opportunity to "experience the future first hand". The world was going remote and the pandemic only accelerated the timeline. Over the past four months, we have been able to drive collaboration and rebuild our culture virtually. We are a creative business and we were not going to give up this chance of finding an opportunity in the middle of a crisis.

We have reconfigured our business and social lives, we now meet for coffee around a screen and chat regularly to our people who are putting in more hours and going that extra mile for clients. We are thankful to our clients, too, who have been understanding. The pandemic might have thrown our lives in a tizzy but everyone in our ecosystem knows we are in this together. It's not only about work though, we have infused elements of fun in our regular catch-ups. Emotional wellbeing and self-care is not an indulgence, it is as big a priority at Grey.



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What are the new approaches and new ways of working that have been implemented globally during Covid-19 lockdown?

The future of work is here, and some companies have already started down the path of digitising their workflows. Operationally, this lets work continue with minimal disruption. As a business, we haven't stopped doing what we do best, which is growing. We have run a number of pitches during the various stages of lockdown. It's been a huge learning curve, but we have found innovative ways to engage with our audiences; this is a trend we see continuing.

A note to ourselves:

- Encourage clear and regular communication that allows for updates in real-time.
- Remember to communicate authentically, reassess the way things have always been done and change it to what works best (building a fit-for-purpose business),
- Drive a culture of learning by creating more online opportunities.

What has been the effect of these ways of working on employee wellbeing, specifically on women?

At Grey, we are very cognisant of creating a healthy work-life balance and have managed to become more flexible in our approach. We are supporting our female employees who have children while they continue to work from home (this includes many of our dads as well). We have also taken the time to understand and support them and have created an online support service for counselling. We realise that every person's journey is unique and there is not a 'one size fits all' solution, so we are doing our best to address everyone's needs individually.



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How has HR as an industry evolved during the pandemic?

The pandemic for HR professionals has been a business opportunity to rethink and transform the way we work. We have had to focus on keeping our employees productive, motivated, engaged and connected — all factors that are moving targets in the new normal. As a people manager, I have learnt that individuals have this ability to self-steer themselves, be responsible and lead themselves. This is very important, especially in the new world we are moving into. In this new world, meta-competencies such as resilience, teamwork and decision-making will also be required more than today. Lifelong learning will become the norm and not just a management buzz word. It will be our role as people managers to help talent pivot and stretch themselves to fill the gaps the pandemic will leave behind.

Women working in corporate environments still face a lot of challenges, even though gender equality has come a long way. What are some of the steps and policies that organisations can implement to support and help women succeed?

A study conducted by *Harvard Business Review* found that women outscored men on 17 of 19 capabilities that differentiate excellent leaders from average or poor ones. The ability to balance assertiveness and ambition, to lead with empathy, to insist on inclusiveness and to be willing to share power make women better leaders. It is only fair to say that over the past decade, companies have woken up to the fact that women do contribute to business performance at all levels.

What could help is for companies to make deliberate efforts and invest in growing women leaders in business, given the history. Women understand exclusion from experience and these efforts must ensure both men and women have an equal

shot at growth. There can't be a fast-track for men and mommy-track for women. Implementation of organisational policies that reflect gender parity are also important and will ultimately drive equal pay across genders.

What do you think are some of the key trends that will shape the future of HR?

- Digitisation (AI)
- Globalisation (Office no longer matters)
- Individualisation (Lead self)

It is evident, we will not be easing into a new normal but rather taking a precipitous plunge into a new global reality. In adapting to the new normal, we must fight the notion that everything will change and instead recognise how much will remain unchanged – old values like trust, authenticity and how you show up will never fade.

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