

ARTICLE COLLECTION

One of the biggest threats facing your company? The loss of highly qualified women.

Required Reading for Executive Women—and the Companies That Need Them, 3rd Edition

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Required Reading for Executive Women— and the Companies That Need Them, 3rd

Collection Overview

Women occupy 40% of managerial positions in the United States but only 6% of *Fortune* 500 top executive roles. In a time when baby-boomer retirements threaten to shrink talent pools, no company can afford to make the mistake of underutilizing women in its leadership ranks.

This HBR Article Collection shows you how to aggressively cultivate women leaders so your firm consistently has the talent it needs to best rivals. For instance, understand the barriers blocking women from advancement to leadership positions (such as outright prejudice). Then overcome those barriers through tactics such as matching high-potential female managers with well-placed, widely esteemed mentors. Enable businesswomen who take time out from paid work to return to their careers by providing time banks of parenting leave they can take as needed. Establish “old girls” networks to help women build leadership skills, contacts, and confidence, as well as earn the recognition vital to advancing. And help women develop the visioning skills essential for effective leadership, including the ability to set strategic direction and inspire constituents.

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by Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli

To increase the number of women in top positions in your firm, first understand the many career barriers they encounter. These include outright resistance to women’s leadership stemming from stereotyped views of successful female managers as pushy or abrasive and from assumptions that women with major family responsibilities aren’t available for promotion. Second, take steps to remove those barriers. For instance, use open-recruitment tools (such as advertising and employment agencies) instead of relying on informal social networks, where antiwoman biases can lurk. And give employees with significant family responsibilities more time to show they’re qualified for promotion.

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by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

Two-thirds of highly educated, accomplished businesswomen who take time out from paid work (to raise children or care for elderly parents) want to return to the workforce. But their opportunities to do so are limited. To leverage their leadership talents—before a rival company does—enable them to get off conventional career ladders *and* get back on. How? Provide reduced-hour jobs, careers that can be interrupted, and the ability to use such benefits without suffering long-term career damage. Approaches include restructured retirement plans that don’t penalize women for career interruptions and job protection after unpaid leaves of up to three years.

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by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce

The authors describe additional ways to ensure that talented female managers who must make work/family trade-offs can still advance into high-level leadership positions. For instance, offer variety in when, where, and how work gets done. A caregiver for a fragile elderly person may have many hours of potentially productive time in a day yet not be able to stray far from home. Also, explore women’s reasons for departing and offer options short of total severance. Clarify that your company’s door will remain open to them.

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by Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru

Visioning—the ability to sense opportunities and threats, set strategic direction, and inspire constituents—is a crucial leadership skill. Yet research shows that many female managers are perceived as lacking visionary ability and that this perception may hold them back from advancement. To combat it, clarify that your organization values differing approaches to setting strategy, including the collaborative team approach to vision-setting favored by some women. Also help women build their visioning skills, including encouraging them to sense opportunities and threats by exchanging ideas with many people inside and outside the organization.

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When you put all the pieces together, a new picture emerges for why women don't make it into the C-suite. It's not the glass ceiling, but the sum of many obstacles along the way.

Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

by Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli

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Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

The Idea in Brief

Women occupy 40% of all managerial positions in the United States. But only 6% of the *Fortune* 500's top executives are female. And just 2% of those firms have women CEOs.

We've long blamed such numbers on the "glass ceiling," the notion that women successfully climb the corporate hierarchy until they're blocked just below the summit. But the problem stems from discrimination operating at all ranks, not just the top, say Eagly and Carli.

Therefore, to move more women into your company's executive suite, you must attack all barriers to advancement simultaneously. For example, prepare women for line management with demanding assignments. Use objective criteria to measure performance. And give working mothers additional time to prove themselves worthy of promotion.

Women's leadership style—characterized by innovating, building trust and empowering followers—is ideally suited to today's business challenges. Tackle the obstacles to women's progress, and you'll increase your firm's competitive prowess.

The Idea in Practice

Eagly and Carli recommend these strategies for increasing the number of women in top positions in your firm:

UNDERSTAND THE CAREER BARRIERS WOMEN ENCOUNTER

Extensive academic and government research studies identify these obstacles:

- **Prejudice:** Men are promoted more quickly than women with equivalent qualifications, even in traditionally female settings such as nursing and education.
- **Resistance to women's leadership:** People view successful female managers as more deceitful, pushy, selfish, and abrasive than successful male managers.
- **Leadership style issues:** Many female leaders struggle to reconcile qualities people prefer in women (compassion for others) with qualities people think leaders need to succeed (assertion and control).
- **Family demands:** Women are still the ones who interrupt their careers to handle work/family trade-offs. Overloaded, they lack time to engage in the social networking essential to advancement.

INTERVENE ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

Because of the interconnectedness of obstacles women face, companies that want more women leaders need to apply a variety of tactics simultaneously:

- Evaluate and reward women's productivity by objective results, not by "number of hours at work."
- Make performance-evaluation criteria explicit, and design evaluation processes to limit the influence of evaluators' biases.
- Instead of relying on informal social networks and referrals to fill positions, use open-recruitment tools such as advertising and employment agencies.

- Avoid having a sole female member on any team. Outnumbered, women tend to be ignored by men.
- Encourage well-placed, widely esteemed individuals to mentor women.
- Ensure a critical mass of women in executive positions to head off problems that come with tokenism. Women's identities as women will become less salient to colleagues than their individual competencies.
- Give women demanding developmental job experiences to train them for leadership positions.
- Establish family-friendly HR practices (including flextime, job sharing, and telecommuting). You'll help women stay in their jobs while rearing children, allow them to build social capital, and enable them eventually to compete for higher positions. Encourage men to participate in family-friendly benefits, too (for example, by providing paternity leave). When only women participate, their careers suffer because companies expect them to be off the job while exercising those options.
- Give employees with significant parental responsibilities more time to show they're qualified for promotion. Parents may need a year or two more than childless professionals.
- Establish alumni programs for women who need to step away from the workforce. Then tap their expertise to show that returning is possible. Consulting giant Booz Allen, for example, sees its alumni as a source of subcontractors.

When you put all the pieces together, a new picture emerges for why women don't make it into the C-suite. It's not the glass ceiling, but the sum of many obstacles along the way.

Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

by Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli

If one has misdiagnosed a problem, then one is unlikely to prescribe an effective cure. This is the situation regarding the scarcity of women in top leadership. Because people with the best of intentions have misread the symptoms, the solutions that managers are investing in are not making enough of a difference.

That there is a problem is not in doubt. Despite years of progress by women in the workforce (they now occupy more than 40% of all managerial positions in the United States), within the C-suite they remain as rare as hens' teeth. Consider the most highly paid executives of *Fortune* 500 companies—those with titles such as chairman, president, chief executive officer, and chief operating officer. Of this group, only 6% are women. Most notably, only 2% of the CEOs are women, and only 15% of the seats on the boards of directors are held by women. The situation is not much different in other industrialized countries. In the 50 largest publicly traded corporations in each nation of the European Union, women

make up, on average, 11% of the top executives and 4% of the CEOs and heads of boards. Just seven companies, or 1%, of *Fortune* magazine's Global 500 have female CEOs. What is to blame for the pronounced lack of women in positions of power and authority?

In 1986 the *Wall Street Journal's* Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt gave the world an answer: "Even those few women who rose steadily through the ranks eventually crashed into an invisible barrier. The executive suite seemed within their grasp, but they just couldn't break through the glass ceiling." The metaphor, driven home by the article's accompanying illustration, resonated; it captured the frustration of a goal within sight but somehow unattainable. To be sure, there was a time when the barriers were absolute. Even within the career spans of 1980s-era executives, access to top posts had been explicitly denied. Consider comments made by President Richard Nixon, recorded on White House audiotapes and made public through the Freedom of Information Act. When explaining why he would

not appoint a woman to the U.S. Supreme Court, Nixon said, “I don’t think a woman should be in any government job whatsoever...mainly because they are erratic. And emotional. Men are erratic and emotional, too, but the point is a woman is more likely to be.” In a culture where such opinions were widely held, women had virtually no chance of attaining influential leadership roles.

Times have changed, however, and the glass ceiling metaphor is now more wrong than right. For one thing, it describes an absolute barrier at a specific high level in organizations. The fact that there have been female chief executives, university presidents, state governors, and presidents of nations gives the lie to that charge. At the same time, the metaphor implies that women and men have equal access to entry- and midlevel positions. They do not. The image of a transparent obstruction also suggests that women are being misled about their opportunities, because the impediment is not easy for them to see from a distance. But some impediments are not subtle. Worst of all, by depicting a single, unvarying obstacle, the glass ceiling fails to incorporate the complexity and variety of challenges that women can face in their leadership journeys. In truth, women are not turned away only as they reach the penultimate stage of a distinguished career. They disappear in various numbers at many points leading up to that stage.

Metaphors matter because they are part of the storytelling that can compel change. Believing in the existence of a glass ceiling, people emphasize certain kinds of interventions: top-to-top networking, mentoring to increase board memberships, requirements for diverse candidates in high-profile succession horse races, litigation aimed at punishing discrimination in the C-suite. None of these is counterproductive; all have a role to play. The danger arises when they draw attention and resources away from other kinds of interventions that might attack the problem more potently. If we want to make better progress, it’s time to rename the challenge.

Walls All Around

A better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavors is the labyrinth. It’s an image with a long and varied history in ancient Greece, India, Nepal, native

North and South America, medieval Europe, and elsewhere. As a contemporary symbol, it conveys the idea of a complex journey toward a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one’s progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. It is this meaning that we intend to convey. For women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center, it is understood that goals are attainable. The metaphor acknowledges obstacles but is not ultimately discouraging.

If we can understand the various barriers that make up this labyrinth, and how some women find their way around them, we can work more effectively to improve the situation. What are the obstructions that women run up against? Let’s explore them in turn.

Vestiges of prejudice. It is a well-established fact that men as a group still have the benefit of higher wages and faster promotions. In the United States in 2005, for example, women employed full-time earned 81 cents for every dollar that men earned. Is this true because of discrimination or simply because, with fewer family demands placed on them and longer careers on average, men are able to gain superior qualifications? Literally hundreds of correlational studies by economists and sociologists have attempted to find the answer.

One of the most comprehensive of these studies was conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. The study was based on survey data from 1983 through 2000 from a representative sample of Americans. Because the same people responded to the survey repeatedly over the years, the study provided accurate estimates of past work experience, which is important for explaining later wages.

The GAO researchers tested whether individuals’ total wages could be predicted by sex and other characteristics. They included part-time and full-time employees in the surveys and took into account all the factors that they could estimate and that might affect earnings, such as education and work experience. Without controls for these variables, the data showed that women earned about 44% less than men, averaged over the entire period from 1983 to 2000. With these controls in place, the gap was only about half as

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Marriage and parenthood are associated with higher wages for men but not for women.

large, but still substantial. The control factors that reduced the wage gap most were the different employment patterns of men and women: Men undertook more hours of paid labor per year than women and had more years of job experience.

Although most variables affected the wages of men and women similarly, there were exceptions. Marriage and parenthood, for instance, were associated with higher wages for men but not for women. In contrast, other characteristics, especially years of education, had a more positive effect on women's wages than on men's. Even after adjusting wages for all of the ways men and women differ, the GAO study, like similar studies, showed that women's wages remained lower than men's. The unexplained gender gap is consistent with the presence of wage discrimination.

Similar methods have been applied to the question of whether discrimination affects promotions. Evidently it does. Promotions come more slowly for women than for men with equivalent qualifications. One illustrative national study followed workers from 1980 to 1992 and found that white men were more likely to attain managerial positions than white women, black men, and black women. Controlling for other characteristics, such as education and hours worked per year, the study showed that white men were ahead of the other groups when entering the labor market and that their advantage in attaining managerial positions grew throughout their careers. Other research has underscored these findings. Even in culturally feminine settings such as nursing, librarianship, elementary education, and social work (all specifically studied by sociologist Christine Williams), men ascend to supervisory and administrative positions more quickly than women.

The findings of correlational studies are supported by experimental research, in which subjects are asked to evaluate hypothetical individuals as managers or job candidates, and all characteristics of these individuals are held constant except for their sex. Such efforts continue the tradition of the Goldberg paradigm, named for a 1968 experiment by Philip Goldberg. His simple, elegant study had student participants evaluate written essays that were identical except for the attached male or female name. The students were unaware that other students had received identical

material ascribed to a writer of the other sex. This initial experiment demonstrated an overall gender bias: Women received lower evaluations unless the essay was on a feminine topic. Some 40 years later, unfortunately, experiments continue to reveal the same kind of bias in work settings. Men are advantaged over equivalent women as candidates for jobs traditionally held by men as well as for more gender-integrated jobs. Similarly, male leaders receive somewhat more favorable evaluations than equivalent female leaders, especially in roles usually occupied by men.

Interestingly, however, there is little evidence from either the correlational or the experimental studies that the odds are stacked higher against women with each step up the ladder—that is, that women's promotions become progressively less likely than men's at higher levels within organizations. Instead, a general bias against women appears to operate with approximately equal strength at all levels. The scarcity of female corporate officers is the sum of discrimination that has operated at all ranks, not evidence of a particular obstacle to advancement as women approach the top. The problem, in other words, is not a glass ceiling.

Resistance to women's leadership. What's behind the discrimination we've been describing? Essentially, a set of widely shared conscious and unconscious mental associations about women, men, and leaders. Study after study has affirmed that people associate women and men with different traits and link men with more of the traits that connote leadership. Kim Campbell, who briefly served as the prime minister of Canada in 1993, described the tension that results:

I don't have a traditionally female way of speaking....I'm quite assertive. If I didn't speak the way I do, I wouldn't have been seen as a leader. But my way of speaking may have grated on people who were not used to hearing it from a woman. It was the right way for a leader to speak, but it wasn't the right way for a woman to speak. It goes against type.

In the language of psychologists, the clash is between two sets of associations: communal and agentic. Women are associated with communal qualities, which convey a concern for the compassionate treatment of others. They include being especially affectionate,

Verbally intimidating others can undermine a woman's influence, and assertive behavior can reduce her chances of getting a job or advancing in her career.

helpful, friendly, kind, and sympathetic, as well as interpersonally sensitive, gentle, and soft-spoken. In contrast, men are associated with agentic qualities, which convey assertion and control. They include being especially aggressive, ambitious, dominant, self-confident, and forceful, as well as self-reliant and individualistic. The agentic traits are also associated in most people's minds with effective leadership—perhaps because a long history of male domination of leadership roles has made it difficult to separate the leader associations from the male associations.

As a result, women leaders find themselves in a double bind. If they are highly communal, they may be criticized for not being agentic enough. But if they are highly agentic, they may be criticized for lacking communion. Either way, they may leave the impression that they don't have "the right stuff" for powerful jobs.

Given this double bind, it is hardly surprising that people are more resistant to women's influence than to men's. For example, in meetings at a global retail company, people responded more favorably to men's overt attempts at influence than to women's. In the words of one of this company's female executives, "People often had to speak up to defend their turf, but when women did so, they were vilified. They were labeled 'control freaks'; men acting the same way were called 'passionate.'"

Studies have gauged reactions to men and women engaging in various types of dominant behavior. The findings are quite consistent. Nonverbal dominance, such as staring at others while speaking to them or pointing at people, is a more damaging behavior for women than for men. Verbally intimidating others can undermine a woman's influence, and assertive behavior can reduce her chances of getting a job or advancing in her career. Simply disagreeing can sometimes get women into trouble. Men who disagree or otherwise act dominant get away with it more often than women do.

Self-promotion is similarly risky for women. Although it can convey status and competence, it is not at all communal. So while men can use bluster to get themselves noticed, modesty is expected even of highly accomplished women. Linguistics professor Deborah Tannen tells a story from her experience: "This [need for

modesty] was evident, for example, at a faculty meeting devoted to promotions, at which a woman professor's success was described: She was extremely well published and well known in the field. A man commented with approval, 'She wears it well.' In other words, she was praised for not acting as successful as she was."

Another way the double bind penalizes women is by denying them the full benefits of being warm and considerate. Because people expect it of women, nice behavior that seems noteworthy in men seems unimpressive in women. For example, in one study, helpful men reaped a lot of approval, but helpful women did not. Likewise, men got away with being unhelpful, but women did not. A different study found that male employees received more promotions when they reported higher levels of helpfulness to coworkers. But female employees' promotions were not related to such altruism.

While one might suppose that men would have a double bind of their own, they in fact have more freedom. Several experiments and organizational studies have assessed reactions to behavior that is warm and friendly versus dominant and assertive. The findings show that men can communicate in a warm or a dominant manner, with no penalty either way. People like men equally well and are equally influenced by them regardless of their warmth.

It all amounts to a clash of assumptions when the average person confronts a woman in management. Perhaps this is why respondents in one study characterized the group "successful female managers" as more deceitful, pushy, selfish, and abrasive than "successful male managers." In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, people suspect that such highly effective women must not be very likable or nice.

Issues of leadership style. In response to the challenges presented by the double bind, female leaders often struggle to cultivate an appropriate and effective leadership style—one that reconciles the communal qualities people prefer in women with the agentic qualities people think leaders need to succeed. Here, for instance, is how Marietta Nien-hwa Cheng described her transition to the role of symphony conductor:

I used to speak more softly, with a higher pitch. Sometimes my vocal cadences went up instead of down. I realized that these

mannerisms lack the sense of authority. I strengthened my voice. The pitch has dropped...I have stopped trying to be everyone's friend. Leadership is not synonymous with socializing.

It's difficult to pull off such a transformation while maintaining a sense of authenticity as a leader. Sometimes the whole effort can backfire. In the words of another female leader, "I think that there is a real penalty for a woman who behaves like a man. The men don't like her and the women don't either." Women leaders worry a lot about these things, complicating the labyrinth that they negotiate. For example, Catalyst's study of *Fortune* 1000 female executives found that 96% of them rated as critical or fairly important that they develop "a style with which male managers are comfortable."

Does a distinct "female" leadership style exist? There seems to be a popular consensus

that it does. Consider, for example, journalist Michael Sokolove's profile of Mike Krzyzewski, head coach of the highly successful Duke University men's basketball team. As Sokolove put it, "So what is the secret to Krzyzewski's success? For starters, he coaches the way a woman would. Really." Sokolove proceeded to describe Krzyzewski's mentoring, interpersonally sensitive, and highly effective coaching style.

More scientifically, a recent meta-analysis integrated the results of 45 studies addressing the question. To compare leadership skills, the researchers adopted a framework introduced by leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns that distinguishes between transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Transformational leaders establish themselves as role models by gaining followers' trust and confidence. They state future goals, develop plans to achieve those goals, and innovate, even when their organizations are generally successful. Such leaders mentor and empower followers, encouraging them to develop their full potential and thus to contribute more effectively to their organizations. By contrast, transactional leaders establish give-and-take relationships that appeal to subordinates' self-interest. Such leaders manage in the conventional manner of clarifying subordinates' responsibilities, rewarding them for meeting objectives, and correcting them for failing to meet objectives. Although transformational and transactional leadership styles are different, most leaders adopt at least some behaviors of both types. The researchers also allowed for a third category, called the *laissez-faire* style—a sort of non-leadership that concerns itself with none of the above, despite rank authority.

The meta-analysis found that, in general, female leaders were somewhat more transformational than male leaders, especially when it came to giving support and encouragement to subordinates. They also engaged in more of the rewarding behaviors that are one aspect of transactional leadership. Meanwhile, men exceeded women on the aspects of transactional leadership involving corrective and disciplinary actions that are either active (timely) or passive (belated). Men were also more likely than women to be *laissez-faire* leaders, who take little responsibility for managing. These findings add up to a star-

Is It Only a Question of Time?

It is a common perception that women will steadily gain greater access to leadership roles, including elite positions. For example, university students who are queried about the future power of men and women say that women's power will increase. Polls have shown that most Americans expect a woman to be elected president or vice president within their lifetimes. Both groups are extrapolating women's recent gains into the future, as if our society were on a continuous march toward gender equality.

But social change does not proceed without struggle and conflict. As women gain greater equality, a portion of people react against it. They long for traditional roles. In fact, signs of a pause in progress toward gender equality have appeared on many fronts. A review of longitudinal studies reveals several areas in which a sharp upward trend in the 1970s and 1980s has been followed by a slowing and flattening in recent years (for instance, in the percentage of managers who are women). The pause is also evident in some attitudinal data—like the percentage of people who approve of female

bosses and who believe that women are at least as well suited as men for politics.

Social scientists have proposed various theories to explain this pause. Some, such as social psychologist Cecilia Ridgeway, believe that social change is activating "people's deep seated interests in maintaining clear cultural understandings of gender difference." Others believe progress has reached its limit given the continuing organization of family life by gender, coupled with employer policies that favor those who are not hampered by primary responsibility for child rearing.

It may simply be that women are collectively catching their breath before pressing for more change. In the past century, feminist activism arose when women came to view themselves as collectively subjected to illegitimate and unfair treatment. But recent polls show less conviction about the presence of discrimination, and feminism does not have the cultural relevance it once had. The lessening of activism on behalf of all women puts pressure on each woman to find her own way.

ting conclusion, given that most leadership research has found the transformational style (along with the rewards and positive incentives associated with the transactional style) to be more suited to leading the modern organization. The research tells us not only that men and women do have somewhat different leadership styles, but also that women's approaches are the more generally effective—while men's often are only somewhat effective or actually hinder effectiveness.

Another part of this picture, based on a separate meta-analysis, is that women adopt a more participative and collaborative style than men typically favor. The reason for this difference is unlikely to be genetic. Rather, it may be that collaboration can get results without seeming particularly masculine. As women navigate their way through the double bind, they seek ways to project authority without relying on the autocratic behaviors that people find so jarring in women. A viable path is to bring others into decision making and to lead as an encouraging teacher and positive role model. (However, if there is not a critical mass of other women to affirm the legitimacy of a participative style, female leaders usually conform to whatever style is typical of the men—and that is sometimes autocratic.)

Demands of family life. For many women, the most fateful turns in the labyrinth are the ones taken under pressure of family responsibilities. Women continue to be the ones who interrupt their careers, take more days off, and work part-time. As a result, they have fewer years of job experience and fewer hours of employment per year, which slows their career progress and reduces their earnings.

In one study of Chicago lawyers, researchers sought to understand why women were much less likely than men to hold the leadership positions in large law firms—the positions that are most highly paid and that confer (arguably) the highest prestige. They found that women were no less likely than men to begin their careers at such firms but were more likely to leave them for positions in the public sector or corporate positions. The reasons for their departures were concentrated in work/family trade-offs. Among the relatively few women who did become partner in a firm, 60% had no children, and the minority who had children generally had delayed childbearing until attaining partner status.

There is no question that, while men increasingly share housework and child rearing, the bulk of domestic work still falls on women's shoulders. We know this from time-diary studies, in which people record what they are doing during each hour of a 24-hour day. So, for example, in the United States married women devoted 19 hours per week on average to housework in 2005, while married men contributed 11 hours. That's a huge improvement over 1965 numbers, when women spent a whopping 34 hours per week to men's five, but it is still a major inequity. And the situation looks worse when child care hours are added.

Although it is common knowledge that mothers provide more child care than fathers, few people realize that mothers provide more than they did in earlier generations—despite the fact that fathers are putting in a lot more time than in the past. National studies have compared mothers and fathers on the amount of their primary child care, which consists of close interaction not combined with housekeeping or other activities. Married mothers increased their hours per week from 10.6 in 1965 to 12.9 in 2000, and married fathers increased theirs from 2.6 to 6.5. Thus, though husbands have taken on more domestic work, the work/family conflict has not eased for women; the gain has been offset by escalating pressures for intensive parenting and the increasing time demands of most high-level careers.

Even women who have found a way to relieve pressures from the home front by sharing child care with husbands, other family members, or paid workers may not enjoy the full workplace benefit of having done so. Decision makers often assume that mothers have domestic responsibilities that make it inappropriate to promote them to demanding positions. As one participant in a study of the federal workforce explained, "I mean, there were 2 or 3 names [of women] in the hat, and they said, 'I don't want to talk about her because she has children who are still home in these [evening] hours.' Now they don't pose that thing about men on the list, many of whom also have children in that age group."

Underinvestment in social capital. Perhaps the most destructive result of the work/family balancing act so many women must perform is that it leaves very little time for socializing

Mothers provide more child care hours than they did in earlier generations—despite the fact that fathers are putting in a lot more time than in the past.

One study suggests that social capital is even more necessary to managers' advancement than skillful performance of traditional managerial tasks.

with colleagues and building professional networks. The social capital that accrues from such “nonessential” parts of work turns out to be quite essential indeed. One study yielded the following description of managers who advanced rapidly in hierarchies: Fast-track managers “spent relatively more time and effort socializing, politicking, and interacting with outsiders than did their less successful counterparts...[and] did not give much time or attention to the traditional management activities of planning, decision making, and controlling or to the human resource management activities of motivating/reinforcing, staffing, training/developing, and managing conflict.” This suggests that social capital is even more necessary to managers’ advancement than skillful performance of traditional managerial tasks.

Even given sufficient time, women can find it difficult to engage in and benefit from informal networking if they are a small minority. In such settings, the influential networks are composed entirely or almost entirely of men. Breaking into those male networks can be hard, especially when men center their networks on masculine activities. The recent gender discrimination lawsuit against Walmart provides examples of this. For instance, an executive retreat took the form of a quail-hunting expedition at Sam Walton’s ranch in Texas. Middle managers’ meetings included visits to strip clubs and Hooters restaurants, and a sales conference attended by thousands of store managers featured a football theme. One executive received feedback that she probably would not advance in the company because she didn’t hunt or fish.

Management Interventions That Work

Taking the measure of the labyrinth that confronts women leaders, we see that it begins with prejudices that benefit men and penalize women, continues with particular resistance to women’s leadership, includes questions of leadership style and authenticity, and—most dramatically for many women—features the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities. It becomes clear that a woman’s situation as she reaches her peak career years is the result of many turns at many challenging junctures. Only a few individual women have made the right combination of moves to

land at the center of power—but as for the rest, there is usually no single turning point where their progress was diverted and the prize was lost.

What’s to be done in the face of such a multifaceted problem? A solution that is often proposed is for governments to implement and enforce antidiscrimination legislation and thereby require organizations to eliminate inequitable practices. However, analysis of discrimination cases that have gone to court has shown that legal remedies can be elusive when gender inequality results from norms embedded in organizational structure and culture. The more effective approach is for organizations to appreciate the subtlety and complexity of the problem and to attack its many roots simultaneously. More specifically, if a company wants to see more women arrive in its executive suite, it should do the following:

Increase people’s awareness of the psychological drivers of prejudice toward female leaders, and work to dispel those perceptions. Raising awareness of ingrained bias has been the aim of many diversity-training initiatives, and no doubt they have been more helpful than harmful. There is the danger they will be undermined, however, if their lessons are not underscored by what managers say and do in the course of day-to-day work.

Change the long-hours norm. Especially in the context of knowledge work, it can be hard to assess individuals’ relative contributions, and managers may resort to “hours spent at work” as the prime indicator of someone’s worth to the organization. To the extent an organization can shift the focus to objective measures of productivity, women with family demands on their time but highly productive work habits will receive the rewards and encouragement they deserve.

Reduce the subjectivity of performance evaluation. Greater objectivity in evaluations also combats the effects of lingering prejudice in both hiring and promotion. To ensure fairness, criteria should be explicit and evaluation processes designed to limit the influence of decision makers’ conscious and unconscious biases.

Use open-recruitment tools, such as advertising and employment agencies, rather than relying on informal social networks and referrals to fill positions. Recruitment from within

organizations also should be transparent, with postings of open positions in appropriate venues. Research has shown that such personnel practices increase the numbers of women in managerial roles.

Ensure a critical mass of women in executive positions—not just one or two women—to head off the problems that come with tokenism. Token women tend to be pegged into narrow stereotypical roles such as “seductress,” “mother,” “pet,” or “iron maiden.” (Or more colorfully, as one woman banker put it, “When you start out in banking, you are a slut or a geisha.”) Pigeonholing like this limits women’s options and makes it difficult for them to rise to positions of responsibility. When women are not a small minority, their identities as women become less salient, and colleagues are more likely to react to them in terms of their individual competencies.

Avoid having a sole female member of any team. Top management tends to divide its small population of women managers among many projects in the interests of introducing diversity to them all. But several studies have found that, so outnumbered, the women tend to be ignored by the men. A female vice president of a manufacturing company described how, when she or another woman ventures an idea in a meeting, it tends to be overlooked: “It immediately gets lost in the conversation. Then two minutes later, a man makes the same suggestion, and it’s ‘Wow! What a great idea!’ And you sit there and think, ‘What just happened?’” As women reach positions of higher power and authority, they increasingly find themselves in gender-imbalanced groups—and some find themselves, for the first time, seriously marginalized. This is part of the reason that the glass ceiling metaphor resonates with so many. But in fact, the problem can be present at any level.

Help shore up social capital. As we’ve discussed, the call of family responsibilities is mainly to blame for women’s underinvestment in networking. When time is scarce, this social activity is the first thing to go by the wayside. Organizations can help women appreciate why it deserves more attention. In particular, women gain from strong and supportive mentoring relationships and connections with powerful networks. When a well-placed individual who possesses greater legitimacy (often a man) takes an interest in a woman’s career,

her efforts to build social capital can proceed far more efficiently.

Prepare women for line management with appropriately demanding assignments. Women, like men, must have the benefit of developmental job experiences if they are to qualify for promotions. But, as one woman executive wrote, “Women have been shunted off into support areas for the last 30 years, rather than being in the business of doing business, so the pool of women trained to assume leadership positions in any large company is very small.” Her point was that women should be taught in business school to insist on line jobs when they enter the workforce. One company that has taken up the challenge has been Procter & Gamble. According to a report by Claudia Deutsch in the *New York Times*, the company was experiencing an executive attrition rate that was twice as high for women as for men. Some of the women reported having to change companies to land jobs that provided challenging work. P&G’s subsequent efforts to bring more women into line management both improved its overall retention of women and increased the number of women in senior management.

Establish family-friendly human resources practices. These may include flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, elder care provisions, adoption benefits, dependent child care options, and employee-sponsored on-site child care. Such support can allow women to stay in their jobs during the most demanding years of child rearing, build social capital, keep up to date in their fields, and eventually compete for higher positions. A study of 72 large U.S. firms showed (controlling for other variables) that family-friendly HR practices in place in 1994 increased the proportion of women in senior management over the subsequent five years.

Allow employees who have significant parental responsibility more time to prove themselves worthy of promotion. This recommendation is particularly directed to organizations, many of them professional services firms, that have established “up or out” career progressions. People not ready for promotion at the same time as the top performers in their cohort aren’t simply left in place—they’re asked to leave. But many parents (most often mothers), while fully capable of reaching that level of achievement, need extra time—perhaps a year or two—to get there. Forcing

When the eye can take in the whole of the puzzle—the starting position, the goal, and the maze of walls—solutions begin to suggest themselves.

them off the promotion path not only reduces the number of women reaching top management positions, but also constitutes a failure by the firm to capitalize on its early investment in them.

Welcome women back. It makes sense to give highperforming women who step away from the workforce an opportunity to return to responsible positions when their circumstances change. Some companies have established “alumni” programs, often because they see former employees as potential sources of new business. A few companies have gone further to activate these networks for other purposes, as well. (Procter & Gamble taps alumni for innovation purposes; Booz Allen sees its alumni ranks as a source of subcontractors.) Keeping lines of communication open can convey the message that a return may be possible.

Encourage male participation in family-friendly benefits. Dangers lurk in family-friendly benefits that are used only by women. Exercising options such as generous parental leave and part-time work slows down women’s careers. More profoundly, having many more women than men take such benefits can harm the careers of women in general because of the expectation that they may well exercise those options. Any effort toward greater family friendliness should actively recruit male participation to avoid inadvertently making it harder for women to gain access to essential managerial roles.

Managers can be forgiven if they find the foregoing list a tall order. It’s a wide-ranging set of interventions and still far from exhaustive. The point, however, is just that: Organizations will succeed in filling half their top management slots with women—and women who are the true performance equals of their male counterparts—only by attacking all the reasons they are absent today. Glass ceiling-inspired programs and projects can do just so

much if the leakage of talented women is happening on every lower floor of the building. Individually, each of these interventions has been shown to make a difference. Collectively, we believe, they can make all the difference.

The View from Above

Imagine visiting a formal garden and finding within it a high hedgerow. At a point along its vertical face, you spot a rectangle—a neatly pruned and inviting doorway. Are you aware as you step through that you are entering a labyrinth? And, three doorways later, as the reality of the puzzle settles in, do you have any idea how to proceed? This is the situation in which many women find themselves in their career endeavors. Ground-level perplexity and frustration make every move uncertain.

Labyrinths become infinitely more tractable when seen from above. When the eye can take in the whole of the puzzle—the starting position, the goal, and the maze of walls—solutions begin to suggest themselves. This has been the goal of our research. Our hope is that women, equipped with a map of the barriers they will confront on their path to professional achievement, will make more informed choices. We hope that managers, too, will understand where their efforts can facilitate the progress of women. If women are to achieve equality, women and men will have to share leadership equally. With a greater understanding of what stands in the way of gender-balanced leadership, we draw nearer to attaining it in our time.

For a list of the sources the authors consulted, view the article at www.hbr.org.

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Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

Further Reading

ARTICLES

[Do Women Lack Ambition?](#)

by Anna Fels
Harvard Business Review
March 2005
Product no. 9424

The author explores another barrier to women's advancement into leadership positions: the notion that women walk away from their career dreams because they lack ambition. The real cause behind the female brain drain? Many women receive scant praise for personal qualities, such as drive and assertiveness, that conflict with traditional notions of femininity. So, to be seen as feminine, they deny their ambitions, thus abandoning their dreams.

Instead of allowing society to define acceptable roles for them, women should assert their own values and priorities and organize politically to support working and stay-at-home mothers. And they must cultivate connections with mentors, peers, and powerful people who can help them blow their own horn—or blow it for them.

[Rethinking Political Correctness](#)

by Robin J. Ely, Debra E. Meyerson, and Martin N. Davidson
Harvard Business Review
September 2006
Product no. 1068

The authors identify five practices people in the workplace can use to address career-limiting prejudice toward women and other underrepresented groups. The key is to resolve diversity-related tensions: 1) **Pause**—if you believe someone has shown prejudice toward you or views you as prejudiced, resist the urge to cast blame. Instead, take time to identify your feelings and consider your response. 2) **Connect**—ask questions to better understand the other person's behavior, and share your own perspective. 3) **Question yourself**—ask yourself how your desire to be proven right about a perceived threat or innocent of prejudice might be distorting your view of the situation. 4) **Get support**—seek advisers who challenge your viewpoint. 5) **Shift your mind-set**—ask yourself what changes you can make to improve workplace relationships.

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A disturbing new study reveals that, 30 years into the women's movement, female executives still don't have what they want—and probably never will.

Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

15 [Article Summary](#)

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The Idea in Practice—*putting the idea to work*

16 [Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All](#)

24 [Further Reading](#)

A list of related materials, with annotations to guide further exploration of the article's ideas and applications

Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All

The Idea in Brief

Anyone who believes that women in the United States can have high-powered careers *and* families should consider these sobering statistics from economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett's January 2001 survey:

- 49% of ultra-achieving career women (earning more than \$100,000) ages 41–55 are childless.
- 33% of high-achieving career women (earning \$55,000–\$66,000) ages 41–55 are childless; 57% are unmarried.
- By contrast, the more successful a man is, the more likely he has a spouse and children. Only 19% of ultra-achieving men are childless and 17% unmarried.

Clearly, women *don't* have it all—while men apparently *do*. And it's not because successful executive women don't want kids; most yearn for them. But the brutal demands of ambitious careers, the asymmetries of male-female relationships, and late-in-life child-bearing difficulties conspire against them.

These realities take an obvious personal toll. But companies and the overall economy also pay a significant price. U.S. industry cannot afford to have a quarter of the female talent pool forced out of their jobs when they have children. Yet in 2000—at the height of the U.S. labor crunch—22% of women with professional degrees were not working. And in Hewlett's more recent survey, 66% of "high potential" women—highly qualified women not part of the workforce—would like to return to full-time jobs.

How to avoid this waste of expensively educated talent? Business leaders and federal lawmakers can establish new policies that support working parents. And young women can be more deliberate about career and family choices. Greater work-life balance *is* possible. It's also essential—for women, their organizations, and U.S. business overall.

The Idea in Practice

THE CHALLENGE TO BUSINESS LEADERS

Employers can provide more meaningful work-life policies, in particular, by giving the "gift of time" to high-achieving working mothers. These women need reduced-hour jobs, careers that can be interrupted—and the ability to use such benefits without suffering long-term career damage.

To address this situation—and win the intense loyalty of their professional women—companies must make it easier for workers to get off conventional career ladders *and* to get back on. Examples include:

- **a time bank of paid parenting leave:** three months of paid leave that parents can take, as needed, until children turn 18
- **restructured retirement plans:** programs without penalties for career interruptions
- **career breaks:** job assurance after (up to) three-year, unpaid leaves
- **reduced-hour careers:** positions that offer promotion possibilities *and* reduced workloads
- **active status for former employees:** helping women on leave stay in the loop by paying their professional association dues and certification fees, and tapping them for advice

THE CHALLENGE TO WOMEN

Young women themselves must also actively expand their life choices. Most important, they cannot assume that, as they pursue their careers, their personal lives will simply fall into place—or that medical science will extend their childbearing years into their 40s. By being more deliberate about career and family trade-offs, they take a vital first step toward having it all—or at least having what men have.

A disturbing new study reveals that, 30 years into the women's movement, female executives still don't have what they want—and probably never will.

Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

There is a secret out there—a painful, well-kept secret: At midlife, between a third and a half of all successful career women in the United States do not have children. In fact, 33% of such women (business executives, doctors, lawyers, academics, and the like) in the 41-to-55 age bracket are childless—and that figure rises to 42% in corporate America. These women have not chosen to remain childless. The vast majority, in fact, yearn for children. Indeed, some have gone to extraordinary lengths to bring a baby into their lives. They subject themselves to complex medical procedures, shell out tens of thousands of dollars, and derail their careers—mostly to no avail, because these efforts come too late. In the words of one senior manager, the typical high-achieving woman childless at midlife has not made a choice but a “creeping nonchoice.”

Why has the age-old business of having babies become so difficult for today's high-achieving women? In January 2001, in partnership with the market research company Harris Interactive and the National Parenting Associa-

tion, I conducted a nationwide survey designed to explore the professional and private lives of highly educated, high-earning women. The survey results are featured in my new book, *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*.

In this survey, I target the top 10% of women—measured in terms of earning power—and focus on two age groups: an older generation, ages 41 to 55, and their younger peers, ages 28 to 40, as defined for survey purposes. I distinguish between high achievers (those who are earning more than \$55,000 in the younger group, \$65,000 in the older one) and ultra-achievers (those who are earning more than \$100,000). I include a sample of high-potential women—highly qualified women who have left their careers, mainly for family reasons. In addition, I include a small sample of men.

The findings are startling—and troubling. They make it clear that, for many women, the brutal demands of ambitious careers, the asymmetries of male-female relationships, and the difficulties of bearing children late in life con-

spire to crowd out the possibility of having children. In this article, I lay out the issues underlying this state of affairs, identify the heavy costs involved, and suggest some remedies, however preliminary and modest. The facts and figures I relate are bleak. But I think that they can also be liberating, if they spur action. My hope is that this information will generate workplace policies that recognize the huge costs to businesses of losing highly educated women when they start their families. I also hope that it will galvanize young women to make newly urgent demands of their partners, employers, and policy makers and thus create more generous life choices for themselves.

The Continuing Inequity

When it comes to career and fatherhood, high-achieving men don't have to deal with difficult trade-offs: 79% of the men I surveyed report wanting children—and 75% have them. The research shows that, generally speaking, the more successful the man, the more likely he will find a spouse and become a father. The opposite holds true for women, and the disparity is particularly striking among corporate ultra-achievers. In fact, 49% of these women are childless. But a mere 19% of their male colleagues are. These figures underscore the depth and scope of the persisting, painful inequities between the sexes. Women face all the challenges that men do in working long hours and withstanding the up-or-out pressures of high-altitude careers. But they also face challenges all their own.

Slim Pickings in Partners. Let's start with the fact that professional women find it challenging even to *be* married—for most, a necessary precondition for childbearing. Only 60% of high-achieving women in the older age group are married, and this figure falls to 57% in corporate America. By contrast, 76% of older men are married, and this figure rises to 83% among ultra-achievers.

Consider Tamara Adler, 43, a former managing director of Deutsche Bank in London. She gave her take on these disturbing realities when I interviewed her for the study. Adler was the bank's most senior woman, and her highly successful career had left no room for family. She mentioned the obvious reasons—long hours and travel—but she also spoke eloquently about how ambitious careers discriminate against women: "In the rarified upper

reaches of high-altitude careers where the air is thin... men have a much easier time finding oxygen. They find oxygen in the form of younger, less driven women who will coddle their egos." She went on to conclude, "The hard fact is that most successful men are not interested in acquiring an ambitious peer as a partner."

It's a conclusion backed up by my data: Only 39% of high-achieving men are married to women who are employed full time, and 40% of these spouses earn less than \$35,000 a year. Meanwhile, nine out of ten married women in the high-achieving category have husbands who are employed full time or self-employed, and a quarter are married to men who earn more than \$100,000 a year. Clearly, successful women professionals have slim pickings in the marriage department—particularly as they age. Professional men seeking to marry typically reach into a large pool of younger women, while professional women are limited to a shrinking pool of eligible peers. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, at age 28 there are four college-educated, single men for every three college-educated, single women. A decade later, the situation is radically changed. At age 38, there is one man for every three women.

The Time Crunch. Now add to that scarcity of marriage candidates a scarcity of time to spend nurturing those relationships. My survey results show that women are dealing with long and lengthening workweeks. Twenty-nine percent of high achievers and 34% of ultra-achievers work more than 50 hours a week, and a significant proportion of these women are on the job ten to 20 more hours a week than they were five years ago. Among ultra-achievers, a quarter are away on business at least five nights every three months. According to research by sociologists Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, the percentage of women working at least 50 hours a week is now higher in the United States than in any other country.

Think of what a 55-hour week means in terms of work-life balance. If you assume an hour lunch and a 45-minute round-trip commute (the national average), the workday stretches to almost 13 hours. Even without "extras" (out-of-town trips, client dinners, work functions), this kind of schedule makes it extremely difficult for any professional to maintain a relationship. Take Sue Palmer, 49, man-

Sylvia Ann Hewlett is an economist and the author of several books, including *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* (Talk Miramax Books, 2002), from which this article is adapted. She is the founder and chairwoman of the National Parenting Association in New York.

aging director of Grant Thornton, the London-based global accounting firm, and the only woman on its management committee. “Ten years ago,” she said, “an assistant of mine told me at the end of a particularly grueling 70-hour week, ‘You know, Sue, you couldn’t have a torrid love affair if you wanted to.’ And I shot back, ‘I couldn’t have a *tepid* love affair if I wanted to.’”

Of course, long hours aren’t unique to women. They’re a fact of life in corporate America, where management is under intense pressure to use its professional workforce for as many hours a week as possible. The reasons for this go back to 1938 when Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which institutionalized the 40-hour workweek and required employers to pay overtime for additional hours worked. One provision, however, exempted managers and professionals and still does. For those workers, extra hours carry no marginal costs to employers. The temptation for companies to take advantage of that provision might not have been so problematic back in 1938 when only 15% of employees were exempt, and

most of them were men with stay-at-home spouses. But it produces significant overload today when close to 30% of employees are in the exempt category, many of them women who rarely have the luxury of a spouse at home tending to domestic responsibilities.

An Unforgiving Decade. Women pay an even greater price for those long hours because the early years of career building overlap—almost perfectly—the prime years of childbearing. It’s very hard to throttle back during that stage of a career and expect to catch up later. As policy analyst Nancy Rankin points out, the career highway has all kinds of off-ramps but few on-ramps.

In fact, the persistent wage gap between men and women is due mainly to the penalties women incur when they interrupt their careers to have children. In a recent study, economists Susan Harkness and Jane Waldfogel compared that wage gap across seven industrialized countries and found it was particularly wide in the United States. For example, in France, women earn 81% of the male wage, in Sweden 84%, and in Australia 88%, while in the United States, women continue to earn a mere 78% of the male wage. These days, only a small portion of this wage gap can be attributed to discrimination (getting paid less for doing the same job or being denied access to jobs, education, or capital based on sex). According to recent studies, an increasingly large part of the wage gap can now be explained by childbearing and child rearing, which interrupt women’s—but not men’s—careers, permanently depressing their earning power. If the gap between what men and women earn in this country is wider than elsewhere, it isn’t because this country has done an inferior job combating discrimination. It is because it has failed to develop policies—in the workplace and in society as a whole—that support working mothers.

Ironically, this policy failure is to some extent the fault of the women’s movement in the United States. Going back to the mid-nineteenth century, feminists in this country have channeled much of their energy into the struggle to win formal equality with men. More recently, the National Organization for Women has spent 35 years fighting for a wide array of equal rights, ranging from educational and job opportunities to equal pay and access to credit. The idea is that once all the legislation that dis-

Creeping Nonchoice: Reality and Regret

The findings presented in this article are compelling in the way that brutal statistics can be. But for me, the most powerful evidence of a problem came from the personal stories I heard while conducting the research. Going into the interviews, I had assumed that if accomplished women were childless, surely they had chosen to be. I was prepared to believe that the exhilaration and challenge of a megawatt career made it easy to opt out of motherhood.

Nothing could be further from the truth. When I surveyed these women about children, their sense of loss was palpable. Consider Lisa Polsky, who joined Morgan Stanley in 1995 as a managing director after successful stints at Citibank and Bankers Trust; she managed to make it on Wall Street, the ultimate bastion of male market power. But when we met in 1999, our conversation focused on what she had missed. Polsky was 44 then, and her childbearing days

were over. She said, “What gnaws at me is that I always assumed I would have children. Somehow I imagined that having a child was something I would get to in a year or so, after the next promotion, when I was more established.”

Kate, 52, a member of the medical faculty at the University of Washington, felt the same way. “Looking back, I can’t think why I allowed my career to obliterate my 30s,” she told me. “I just didn’t pay attention. I’m only just absorbing the consequences.”

And there is Stella Parsons, 45, who had just been offered a chairmanship at Ohio State University the day I interviewed her. But she waved my congratulations away. “I wish some of this career success had spilled over to my private life. I just didn’t get it together in time.” Then she whispered, “I’m almost ashamed to admit it, but I still ache for a child.”

criminate against women is dismantled, the playing field becomes level and women can assume a free and equal place in society by simply cloning the male competitive model.

In Europe, various groups of social feminists have viewed the problem for women quite differently. For them, it is not woman's lack of legal rights that constitutes her main handicap, or even her lack of reproductive freedom. Rather, it is her dual burden—taking care of a home and family as well as holding down a job—that leads to her second-class status.

The Second Shift. The problem with the notion that American women should be able to successfully clone the male competitive model is that husbands have not picked up a significant share of women's traditional responsibilities on the home front. Even high-achieving women who are married continue to carry the lion's share of domestic responsibilities. (See the exhibit "Primary Child Care and Household Responsibilities.") Only 9% of their husbands assume primary responsibility for meal preparation, 10% for the laundry, and 5% for cleaning the house. When it comes to

children, husbands don't do much better. Only 9% of them take time off from work when a child is sick, 9% take the lead in helping children with homework, and 3% organize activities such as play dates and summer camp.

Yes, these percentages have grown over the years—but not much. At the end of the day, the division of labor at home boils down to one startling fact: 43% of the older, high-achieving women and 37% of the younger, high-achieving women feel that their husbands actually create more household work for them than they contribute. (Thirty-nine percent of ultra-achieving women also feel this way, despite the fact that half of them are married to men who earn less than they do.)

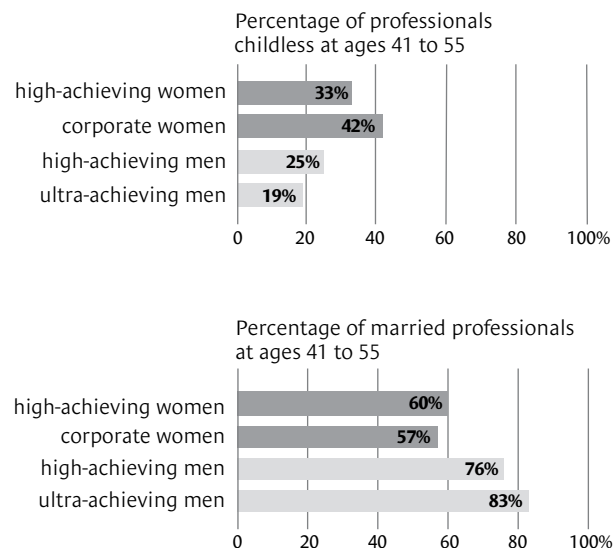
Stubborn Biology. So this is the difficult position in which women find themselves. According to Lisa Benenson, former editor of *Working Woman* and *Working Mother* magazines, "The signals are very clear. Young women are told that a serious person needs to commit to her career in her 20s and devote all her energies to her job for at least ten years if she is to be successful." But the fact is, if you take this advice

The Sobering Facts

In January 2001, in partnership with Harris Interactive and the National Parenting Association, I conducted a nationwide survey targeting the top 10% of women—measured in terms of earning power—and a small sample of men for comparative purposes. Responding were 1,168 high-achieving career women ages 28 to 55; 479 high-achieving, noncareer women ages 28 to 55; and 472 high-achieving men ages 28 to 55. (The group of ultra-achieving men was not large enough to disaggregate.) The sample was drawn from the Harris Poll on-line database of cooperative respondents. Data were weighted for key demographic variables to reflect each sample's national population. My analysis delineated an older generation, 41 to 55, and that group's younger peers, 28 to 40. I also distinguished between high achievers (those earning more than \$65,000 or \$55,000, depending on age), ultra-achievers (those earning more than \$100,000), and high-potential women—highly qualified women who have left their careers, mainly for family reasons. Corporate

women were defined as working in companies with more than 5,000 employees. The two charts below contain some of the startling—and sobering—findings.

The survey was carried out by Harris Interactive under the auspices of the National Parenting Association, a nonprofit research organiza-



tion. Funding for the survey and the associated research was provided by Ernst & Young, Merck, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. For more about the methodology and findings, go to www.parentsunite.org.

you might well be on the wrong side of 35 before you have time to draw breath and contemplate having a child—exactly the point in life when infertility can—and overwhelmingly does—become an issue.

Media hype about advances in reproductive science only exacerbates the problem, giving women the illusion that they can delay child-bearing until their careers are well established. My survey tells us that 89% of young, high-achieving women believe that they will be able to get pregnant deep into their 40s. But sadly, new reproductive technologies have not solved fertility problems for older women. The research shows that only 3% to 5% of women who attempt in vitro fertilization in their 40s actually succeed in bearing a child. This kind of information is hard to come by because the infertility industry in this country likes to tout the good news—with dire consequences. Too many career women put their private lives on the back burner, assuming that children will eventually happen for them courtesy of high-tech reproduction—only to discover disappointment and failure.

A Costly Imbalance

I can't tell you how many times over the course of this research the women I interviewed apologized for "wanting it all." But it wasn't as though these women were looking for special treatment. They were quite prepared to shoulder more than their fair share of the work involved in having both career and

family. So why on earth shouldn't they feel entitled to rich, multidimensional lives? At the end of the day, women simply want the choices in love and work that men take for granted.

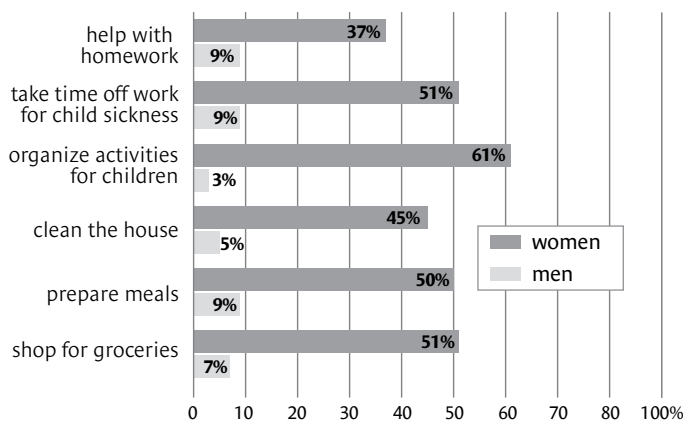
Instead, they operate in a society where motherhood carries enormous economic penalties. Two recent studies lay out these penalties in very specific terms. In her study, economist Waldfogel finds that mothers earn less than other women do even when you control for marital status, experience, and education. In fact, according to her research, one child produces a "penalty" of 6% of earnings, while two children produce a wage penalty of 13%. In a more recent study, economists Michelle Budig and Paula England find that motherhood results in a penalty of 7% per child.

Given such a huge disincentive, why do women persist in trying to "have it all"? Because, as a large body of research demonstrates, women are happier when they have both career and family. In a series of books and articles that span more than a decade, University of Michigan sociologist Lois Hoffmann has examined the value of children to parents and finds that, across cultures, parents see children as enormously important in providing love and companionship and in warding off loneliness. Children also help parents deal with the questions of human existence: How do I find purpose beyond the self? How do I cope with mortality?

Thus, the fact that so many professional women are forced to sacrifice motherhood is patently unfair, and it also has immense implications for American business, since it causes women intent on motherhood to cut short their careers. This is, of course, the flip side of the same coin. For if a large proportion of women who stay on track in their careers are forced to give up family, an equally large proportion who opt for family are forced to give up their careers. According to my survey, 66% of high-potential women would like to return to full-time jobs.

The cost to corporations and to our economy becomes monumental in the aggregate. Our nation needs professional women to stay in the labor force; we can ill afford to have a quarter of the female talent pool forced out of their jobs when they have children. But in 2000, at the height of the labor crunch, Census Bureau data showed that fully 22% of all women with professional degrees (MBAs,

Primary Child Care and Household Responsibilities
High-achieving Men and Women



Source: National Parenting Association

MDs, PhDs, and so on) were not in the labor market at all. What an extraordinary waste of expensively educated talent!

At the same time, we need adults at all income levels to become committed, effective parents. When a parent devotes time, attention, and financial resources to help a child become a well-adjusted person—one who succeeds in school and graduates from college—not only do parents feel deeply fulfilled, but society, of course, is graced with productive workers who boost the GDP, obey the law, and pay their taxes. Thus, we are all stakeholders in parents' ability to come through for their children.

And when women come to understand the value of parenthood to the wider community, they can quit apologizing for wanting both a career and a family. A woman can hold her head high when she goes into her boss and asks for a schedule that fits her needs.

The Challenge to Business

The statistics I've laid out here would be bearable if they were purely historical—the painful but isolated experience of a pioneering generation—but they are not. My survey shows that younger women are facing even more difficult trade-offs. (The sidebar “The Delusions of a Younger Generation” suggests that younger women may be more dangerously complacent than their elders.) Can we reverse these pernicious trends and finally create the possibility of true work-life balance? I believe we can.

The first challenge is to employers, to craft more meaningful work-life policies. Professional women who want both family and career know that conventional benefit packages are insufficient. These women need reduced-hour jobs and careers that can be interrupted, neither of which is readily available yet. And more than anything, they need to be able to partake of such benefits without suffering long-term damage to their careers.

High-achieving women make it abundantly clear that what they want most are work-life policies that confer on them what one woman calls “the gift of time.” Take Joanna, for example. At 39, Joanna had worked for five years as an account executive for a Chicago headhunter. She believed her company had great work-life policies—until she adopted a child. “My main problem,” Joanna said, “is the number of hours I am expected to put in. I work 60 hours a week 50 weeks of the year, which leaves precious little time for anything else.” Joanna asked for a reduced schedule, but it was a “no go. The firm didn't want to establish a precedent,” she said. Joanna began looking for another job.

According to my survey, some employers take family needs into account: 12% offer paid parenting leave and 31% job sharing. Many more, however, provide only time flexibility: 69% allow staggered hours, and 48% have work-at-home options. These less ambitious policies seem to be of limited use to time-pressed, high-achieving women.

So, what do professionals want? The high-achieving career women who participated in my survey were asked to consider a list of policy options that would help them achieve balance in their lives over the long haul. They endorsed the following cluster of work-life policies that would make it much easier to get

The Delusions of a Younger Generation

One professional woman, a 29-year-old lawyer, told me: “The pioneer women of the 1970s and 1980s paid some kind of special price for their careers. For us, things are different. We plan on having it all.”

But is such easy confidence warranted? I think not. In fact, women in their 20s and 30s are dealing with the same cruel trade-offs. If anything, the choices younger women must make are more difficult than ever. Let's start with the fact that they are marrying even later. My data show that the high-achieving women of the older generation tended to marry young: 75% of them were married by 25, but only 54% of the younger generation are married by that age.

Young women are delaying childbirth even longer, too. If you compare women in the two age groups by calculating what proportion had a child by 35, younger women seem to be in worse shape. Only 45% of the younger women have had a child by 35, while 62% of the

older women had a child by that age. (Indeed, among ultra-achievers, no one in the older group had her first child after 36.)

It's easy to speculate that these women are delaying childbirth because they don't feel a sense of biological urgency. The hype around the miracle babies of high-tech reproduction is falling on eager ears. Amy, 29, is just embarking on her career. Her story is probably typical. “I figure I've got 14, 15 years before I need worry about making babies,” she e-mailed me. “In my mid-30s, I'll go back to school, earn an MBA, and get myself a serious career. At 40, I'll be ready for marriage and family. I can't tell you how glad I am that this new reproductive technology virtually guarantees that you can have a baby until 45. Or maybe it's even later. Go doctors!”

Modern medicine notwithstanding, the chances of Amy's getting pregnant in her 40s are tiny—in the range of 3% to 5%. The luxury of time she feels is, unfortunately, an illusion.

off conventional career ladders and eventually get back on:

A Time Bank of Paid Parenting Leave. This would allow for three months of paid leave, which could be taken as needed, until the child turned 18.

Restructured Retirement Plans. In particular, survey respondents want to see the elimination of penalties for career interruptions.

Career Breaks. Such a leave of absence might span three years—unpaid, of course, but with the assurance of a job when the time came to return to work.

Reduced-Hour Careers. High-level jobs should be created that permit reduced hours and workloads on an ongoing basis but still offer the possibility of promotion.

Alumni Status for Former Employees. Analogous to active retirement, alumni standing would help women who have left or are not active in their careers stay in the loop. They might be tapped for advice and guidance, and the company would continue to pay their dues and certification fees so they could maintain professional standing.

Policies like these are vital—though in themselves not enough to solve the problem. In particular, companies must guard against the perception that by taking advantage of such policies, a woman will tarnish her professional image. Outside the fiction of human resource policies, a widespread belief in business is that a woman who allows herself to be accommodated on the family front is no longer choosing to be a serious contender. Top management must work to banish this belief from the corporate culture.

The good news is that, where top management supports them, work-life policies like the ones I've listed do pay off. My survey data show that companies offering a rich array of work-life policies are much more likely to hang on to their professional women than companies that don't. High-achieving mothers who have been able to stay in their careers tend to work for companies that allow them access to generous benefits: flextime, telecommuting, paid parenting leave, and compressed workweeks. In contrast, high-achieving mothers who have been forced out of their careers tended to work for companies with inadequate work-life benefits.

I heard a wonderful example of the loyalty these kinds of policies engender when I spoke

with Amy, 41, a marketing executive for IBM. Her son had just turned three, and Amy was newly back at work. "People don't believe me when I tell them that my company offers a three-year personal leave of absence," she said. As she described the policy, it applies not only to mothers; others have used it to care for elderly parents or to return to school. The leave is unpaid but provides continuation of benefits and a job-back guarantee. "IBM gave me this gift," she said, "and I will always be grateful." Clearly, in the aggregate, business leaders hold the power to make important and constructive change.

Because companies can't be expected to craft all the policies that will make a difference in women's lives, government should also take action. I have urged policy makers at the national level, for example, to extend the Family and Medical Leave Act to workers in small companies and turn it into paid leave. State and federal governments could also accomplish much by providing tax incentives to companies that offer employees flextime and various reduced-hour options. And we should promote legislation that eliminates perverse incentives for companies to subject their employees to long-hour weeks.

The Challenge to Women

My book focuses on what women themselves can do to expand their life choices. In a nutshell, if you're a young woman who wants both career and family, you should consider doing the following:

Figure out what you want your life to look like at 45. If you want children (and between 86% and 89% of high-achieving women do), you need to become highly intentional—and take action now.

Give urgent priority to finding a partner. My survey data suggest that high-achieving women have an easier time finding partners in their 20s and early 30s.

Have your first child before 35. The occasional miracle notwithstanding, late-in-life child-bearing is fraught with risk and failure. Even if you manage to get one child "under the wire," you may fail to have a second. This, too, can trigger enormous regret.

Choose a career that will give you the gift of time. Certain careers provide more flexibility and are more forgiving of interruptions. Female entrepreneurs, for example, do better

than female lawyers in combining career and family—and both do better than corporate women. The key is to avoid professions with rigid career trajectories.

Choose a company that will help you achieve work-life balance. Look for such policies as reduced-hour schedules and job-protected leave.

That's an easy list to compile, but I have no illusions that it will change the world, because identifying what each woman can do is only half the battle. The other half is convincing women that they are entitled to both a career and children. Somehow the perception persists that a woman isn't a woman unless her life is riddled with sacrifice.

An End to Self-Sacrifice

In February 2001, I conducted an informal focus group with young professionals at three consulting firms in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During that session, a young woman named Natalie commented, "This is the third consulting firm I've worked for, and I've yet to see an older, more senior woman whose life I would actually want."

Natalie's colleague Rachel was shocked and

asked her to explain. She responded, "I know a few hard-driving women who are climbing the ladder at consulting firms, but they are single or divorced and seem pretty isolated. And I know a handful of working mothers who are trying to do the half-time thing or the two-thirds-time thing. They work reduced hours so they can see their kids, but they don't get the good projects, they don't get the bonuses, and they also get whispered about behind their backs. You know, comments like, 'If she's not prepared to work the client's hours, she has no business being in the profession.'"

This is the harsh reality behind the myth of having it all. Even in organizations whose policies support women, prevailing attitudes and unrelenting job pressures undermine them. Women's lives have expanded. But the grudging attitudes of most corporate cultures weigh down and constrain what individual women feel is possible.

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Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All

Further Reading

ARTICLES

[Management Women and the New Facts of Life](#)

by Felice N. Schwartz
Harvard Business Review
January–February 1989
Product no. 89110

Schwartz reinforces many of Hewlett's arguments regarding the myth that executive women have it all. For example, in the late 1980s, Schwartz found that only 35% of executive women had children by age 40, while 90% of executive men were parents.

Schwartz also emphasizes the business case for enabling executive women to balance work and family. She focuses especially on "career-and-family women"—those who want to pursue serious careers while also rearing children. Most of these women would willingly trade some career growth for the flexibility to raise their families. With their willingness to forgo advancement (at least while their children are young) but still give their best, they can upgrade middle management far more than people who have stalled at that level owing to professional limitations.

To retain valuable women managers *and* keep them productive, companies must provide flexibility and family support. The payoff? Access to some of the most gifted individuals in the country—the barest minimum that national self-preservation requires in this age of explosive international competition.

[Must Success Cost So Much?](#)

by Fernando Bartolomé and Paul A. Lee Evans
Harvard Business Review
March–April 1980
Product no. 80203

While the Hewlett article articulates the price women executives often pay for career success, this article explores the similar prices successful men pay. Many male executives put their private lives at risk by letting the long hours and

tensions of their work day spill into and corrode their home lives. Yet some men seem immune to this spillover effect. Why? They excel at adapting to change, finding the right jobs, and handling career disappointments.

The authors explain how executives and their organizations can better manage spillover, including improving job fit and embracing values that include more than just drive and single-minded dedication to career.

[What Do Men Want?](#)

by Michael S. Kimmel
Harvard Business Review
November–December 1993
Product no. 93606

Kimmel also disagrees that men have it all. Like women, many men yearn to be involved parents. However, few have felt comfortable giving up income, prestige, and corporate support. Because many companies define professional success solely in terms of dedication to career, men have hidden their participation at home or have left corporate life for more flexible professions.

Companies risk losing talented women *and* men to these compromises if they don't develop strategies to accommodate family needs. However, it's not enough to establish family-friendly policies. Companies must also ensure that men feel comfortable *using* those policies. Rewarding people for working reasonable hours constitutes a good first step.

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BIG PICTURE

Stepping off the career fast track is easy. What's hard is getting back on. Careers, companies, and economies suffer when highly skilled women cannot get back where they belong.

Off-Ramps and On-Ramps

Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

26 [Article Summary](#)

The Idea in Brief—*the core idea*

The Idea in Practice—*putting the idea to work*

27 [Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success](#)

37 [Further Reading](#)

A list of related materials, with annotations to guide further exploration of the article's ideas and applications

Off-Ramps and On-Ramps

Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success

The Idea in Brief

For professional women, it's unusual *not* to step off the career fast track at least once. With children to raise, elderly parents to care for, and other family demands, many women feel they have little choice but to off-ramp.

When women are ready to step back on track, opportunities are limited: Available jobs don't measure up in pay or prestige to previous positions. Result? Women returning to the workforce are demoralized. And companies miss the chance to leverage women's best skills. With talent shortages looming over the next decade, firms must reverse the female brain drain if they hope to beat rivals.

Like it or not, many highly skilled women need to take time off. How to ensure your company's access to their talents over the long term? Help off-ramping women maintain connections that will enable them to reenter the workforce without being marginalized. Reduced-hour jobs, flexible workdays, and removal of off-ramping's stigma are just a few strategies. For example, consulting firm Ernst & Young used such approaches to reverse an expensive downward trend in women's retention and increase its percentage of female partners threefold.

The Idea in Practice

How to reverse female brain drain in your firm? Consider these strategies:

CREATE REDUCED-HOUR JOBS

Offer women ways to keep a hand in their chosen field, short of full-time involvement.

► Example:

By offering part-time schedules, consumer-products giant Johnson & Johnson boosted employee loyalty and productivity. Female part-time managers maintain they would have quit had part-time jobs not been available. Instead, they push themselves to perform at the same level they achieved before going part-time.

PROVIDE FLEXIBLE WORKDAYS

Offer variety in when, where, and how work gets done. A caregiver for an invalid or fragile elderly person may have many hours of potentially productive time in a day, yet not be able to stray far from home.

PROVIDE FLEXIBLE CAREER ARCS

Offer alternative paths that support women during on-ramping and off-ramping phases—so they don't have to quit their career cold turkey.

► Example:

Management consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton created a pilot "reserve" program for current employees and alumni. It "unbundled" standard management consulting work, identifying bite-sized chunks that could be done via telecommuting or short stints in the office. Then it created a standard employment contract that's activated when chunks of part-time work become available. With 150 women employees operating under part-time employment contracts, the company has retained valuable female talent.

REMOVE THE STIGMA

Create policies that allow employees to adopt unconventional work arrangements without suffering damage to their careers.

► Example:

Ernst & Young's chairman made retaining and promoting women a priority. The company equipped all employees for telework and ensured that alternative work schedules didn't affect promotion opportunities. It also created a database of flexible work arrangements. Interested parties learn how arrangements are structured, contact participants with questions, and share lessons learned.

STOP BURNING BRIDGES

Explore off-ramping women's reasons for departing, offering options short of total severance. Clarify that your company's door will remain open to them. And maintain connections with off-ramped employees through formal alumni programs.

NURTURE AMBITION

Establish "old girls" networks enabling women to build skills, contacts, and confidence, as well as earn recognition. You'll help them sustain their passion for work and their competitive edge.

Stepping off the career fast track is easy. What's hard is getting back on. Careers, companies, and economies suffer when highly skilled women cannot get back where they belong.

BIG PICTURE

Off-Ramps and On-Ramps

Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success

by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce

Throughout the past year, a noisy debate has erupted in the media over the meaning of what Lisa Belkin of the *New York Times* has called the “opt-out revolution.” Recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Fast Company* all point to a disturbing trend—large numbers of highly qualified women dropping out of mainstream careers. These articles also speculate on what might be behind this new brain drain. Are the complex demands of modern child rearing the nub of the problem? Or should one blame the trend on a failure of female ambition?

The facts and figures in these articles are eye-catching: a survey of the class of 1981 at Stanford University showing that 57% of women graduates leave the work force; a survey of three graduating classes at Harvard Business School demonstrating that only 38% of women graduates end up in full-time careers; and a broader-gauged study of MBAs showing that one in three white women holding an MBA is not working full-time, compared with one in 20 for men with the same degree.

The stories that enliven these articles are also powerful: Brenda Barnes, the former CEO of PepsiCo, who gave up her megawatt career to spend more time with her three children; Karen Hughes, who resigned from her enormously influential job in the Bush White House to go home to Texas to better look after a needy teenage son; and a raft of less prominent women who also said goodbye to their careers. Lisa Beattie Frelinghuysen, for example—featured in a recent *60 Minutes* segment—was building a very successful career as a lawyer. She’d been president of the law review at Stanford and went to work for a prestigious law firm. She quit after she had her first baby three years later.

These stories certainly resonate, but scratch the surface and it quickly becomes clear that there is very little in the way of systematic, rigorous data about the seeming exodus. A sector here, a graduating class there, and a flood of anecdotes: No one seems to know the basic facts. Across professions and across sectors, what is the scope of this opt-out phenomenon?

What proportion of professional women take off-ramps rather than continue on their chosen career paths? Are they pushed off or pulled? Which sectors of the economy are most severely affected when women leave the workforce? How many years do women tend to spend out of the workforce? When women decide to reenter, what are they looking for? How easy is it to find on-ramps? What policies and practices help women return to work?

Early in 2004, the Center for Work-Life Policy formed a private sector, multiyear task force entitled “The Hidden Brain Drain: Women and Minorities as Unrealized Assets” to answer these and other questions. In the summer of 2004, three member companies of the task force (Ernst & Young, Goldman Sachs, and Lehman Brothers) sponsored a survey specifically designed to investigate the role of off-ramps and on-ramps in the lives of highly qualified women. The survey, conducted by Harris Interactive, comprised a nationally representative group of highly qualified women, defined as those with a graduate degree, a professional degree, or a high-honors undergraduate degree. The sample size was 2,443 women. The survey focused on two age groups: older women aged 41 to 55 and younger women aged 28 to 40. We also surveyed a smaller group of highly qualified men (653) to allow us to draw comparisons.

Using the data from the survey, we’ve created a more comprehensive and nuanced portrait of women’s career paths than has been available to date. Even more important, these data suggest actions that companies can take to ensure that female potential does not go unrealized. Given current demographic and labor market trends, it’s imperative that employers learn to reverse this brain drain. Indeed, companies that can develop policies and practices to tap into the female talent pool over the long haul will enjoy a substantial competitive advantage.

Women Do Leave

Many women take an off-ramp at some point on their career highway. Nearly four in ten highly qualified women (37%) report that they have left work voluntarily at some point in their careers. Among women who have children, that statistic rises to 43%.

Factors other than having children that pull women away from their jobs include the de-

mands of caring for elderly parents or other family members (reported by 24%) and personal health issues (9%). Not surprisingly, the pull of elder care responsibilities is particularly strong for women in the 41 to 55 age group—often called the “sandwich” generation, positioned as it is between growing children and aging parents. One in three women in that bracket have left work for some period to spend time caring for family members who are not children. And lurking behind all this is the pervasiveness of a highly traditional division of labor on the home front. In a 2001 survey conducted by the Center for Work-Life Policy, fully 40% of highly qualified women with spouses felt that their husbands create more work around the house than they perform.

Alongside these “pull” factors are a series of “push” factors—that is, features of the job or workplace that make women head for the door. Seventeen percent of women say they took an off-ramp, at least in part, because their jobs were not satisfying or meaningful. Overall, understimulation and lack of opportunity seem to be larger problems than overwork. Only 6% of women stopped working because the work itself was too demanding. In business sectors, the survey results suggest that push factors are particularly powerful—indeed, in these sectors, unlike, say, in medicine or teaching, they outweigh pull factors. Of course, in the hurly-burly world of everyday life, most women are dealing with a combination of push and pull factors—and one often serves to intensify the other. When women feel hemmed in by rigid policies or a glass ceiling, for example, they are much more likely to respond to the pull of family.

It’s important to note that, however pulled or pushed, only a relatively privileged group of women have the option of not working. Most women cannot quit their careers unless their spouses earn considerable incomes. Fully 32% of the women surveyed cite the fact that their spouses’ income “was sufficient for our family to live on one income” as a reason contributing to their decision to off-ramp.

Contrast this with the experience of highly qualified men, only 24% of whom have taken off-ramps (with no statistical difference between those who are fathers and those who are not). When men leave the workforce, they do it for different reasons. Child-care and elder-care responsibilities are much less important; only

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12% of men cite these factors as compared with 44% of women. Instead, on the pull side, they cite switching careers (29%), obtaining additional training (25%), or starting a business (12%) as important reasons for taking time out. For highly qualified men, off-ramping seems to be about strategic repositioning in their careers—a far cry from the dominant concerns of their female peers.

For many women in our study, the decision to off-ramp is a tough one. These women have invested heavily in their education and training. They have spent years accumulating the skills and credentials necessary for successful careers. Most are not eager to toss that painstaking effort aside.

Lost on Reentry

Among women who take off-ramps, the overwhelming majority have every intention of returning to the workforce—and seemingly little idea of just how difficult that will prove. Women, like lawyer Lisa Beattie Frelinghuysen from the *60 Minutes* segment, who happily give up their careers to have children are the exception rather than the rule. In our research, we find that most highly qualified women who are currently off-ramped (93%)

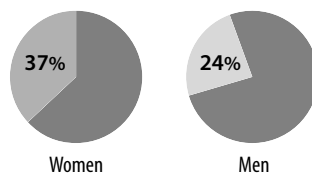
want to return to their careers.

Many of these women have financial reasons for wanting to get back to work. Nearly half (46%) cite “having their own independent source of income” as an important propelling factor. Women who participated in focus groups conducted as part of our research talked about their discomfort with “dependence.” However good their marriages, many disliked needing to ask for money. Not being able to splurge on some small extravagance or make their own philanthropic choices without clearing it with their husbands did not sit well with them. It’s also true that a significant proportion of women currently seeking on-ramps are facing troubling shortfalls in family income: 38% cite “household income no longer sufficient for family needs” and 24% cite “partner’s income no longer sufficient for family needs.” Given what has happened to the cost of homes (up 38% over the past five years), the cost of college education (up 40% over the past decade), and the cost of health insurance (up 49% since 2000), it’s easy to see why many professional families find it hard to manage on one income.

But financial pressure does not tell the whole story. Many of these women find deep pleasure in their chosen careers and want to reconnect with something they love. Forty-three percent cite the “enjoyment and satisfaction” they derive from their careers as an important reason to return—among teachers this figure rises to 54% and among doctors it rises to 70%. A further 16% want to “regain power and status in their profession.” In our focus groups, women talked eloquently about how work gives shape and structure to their lives, boosts confidence and self-esteem, and confers status and standing in their communities. For many off-rampers, their professional identities remain their primary identities, despite the fact that they have taken time out.

Perhaps most interesting, 24% of the women currently looking for on-ramps are motivated by “a desire to give something back to society” and are seeking jobs that allow them to contribute to their communities in some way. In our focus groups, off-ramped women talked about how their time at home had changed their aspirations. Whether they had gotten involved in protecting the wetlands, supporting the local library, or rebuilding a playground, they felt newly connected to the

How Many Opt Out?



In our survey of highly qualified professionals, we asked the question, “Since you first began working, has there ever been a period where you took a voluntary time out from work?” Nearly four in ten women reported that they had—and that statistic rises to 43% among women who have children. By contrast, only 24% of highly qualified men have taken off-ramps (with no statistical difference between those who are fathers and those who are not).

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importance of what one woman called “the work of care.”

Unfortunately, only 74% of off-ramped women who want to rejoin the ranks of the employed manage to do so, according to our survey. And among these, only 40% return to full-time, professional jobs. Many (24%) take part-time jobs, and some (9%) become self-employed. The implication is clear: Off-ramps are around every curve in the road, but once a woman has taken one, on-ramps are few and far between—and extremely costly.

The Penalties of Time Out

Women off-ramp for surprisingly short periods of time—on average, 2.2 years. In business sectors, off-rampers average even shorter periods of time out (1.2 years). However, even these relatively short career interruptions entail heavy financial penalties. Our data show that women lose an average of 18% of their

earning power when they take an off-ramp. In business sectors, penalties are particularly draconian: In these fields, women’s earning power dips an average of 28% when they take time out. The longer you spend out, the more severe the penalty becomes. Across sectors, women lose a staggering 37% of their earning power when they spend three or more years out of the workforce.

Naomi, 34, is a case in point. In an interview, this part-time working mother was open about her anxieties: “Every day, I think about what I am going to do when I want to return to work full-time. I worry about whether I will be employable—will anyone even look at my résumé?” This is despite an MBA and substantial work experience.

Three years ago, Naomi felt she had no choice but to quit her lucrative position in market research. She had just had a child, and returning to full-time work after the standard maternity leave proved to be well-nigh impossible. Her 55-hour week combined with her husband’s 80-hour week didn’t leave enough time to raise a healthy child—let alone care for a child who was prone to illness, as theirs was. When her employer denied her request to work reduced hours, Naomi quit.

After nine months at home, Naomi did find some flexible work—but it came at a high price. Her new freelance job as a consultant to an advertising agency barely covered the cost of her son’s day care. She now earns a third of what she did three years ago. What plagues Naomi the most about her situation is her anxiety about the future. “Will my skills become obsolete? Will I be able to support myself and my son if something should happen to my husband?”

The scholarly literature shows that Naomi’s experience is not unusual. Economist Jane Waldfogel has analyzed the pattern of earnings over the life span. When women enter the workforce in their early and mid twenties they earn nearly as much as men do. For a few years, they almost keep pace. For example, at ages 25 to 29, they earn 87% of the male wage. However, when women start having children, their earnings fall way behind those of men. By the time they reach the 40-to-44 age group, women earn a mere 71% of the male wage. In the words of MIT economist Lester Thurow, “These are the prime years for establishing a successful career. These are the years when

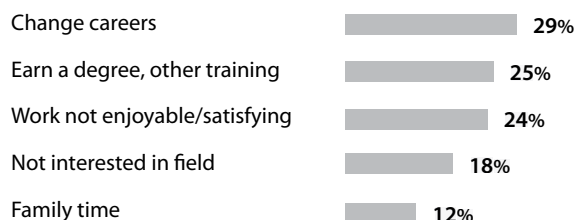
Why Do They Leave the Fast Lane?

Our survey data show that women and men take off-ramps for dramatically different reasons. While men leave the workforce mainly to reposition themselves for a career change, the majority of women off-ramp to attend to responsibilities at home.

Top five reasons women leave the fast lane



Top five reasons men leave the fast lane



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hard work has the maximum payoff. They are also the prime years for launching a family. Women who leave the job market during those years may find that they never catch up.”

Taking the Scenic Route

A majority (58%) of highly qualified women describe their careers as “nonlinear”—which is to say, they do not follow the conventional trajectory long established by successful men. That ladder of success features a steep gradient in one’s 30s and steady progress thereafter. In contrast, these women report that their “career paths have not followed a progression through the hierarchy of an industry.”

Some of this nonlinearity is the result of taking off-ramps. But there are many other ways in which women ease out of the professional fast lane. Our survey reveals that 16% of highly qualified women work part-time. Such arrangements are more prevalent in the legal and medical professions, where 23% and 20% of female professionals work less than full-time, than in the business sector, where only 8% of women work part-time. Another common work-life strategy is telecommuting; 8% of highly qualified women work exclusively from

home, and another 25% work partly from home.

Looking back over their careers, 36% of highly qualified women say they have worked part-time for some period of time as part of a strategy to balance work and personal life. Twenty-five percent say they have reduced the number of work hours within a full-time job, and 16% say they have declined a promotion. A significant proportion (38%) say they have deliberately chosen a position with fewer responsibilities and lower compensation than they were qualified for, in order to fulfill responsibilities at home.

Downsizing Ambition

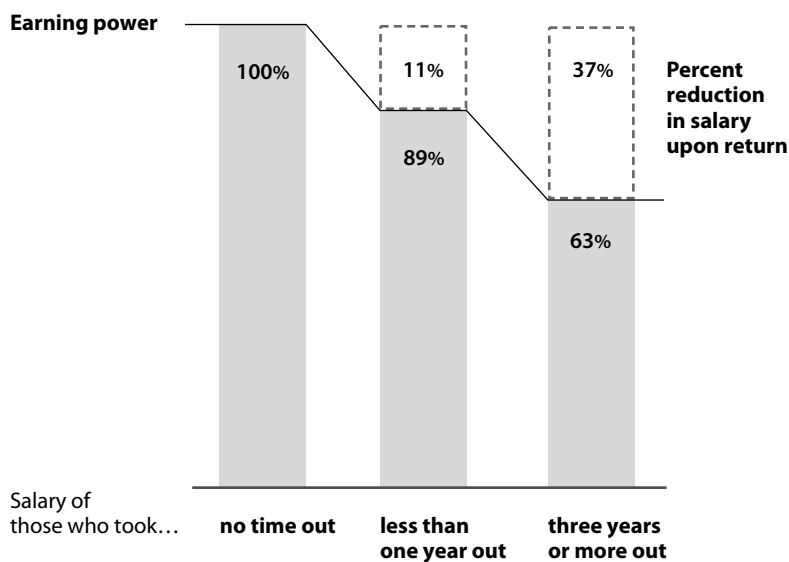
Given the tour of women’s careers we’ve just taken, is it any surprise that women find it difficult to claim or sustain ambition? The survey shows that while almost half of the men consider themselves extremely or very ambitious, only about a third of the women do. (The proportion rises among women in business and the professions of law and medicine; there, 43% and 51%, respectively, consider themselves very ambitious.) In a similar vein, only 15% of highly qualified women (and 27% in the business sector) single out “a powerful position” as an important career goal; in fact, this goal ranked lowest in women’s priorities in every sector we surveyed.

Far more important to these women are other items on the workplace wish list: the ability to associate with people they respect (82%); the freedom to “be themselves” at work (79%); and the opportunity to be flexible with their schedules (64%). Fully 61% of women consider it extremely or very important to have the opportunity to collaborate with others and work as part of a team. A majority (56%) believe it is very important for them to be able to give back to the community through their work. And 51% find “recognition from my company” either extremely or very important.

These top priorities constitute a departure from the traditional male take on ambition. Moreover, further analysis points to a disturbing age gap. In the business sector, 53% of younger women (ages 28 to 40) own up to being very ambitious, as contrasted with only 37% of older women. This makes sense in light of Anna Fels’s groundbreaking work on women and ambition. In a 2004 HBR article, Fels argues convincingly that ambition stands on two

The High Cost of Time Out

Though the average amount of time that women take off from their careers is surprisingly short (less than three years), the salary penalty for doing so is severe. Women who return to the workforce after time out earn significantly less than their peers who remained in their jobs.



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How Ernst & Young Keeps Women on the Path to Partnership

In the mid-1990s, turnover among female employees at Ernst & Young was much higher than it was among male peers. Company leaders knew something was seriously wrong; for many years, its entering classes of young auditors had been made up of nearly equal numbers of men and women—yet it was still the case that only a tiny percentage of its partnership was female. This was a major problem. Turnover in client-serving roles meant lost continuity on work assignments. And on top of losing talent that the firm had invested in training, E&Y was incurring costs averaging 150% of a departing employee's annual salary just to fill the vacant position.

E&Y set a new course, marked by several important features outlined here. Since E&Y began this work, the percentage of women partners has more than tripled to 12% and the downward trend in retention of women at every level has been reversed. E&Y now has four women on the management board, and many more women are in key operating and client serving roles. Among its women partners, 10% work on a flexible schedule and more than 20 have been promoted to partner while working a reduced schedule. In 2004, 22% of new partners were women.

Focus

Regional pilot projects targeted five areas for improvement: Palo Alto and San Jose focused on life balance, Minneapolis on mentoring, New Jersey on flexible work arrangements, Boston on women networking in the business community, and Washington, DC, on women networking inside E&Y. Successful solutions were rolled out across the firm.

Committed Leadership

Philip Laskawy, E&Y's chairman from 1994 to 2001, made it a priority to retain and promote women. He convened a diversity task force of partners to focus on the problem and created an Office of Retention. Laskawy's successor, Jim Turley, deepened the focus on diversity by rolling out a People First strategy.

Policies

Ernst & Young equipped all its people for telework and made it policy that flexible work schedules would not affect anyone's opportunity for advancement. The new premise was that all jobs could be done flexibly.

New Roles

E&Y's Center for the New Workforce dedicates its staff of seven to developing and advancing women into leadership roles. A strategy team of three professionals addresses the firm's flexibility goals for both men and women. Also, certain partners are designated as "career watchers" and track individual women's progress, in particular, monitoring the caliber of the projects and clients to which they are assigned.

Learning Resources

All employees can use E&Y's Achieving Flexibility Web site to learn about flexible work arrangements. They can track how certain FWAs were negotiated and structured and can use the contact information provided in the database to ask those employees questions about how it is (or isn't) working.

Peer Networking

Professional Women's Networks are active in 41 offices, and they focus on building the skills, confidence, leadership opportunities, and networks necessary for women to be successful. A three-day Women's Leadership Conference is held every 18 months. The most recent was attended by more than 425 women partners, principals, and directors.

Accountability

The annual People Point survey allows employees to rate managers on how well they foster an inclusive, flexible work environment. Managers are also evaluated on metrics like number of women serving key accounts, in key leadership jobs, and in the partner pipeline.

legs—mastery and recognition. To hold onto their dreams, not only must women attain the necessary skills and experience, they must also have their achievements appropriately recognized. To the extent the latter is missing in female careers, ambition is undermined. A vicious cycle emerges: As women's ambitions stall, they are perceived as less committed, they no longer get the best assignments, and this lowers their ambitions further.

In our focus groups, we heard the disappointment—and discouragement—of women who had reached senior levels in corporations only to find the glass ceiling still in place, despite years of diversity initiatives. These women feel that they are languishing and have not been given either the opportunities or the recognition that would allow them to realize their full potential. Many feel handicapped in the attainment of their goals. The result is the vicious cycle that Fels describes: a “downsizing” of women's ambition that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And the discrepancy in ambition levels between men and women has an insidious side effect in that it results in insufficient role models for younger women.

Reversing the Brain Drain

These, then, are the hard facts. With them in hand, we move from anecdotes to data—and, more important, to a different, richer analytical understanding of the problem. In the structural issue of off-ramps and on-ramps, we see the mechanism derailing the careers of highly qualified women and also the focal point for making positive change. What are the implications for corporate America? One thing at least seems clear: Employers can no longer pretend that treating women as “men in skirts” will fix their retention problems. Like it or not, large numbers of highly qualified, committed women need to take time out. The trick is to help them maintain connections that will allow them to come back from that time without being marginalized for the rest of their careers.

Create reduced-hour jobs. The most obvious way to stay connected is to offer women with demanding lives a way to keep a hand in their chosen field, short of full-time involvement. Our survey found that, in business sectors, fully 89% of women believe that access to reduced-hour jobs is important. Across all sectors, the figure is 82%.

The Johnson & Johnson family of companies has seen the increased loyalty and productivity that can result from such arrangements. We recently held a focus group with 12 part-time managers at these companies and found a level of commitment that was palpable. The women had logged histories with J&J that ranged from eight to 19 years and spoke of the corporation with great affection. All had a focus on productivity and pushed themselves to deliver at the same level they had achieved before switching to part-time. One woman, a 15-year J&J veteran, was particularly eloquent in her gratitude to the corporation. She had had her first child at age 40 and, like so many new mothers, felt torn apart by the conflicting demands of home and work. In her words, “I thought I only had two choices—work full-time or leave—and I didn't want either. J&J's reduced-hour option has been a savior.” All the women in the room were clear on one point: They would have quit had part-time jobs not been available.

At Pfizer, the deal is sweetened further for part-time workers; field sales professionals in the company's Vista Rx division are given access to the same benefits and training as full-time employees but work 60% of the hours (with a corresponding difference in base pay). Many opt for a three-day workweek; others structure their working day around children's school hours. These 230 employees—93% of whom are working mothers—remain eligible for promotion and may return to full-time status at their discretion.

Provide flexibility in the day. Some women don't require reduced work hours; they merely need flexibility in when, where, and how they do their work. Even parents who employ nannies or have children in day care, for example, must make time for teacher conferences, medical appointments, volunteering, child-related errands—not to mention the days the nanny calls in sick or the day care center is closed. Someone caring for an invalid or a fragile elderly person may likewise have many hours of potentially productive time in a day yet not be able to stray far from home.

For these and other reasons, almost two-thirds (64%) of the women we surveyed cite flexible work arrangements as being either extremely or very important to them. In fact, by a considerable margin, highly qualified women find flexibility more important than compensa-

tion; only 42% say that “earning a lot of money” is an important motivator. In our focus groups, we heard women use terms like “nirvana” and “the golden ring” to describe employment arrangements that allow them to flex their workdays, their workweeks, and their careers. A senior employee who recently joined Lehman Brothers’ equity division is an example. She had been working at another financial services company when a Lehman recruiter called. “The person who had been in the job previously was working one day a week from home, so they offered that opportunity to me. Though I was content in my current job,” she told us, “that intriguing possibility made me reevaluate. In the end, I took the job at Lehman. Working from home one day a week was a huge lure.”

Provide flexibility in the arc of a career. Booz Allen Hamilton, the management and technology consulting firm, recognized that it isn’t simply a workday, or a workweek, that needs to be made more flexible. It’s the entire arc of a career.

Management consulting as a profession loses twice as many women as men in the middle reaches of career ladders. A big part of the problem is that, perhaps more than in any other business sector, it is driven by an up-or-out ethos; client-serving professionals must progress steadily or fall by the wayside. The strongest contenders make partner through a relentless winnowing process. While many firms take care to make the separations as painless as possible (the chaff, after all, tends to land in organizations that might employ their services), there are clear limits to their patience. Typically, if a valued professional is unable to keep pace with the road warrior lifestyle, the best she can hope for is reassignment to a staff job.

Over the past year, Booz Allen has initiated a “ramp up, ramp down” flexible program to allow professionals to balance work and life and still do the client work they find most interesting. The key to the program is Booz Allen’s effort to “unbundle” standard consulting projects and identify chunks that can be done by telecommuting or shorts stints in the office. Participating professionals are either regular employees or alumni that sign standard employment contracts and are activated as needed. For the professional, it’s a way to take on a manageable amount of the kind of work they do best. For Booz Allen, it’s a way to

maintain ties to consultants who have already proved their merit in a challenging profession. Since many of these talented women will eventually return to full-time consulting employment, Booz Allen wants to be their employer of choice—and to keep their skills sharp in the meantime.

When asked how the program is being received, DeAnne Aguirre, a vice president at Booz Allen who was involved in its design (and who is also a member of our task force), had an instant reaction: “I think it’s instilled new hope—a lot of young women I work with no longer feel that they will have to sacrifice some precious part of themselves.” Aguirre explains that trade-offs are inevitable, but at Booz Allen an off-ramping decision doesn’t have to be a devastating one anymore. “Flex careers are bound to be slower than conventional ones, but in ten years’ time you probably won’t remember the precise year you made partner. The point here is to remain on track and vitally connected.”

Remove the stigma. Making flexible arrangements succeed over the long term is hard work. It means crafting an imaginative set of policies, but even more important, it means eliminating the stigma that is often attached to such nonstandard work arrangements. As many as 35% of the women we surveyed report various aspects of their organizations’ cultures that effectively penalize people who take advantage of work-life policies. Telecommuting appears to be most stigmatized, with 39% of women reporting some form of tacit resistance to it, followed by job sharing and part-time work. Of flexible work arrangements in general, 21% report that “there is an unspoken rule at my workplace that people who use these options will not be promoted.” Parental leave policies get more respect—though even here, 19% of women report cultural or attitudinal barriers to taking the time off that they are entitled to. In environments where flexible work arrangements are tacitly deemed illegitimate, many women would rather resign than request them.

Interestingly, when it comes to taking advantage of work-life policies, men encounter even more stigma. For example, 48% of the men we surveyed perceived job sharing as illegitimate in their workplace culture—even when it’s part of official policy.

Transformation of the corporate culture

seems to be a prerequisite for success on the work-life front. Those people at or near the top of an organization need to have that “eureka” moment, when they not only understand the business imperative for imaginative work-life policies but are prepared to embrace them, and in so doing remove the stigma. In the words of Dessa Bokides, treasurer at Pitney Bowes, “Only a leader’s devotion to these issues will give others permission to transform conventional career paths.”

Stop burning bridges. One particularly dramatic finding of our survey deserves special mention: Only 5% of highly qualified women looking for on-ramps are interested in rejoining the companies they left. In business sectors, that percentage is zero. If ever there was a danger signal for corporations, this is it.

The finding implies that the vast majority of off-ramped women, at the moment they left their careers, felt ill-used—or at least underutilized and unappreciated—by their employers. We can only speculate as to why this was. In some cases, perhaps, the situation ended badly; a woman, attempting impossible juggling feats, started dropping balls. Or an employer, embittered by the loss of too many “star” women, lets this one go much too easily.

It’s understandable for managers to assume that women leave mainly for “pull” reasons and that there’s no point in trying to keep them. Indeed, when family overload and the traditional division of labor place unmanageable demands on a working woman, it does appear that quitting has much more to do with what’s going on at home than what’s going on at work. However, it is important to realize that even when pull factors seem to be dominant, push factors are also in play. Most off-ramping decisions are conditioned by policies, practices, and attitudes at work. Recognition, flexibility, and the opportunity to telecommute—especially when endorsed by the corporate culture—can make a huge difference.

The point is, managers will not stay in a departing employee’s good graces unless they take the time to explore the reasons for off-ramping and are able and willing to offer options short of total severance. If a company wants future access to this talent, it will need to go beyond the perfunctory exit interview and, at the very least, impart the message that the door is open. Better still, it will

maintain a connection with off-ramped employees through a formal alumni program.

Provide outlets for altruism. Imaginative attachment policies notwithstanding, some women have no interest in returning to their old organizations because their desire to work in their former field has waned. Recall the focus group participants who spoke of a deepened desire to give back to the community after taking a hiatus from work. Remember, too, that women in business sectors are pushed off track more by dissatisfaction with work than pulled by external demands. Our data suggest that fully 52% of women with MBAs in the business sector cite the fact that they do not find their careers “either satisfying or enjoyable” as an important reason for why they left work. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, a majority (54%) of the women looking for on-ramps want to change their profession or field. And in most of those cases, it’s a woman who formerly worked in the corporate sphere hoping to move into the not-for-profit sector.

Employers would be well advised to recognize and harness the altruism of these women. Supporting female professionals in their advocacy and public service efforts serves to win their energy and loyalty. Companies may also be able to redirect women’s desire to give back to the community by asking them to become involved in mentoring and formal women’s networks within the company.

Nurture ambition. Finally, if women are to sustain their passion for work and their competitive edge—whether or not they take formal time out—they must keep ambition alive. Our findings point to an urgent need to implement mentoring and networking programs that help women expand and sustain their professional aspirations. Companies like American Express, GE, Goldman Sachs, Johnson & Johnson, Lehman Brothers, and Time Warner are developing “old girls networks” that build skills, contacts, and confidence. They link women to inside power brokers and to outside business players and effectively inculcate those precious rainmaking skills.

Networks (with fund-raising and friend-raising functions) can enhance client connections. But they also play another, critical role. They provide the infrastructure within which women can earn recognition, as well as a safe platform from which to blow one’s own horn without being perceived as too

Only 5% of highly qualified women looking for on-ramps are interested in rejoining the companies they left. In business sectors, that percentage is zero.

pushy. In the words of Patricia Fili-Krushel, executive vice president of Time Warner, “Company-sponsored women’s networks encourage women to cultivate both sides of the power equation. Women hone their own leadership abilities but also learn to use power on behalf of others. Both skill sets help us increase our pipeline of talented women.”

Adopt an On-Ramp

As we write this, market and economic factors, both cyclical and structural, are aligned in ways guaranteed to make talent constraints and skill shortages huge issues again. Unemployment is down and labor markets are beginning to tighten, just as the baby-bust generation is about to hit “prime time” and the number of workers between the ages of 35 to 45 is shrinking. Immigration levels are stable, so there’s little chance of relief there. Likewise, productivity improvements are flattening. The phenomenon that bailed us out of our last big labor crunch—the entry for the first time of millions of women into the labor force—is not available to us again. Add it all up, and CEOs are back to wondering how they will find enough high-caliber talent to drive growth.

There is a winning strategy. It revolves around the retention and reattachment of highly qualified women. America these days has a large and impressive pool of female talent. Fifty-eight percent of college graduates are now women, and nearly half of all professional and graduate degrees are earned by women. Even more important, the incremental addi-

tions to the talent pool will be disproportionately female, according to figures released by the U.S. Department of Education. The number of women with graduate and professional degrees is projected to grow by 16% over the next decade, while the number of men with these degrees is projected to grow by a mere 1.3%. Companies are beginning to pay attention to these figures. As Melinda Wolfe, head of global leadership and diversity at Goldman Sachs, recently pointed out, “A large part of the potential talent pool consists of females and historically underrepresented groups. With the professional labor market tightening, it is in our direct interest to give serious attention to these matters of retention and reattachment.”

In short, the talent is there; the challenge is to create the circumstances that allow businesses to take advantage of it over the long run. To tap this all-important resource, companies must understand the complexities of women’s nonlinear careers and be prepared to support rather than punish those who take alternate routes.

The complete statistical findings from this research project, and additional commentary and company examples, are available in an HBR research report entitled “The Hidden Brain Drain: Off-Ramps and On-Ramps in Women’s Careers” (see www.womenscareersreport.hbr.org).

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Off-Ramps and On-Ramps

Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success

Further Reading

ARTICLES

[The Alternative Workplace: Changing Where and How People Work](#)

by Mahlon Apgar, IV
Harvard Business Review
June 2000
Product no. 98301

Flexible work environments attract talented women *and* men—and can greatly enhance your productivity. By offering teleworking, for example, AT&T, IBM, and the U.S. Army have saved a bundle in real-estate and infrastructure costs while retaining talented workers. To successfully introduce teleworking, start with a simple pilot project. Then phase in more people, tailoring the program in response to employee feedback.

Begin with sales, project engineering, and other areas where employees are largely self-directed. And ensure that remote employees still feel “in the loop,” that everyone knows what results they’re expected to achieve, and that customers are fully informed.

[The Maternal Wall](#)

by Joan C. Williams
Harvard Business Review
October 2004
Product no. F0410H

Childbearing counts among the most common reasons for off-ramping. Why? Viewing new mothers as less competent than childless women, some supervisors evaluate their performance harshly, while colleagues withdraw their political support. Other supervisors, in a benevolent but prejudiced attempt to avoid separating mother and child, eliminate demanding projects—denying new mothers opportunities to shine.

To retain talented women who are parents—and avoid the increasing risk of caregiver-discrimination lawsuits—eliminate stereotypes about caregivers from personnel decisions. Create programs supporting *all* employees’ caregiving needs. Educate supervisors about what constitutes caregiver discrimination. Examine hiring, attendance, and promotion policies to ensure they’re free from biased standards. Finally, think flexibly about how job duties can be accomplished. And make personnel decisions based on legitimate business needs—not assumptions about workers’ commitment and productivity.

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Women are judged to be less visionary than men in 360-degree feedback. It may be a matter of perception, but it stops women from getting to the top.

Women and the Vision Thing

by Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

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A list of related materials, with annotations to guide further exploration of the article's ideas and applications

Women and the Vision Thing

The Idea in Brief

Women are still a minority in the top ranks of business. The reason? Their perceived lack of vision, according to Ibarra and Obodaru. In 360-degree feedback, women score relatively low on key elements of visioning—including ability to sense opportunities and threats, to set strategic direction, and to inspire constituents.

The authors' research suggests three explanations for women's low visioning scores:

- Some women don't buy into the value of being visionary.
- Some women lack the confidence to go out on a limb with an untested vision.
- Some women who develop a vision in collaboration with their teams don't get credit for having created one.

Regardless of the cause, women seeking more senior roles must be perceived as visionary leaders. They can start by understanding what "being visionary" means in practical terms—and then honing their visioning skills.

The Idea in Practice

WHAT "BEING VISIONARY" MEANS

Being visionary is a matter of exercising three skills well:

Skill	How to exercise it
Sensing opportunities and threats in the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simplify complex situations by identifying broad-stroke patterns• Foresee events that will affect your organization• Conduct a vigorous exchange with an array of people inside and outside the organization
Setting strategic direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage new business• Generate ideas for new strategies• Make decisions with an eye toward the big picture
Inspiring constituents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frame current practices as inadequate• Be open to new ways of doing things• Encourage others to look beyond limitations• Communicate new and better possibilities in clear, compelling ways

HOW TO STRENGTHEN YOUR VISIONING SKILLS

- **Appreciate the importance of visioning.** Recognize vision as a matter of not just style but substance. It's not about meaningless vision statements but about strategic acumen and positioning your know-how.
- **Leverage (or build) your network.** Formulating a vision demands a solid grasp of what's happening outside your group and organization. A good external network is the first line of defense against the insular thinking that can hurt your visioning ability.
- **Learn the craft.** Much of visioning can be learned the old-fashioned way: at the elbow of a master. Find role models and study how they develop and communicate strategic ideas. Then work with a coach to identify training and tools to build your capabilities.
- **Let go of old roles.** When you're very good at a needed task, the whole organization will conspire to keep you at it. For instance, even if delivering on the details has always been your ticket to advancement, it won't help you with visioning. Resist the urge to stay in the weeds.
- **Constantly communicate.** As you develop a vision, find opportunities to articulate it. Don't wait until it's perfect. Try out draft versions along the way, even after the vision has come into sharp focus. You won't be seen as a visionary unless you get the word out.
- **Step up to the plate.** A vision comes not only from the outside but also from greater self-confidence. Believe in your ability, and assume responsibility for creating a new and better future for others in your organization.

Women are judged to be less visionary than men in 360-degree feedback. It may be a matter of perception, but it stops women from getting to the top.

Women and the Vision Thing

by Herminia Ibarra and Otilia Obodaru

Many believe that bias against women lingers in the business world, particularly when it comes to evaluating their leadership ability. Recently, we had a chance to see whether that assumption was true. In a study of thousands of 360-degree assessments collected by Insead's executive education program over the past five years, we looked at whether women actually received lower ratings than men. To our surprise, we found the opposite: As a group, women outshone men in most of the leadership dimensions measured. There was one exception, however, and it was a big one: Women scored lower on "envisioning"—the ability to recognize new opportunities and trends in the environment and develop a new strategic direction for an enterprise.

But was this weakness a perception or a reality? How much did it matter to women's ability to lead? And how could someone not perceived as visionary acquire the right capabilities? As we explored these issues with successful female executives, we arrived at another question: Was a reputation for vision

even something many of them wanted to achieve?

A Brilliant Career

A leading services company CEO we'll call Anne Dumas typified in many ways the women we spoke with. The pillar of her leadership style was a principle taught to her 20 years ago by her first boss: Always stay close to the details. As she explained it: "I think strategy comes naturally from knowing your business and the forces that influence your market, clients, and suppliers—not at a high level but at a detailed level. Intermediaries kill your insight. You obviously can't monitor everything, but nothing should keep you from knowing in detail the processes on which your company runs—not supervising everything but understanding at a detailed level what is going on. Otherwise, you are hostage to people who will play politics. At best you don't have full information; at worst you're vulnerable to hidden agendas. My job is to go to the relevant detail level."

In her four years as CEO, Dumas had achieved some impressive results. She had doubled revenues and operating margins, given the company a new strategic direction, and undertaken a fundamental reorganization of the company's core processes and structures. More recently, she had turned her attention to developing her leadership team.

Yet Dumas knew she should somehow improve her communication effectiveness, particularly in her role as an executive member of her parent company's board. One challenge was her stylistic mismatch with her chairman, a broad-brush, big-picture thinker who often balked at what he perceived as excessive attention to detail. She found herself reluctant to favor "form over substance." She told us, "I always wonder what people mean when they say, 'He's not much of a manager but is a good leader.' Leader of what? You have to do things to be a leader." She went on to imply that so-called visionary behaviors might even be harmful. "We are in danger today of being mesmerized by people who play with our reptilian brain. For me, it is manipulation. I can do the storytelling too, but I refuse to play on people's emotions. If the string pulling is too obvious, I can't make myself do it."

Dumas's reluctance is not unusual. One of the biggest developmental hurdles that aspiring leaders, male and female alike, must clear is learning to sell their ideas—their vision of the future—to numerous stakeholders. Presenting an inspiring story about the future is very different from generating a brilliant strategic analysis or crafting a logical implementation plan, competencies on which managers like Dumas have built their careers.

Indeed, a whole generation of women now entering the C-suite owe their success to a strong command of the technical elements of their jobs and a nose-to-the-grindstone focus on accomplishing quantifiable objectives. But as they step into bigger leadership roles—or are assessed on their potential to do so—the rules of the game change, and a different set of skills comes to the fore.

Vision Impaired

Our research drew on 360-degree evaluations of 2,816 executives from 149 countries enrolled in executive education courses at Insead. As with most 360-degree exercises, these managers filled out self-assessments and invited sub-

ordinates, peers, supervisors, and other people they dealt with in a professional context, such as suppliers and customers, to evaluate them on a set of leadership dimensions. In total 22,244 observers participated. (See the sidebar "Critical Components of Leadership" for a description of the Global Executive Leadership Inventory, or GELI.)

As we looked for patterns within this data set, we focused on differences between the male and female leaders, both in terms of how they saw themselves and in terms of how the observers evaluated them. Certainly, there were plenty of data to work with, since 20% of the executives assessed and 27% of the evaluating observers were women. When analyzing the data, we controlled for the effects of the executives' age and level.

The first surprise for us, given prior published research, was that we found no evidence of a female "modesty effect." Quite the opposite: Women rated themselves significantly higher than men rated themselves on four of the 10 GELI dimensions we analyzed. And on the remaining dimensions, the women and men gave themselves ratings that were about the same.

Our analyses of how leaders were rated by their male and female associates—bosses, peers, and subordinates—also challenged the common wisdom. Again based on prior research, we'd expected gender stereotypes to lower the ratings of female leaders, particularly those given by men. That was not the case. If there was a gender bias, it favored female leaders: Male observers scored female leaders significantly higher than they scored male leaders on seven dimensions, and female observers scored them significantly higher on eight. (See the exhibit "Comparing the Ratings of Male and Female Leaders.")

Ratings on one dimension, however, defied this pattern. Female leaders were rated lower by their male observers (but not by women) on their capabilities in "envisioning." That deficit casts a large shadow over what would otherwise be an extremely favorable picture of female executives. The GELI instrument does not claim that the different dimensions of leadership are equal in importance, and as other research has shown, some do matter more than others to people's idea of what makes a leader. In particular, the envisioning dimension is, for most observers, a must-have capability.

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Intrigued by this one apparent weakness, we looked more closely at the observers' ratings. Was a particular group responsible for bringing the envisioning scores down? Indeed one was. As shown in the exhibit "Who Says Women Aren't Visionary?" the male peers (who represented the majority of peers in our sample) rated women lower on envisioning. Interestingly, female peers did not downgrade women, contrary to the frequently heard claim that women compete rather than cooperate with one another. Our data suggest it's the men who might feel most competitive toward their female peers. Male superiors and subordinates rated male and female leaders about the same.

What It Means to Be Visionary

George H.W. Bush famously responded to the suggestion that he look up from the short-term goals of his campaign and start focusing

on the longer term by saying, "Oh—the vision thing." His answer underlines vision's ambiguity. Just what do we mean when we say a person is visionary?

The distinction between management and leadership has long been recognized. Most agree that managing for continuous improvement to the status quo is different from being a force for change that compels a group to innovate and depart from routine. And if leadership is essentially about realizing change, then crafting and articulating a vision of a better future is a leadership prerequisite. No vision, no leadership.

But just as leadership is a question of what one does rather than what one is, so too is vision. It encompasses the abilities to frame the current practices as inadequate, to generate ideas for new strategies, and to communicate possibilities in inspiring ways to others. Being visionary, therefore, is not the same as being

Critical Components of Leadership

The Global Executive Leadership Inventory (GELI) is a 360-degree feedback instrument developed at Insead's Global Leadership Center by Manfred Kets de Vries, Pierre Vriegnaud, and Elizabeth Florent-Treacy. To identify significant dimensions of exemplary leadership, they interviewed more than 300 senior executives over the course of three years. The emerging questionnaire was then validated on an international sample of more than 300 senior executives and MBA students. The result, GELI, measures degrees of competency in these dimensions of global leadership, which it defines as follows¹:

Envisioning

Articulating a compelling vision, mission, and strategy that incorporate a multicultural and diverse perspective and connect employees, shareholders, suppliers, and customers on a global scale.

Empowering

Empowering followers at all levels of the organization by delegating and sharing information.

Energizing

Energizing and motivating employees to achieve the organization's goals.

Designing and aligning

Creating world-class organizational design and control systems and using them to align the behavior of employees with the organization's values and goals.

Rewarding and feedback

Setting up the appropriate reward structures and giving constructive feedback.

Team building

Creating team players and focusing on team effectiveness by instilling a cooperative atmosphere, promoting collaboration, and encouraging constructive conflict.

Outside orientation

Making employees aware of outside constituencies, such as customers, suppliers, shareholders, and other interest groups, including local communities affected by the organization.

Global mind-set

Inculcating a global mentality, instilling values that act as a glue between the regional or national cultures represented in the organization.

Tenacity

Encouraging tenacity and courage in employees by setting a personal example in taking reasonable risks.

Emotional intelligence

Fostering trust in the organization by creating—primarily by setting an example—an emotionally intelligent workforce whose members are self-aware and treat others with respect and understanding.

1. GELI contains two additional dimensions, life balance and resilience to stress, which we did not analyze in our study, since many observers were unable to provide evaluations on them.

charismatic. It entails “naming” broad-stroke patterns and setting strategy based on those patterns. (See the sidebar “What Does It Mean to Have Vision?”)

Visionary leaders don’t answer the question “Where are we going?” simply for themselves; they make sure that those around them understand the direction as well. As they search for

new paths, they conduct a vigorous exchange with an array of people inside and outside their organizations, knowing that great visions rarely emerge from solitary analysis. As “practical futurists,” leaders also test new ideas pragmatically against current resources (money, people, organizational capabilities) and work with others to figure out how to realize the desired future. True strategists offer much more than the generic vision statements that companies hang on their walls; they articulate a clear point of view about what will transpire and position their organizations to respond to it. All of this adds up to a tall order for anyone in a leadership role. It’s not obvious, however, why it should be a particular challenge for women.

Perception or Reality?

As we sought to understand why women fail to impress with their vision, research findings from prior studies were not much help. To begin with, most attempts to compare men’s and women’s styles have focused on how leaders are rated by subordinates. Yet, as we all know, leaders play a key role in managing stakeholders above, across, and outside their units. Moreover, the vast majority of studies ask participants either to rate hypothetical male and female leaders or to evaluate “the majority” of male or female leaders they know, rather than the actual, specific leaders they know well. Empirical studies of gender differences in leadership styles have often used populations of students, members of diverse associations, and nonmanagers, rather than the midlevel to senior business managers we are actually trying to understand.

We turned therefore to the experts who were living this reality every day: the women participating in our executive education programs. When we asked how they would interpret our data, we heard three explanations. First, several women noted that they tended to set strategy via processes that differed from those used by their male counterparts. This suggests that what may in fact be visionary leadership is not perceived that way because it takes a different path. Second, we heard that women often find it risky to stray away from concrete facts, analyses, and details. And third, many women betrayed negative attitudes toward visionary leadership. Because they thought of themselves as grounded, concrete, and no-nonsense, and had seen many so-called

Comparing the Ratings of Male and Female Leaders

In the 360-degree assessments of participants in Insead’s executive education program, female leaders received higher ratings than male leaders in most dimensions of leadership. But in one dimension—envisioning—women were rated lower than men.

	Which leaders rated themselves higher?	Which leaders did male observers rate higher?	Which leaders did female observers rate higher?
Envisioning	Neither	Men	Women
Empowering	Neither	Neither	Neither
Energizing	Women	Women	Women
Designing and aligning	Women	Women	Women
Rewarding and feedback	Neither	Women	Women
Team building	Neither	Women	Women
Outside orientation	Women	Women	Women
Global mind-set	Neither	Neither	Neither
Tenacity	Neither	Women	Women
Emotional intelligence	Women	Women	Women

visionary ideas founder in execution, they tended to eye envisioning behaviors with some suspicion. Each of these interpretations invited serious consideration.

Theory 1: Women are equally visionary but in a different way. Several of the women who had taken the GELI survey argued that it is not that women lack vision but that they come to their visions in a less directive way than men do. One executive put it like this: “Many women tend to be quite collaborative in forming their vision. They take into account the input of many and then describe the result as the group’s vision rather than their own.” Another said, “I don’t see myself as particularly visionary in the creative sense. I see myself as pulling and putting together abstract pieces of information or observations that lead to possible strategies and future opportunities.”

Vivienne Cox, CEO of BP Alternative Energy, is known for having an “organic” leadership style. She led a team that crafted a strat-

egy for moving BP into alternative energy in a more unified and substantial way, by combining a set of peripheral businesses such as solar, wind, and hydrogen-fired power plants into one new low-carbon-powered unit that BP would invest billions in. Ask those involved how the new strategy came about, and the answer always involves multiple players working collaboratively. One of her key lieutenants described Cox’s approach like this: “She thinks about how to create incentives or objectives so that the organization will naturally find its own solutions and structures. It encourages people to be thoughtful, innovative, and self-regulating.” Cox herself claims that her role is to be a “catalyst.” She consistently articulates a management philosophy in which the leader does not drive change but, rather, allows potential to emerge.

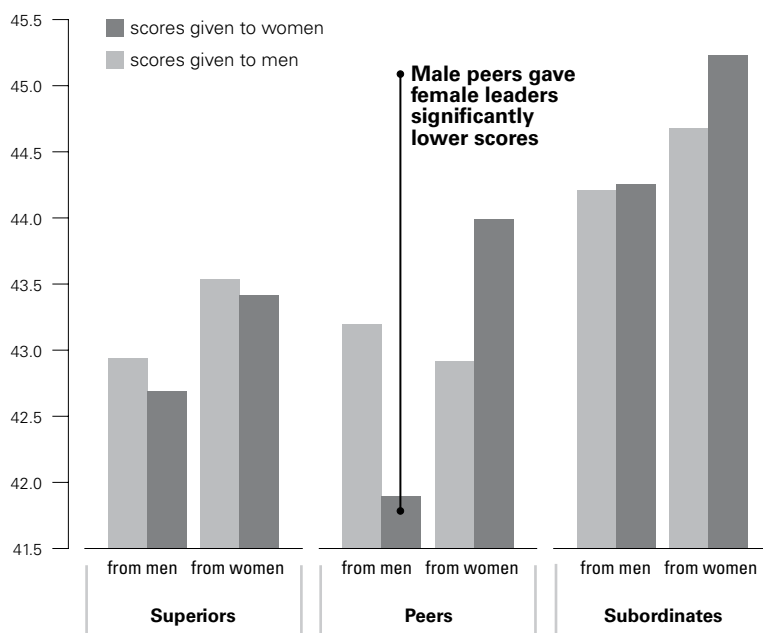
Interestingly, the processes these women describe do not hinge just on a collaborative style. They also rely on diverse and external inputs and alliances. At BP Alternative Energy, Cox spent much of her time talking to key people outside her business group and the company in order to develop a strategic perspective on opportunities and sell the idea of low-carbon power to her CEO and peers. Her ideas were informed by a wide network that included thought leaders in a range of sectors. She brought in outsiders who could transcend a parochial view to fill key roles and invited potential adversaries into the process early on to make sure her team was also informed by those who had a different view of the world. Our results hint at an interesting hypothesis: By involving their male peers in the process of creating a vision, female leaders may get less credit for the result.

Theory 2: Women hesitate to go out on a limb. Some women responded to our findings by noting that they need to base their marching orders on concrete facts and irrefutable analysis, not unprovable assertions about how the future will take shape. Here, two Democratic candidates for the 2008 U.S. presidential race offer an interesting parallel. Barack Obama was viewed as a visionary, a charismatic communicator offering a more hopeful if undetailed future. Hillary Clinton was viewed as a competent executor with an impressive if uninspiring grasp of policy detail. According to a recent *New Yorker* article by George Packer, Clinton as much as admitted

Who Says Women Aren’t Visionary?

In 360-degree assessments, women scored relatively low on vision, primarily because of scores given by their male peers.

How men and women were rated on vision*



*Out of a total possible score of 56. Observers ranked the leader on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest) for eight key behaviors.

that she does not inspire through rhetoric and emotion. She said: “A President, no matter how rhetorically inspiring, still has to show strength and effectiveness in the day-to-day handling of the job, because people are counting on that. So, yes, words are critically important, but they’re not enough. You have to act. In my own experience, sometimes it’s putting one foot in front of the other day after day.”

Might women feel they have to choose between being seen as competent and in control or being visionary? Recall Anne Dumas, our services executive, and her pride in having a vast, detailed knowledge of what is happening in her firm. Often, she told us, she’d called on that reservoir of data to defend her position against challenges. The same attitude comes through in the observation of a management consultant who told us, “Men speak more confidently and boldly on an issue, with very little data to back it up. Women want to have a lot of data and feel confident that they can back up what they are saying.”

A common obstacle for female leaders is that they often lack the presumption of competence accorded to their male peers. As a result, women are less likely to go out on a limb, extrapolating from facts and figures to interpretations that are more easily challenged. When a situation is rife with threat—when people, male or female, expect that they are “guilty until proven innocent”—they adopt a

defensive, often rigid, posture, relying less on their imagination and creativity and sticking to safe choices.

The presumption-of-competence effect is compounded by gender stereotypes that lead us to expect emotional, collaborative women and rational, directive men. When men communicate from the heart or manage participatively, it’s taken as evidence of range, an added plus. Women’s emotional communication or inclusive process, by contrast, is implicitly viewed as proof of an incapacity or unwillingness to do otherwise, even if the situation calls for it.

Theory 3: Women don’t put much stock in vision. Do men and women really have different leadership styles? Certainly a lot of ink has been spilled on the question, but the answer provided by hundreds of studies, subjected to meta-analysis, is no. When other factors (such as title, role, and salary) are held constant, similarities in style vastly outweigh the differences. The occasional finding that women are slightly more people oriented and participative tends not to hold up in settings where there are few women—that is, in line positions and upper management. But put aside the science and ask individuals for their opinion on whether men and women have different leadership styles, and most women (and men) answer yes.

This can only complicate the solution to the vision deficit. It’s one thing for a woman who suspects she is wrongly perceived to resolve to change certain behaviors in order to convey the competence and substance she has to offer. It’s quite another thing when her own self-conception has become colored by the same biases.

Our interviews with female executives highlighted one potential difference in attitude between the genders that could explain women’s lower ratings on envisioning. We suspect women may not value envisioning as a critical leadership competency to the same extent that men do or may have a more skeptical view of envisioning’s part in achieving results. Over and over again in our discussions with women, we heard them take pride in their concrete, no-nonsense attitude and practical orientation toward everyday work problems. We were reminded of a comment made by Margaret Thatcher: “If you want anything said, ask a man; if you want anything done, ask a woman.” Many of the women we interviewed similarly expressed the opinion that women were more

What Does It Mean to Have Vision?

Across studies and research traditions, vision has been found to be the central component in charismatic leadership and the essence of the oft-noted distinction between management and leadership. But what does it look like in action? As detailed by the Global Executive Leadership Inventory, behaving in a visionary way is a matter of doing three things well:

Sensing opportunities and threats in the environment

- simplifying complex situations
- foreseeing events that will affect the organization

Setting strategic direction

- encouraging new business
- defining new strategies
- making decisions with an eye toward the big picture

Inspiring constituents

- challenging the status quo
- being open to new ways of doing things
- inspiring others to look beyond limitations

thorough, had a better command of detail, and were less prone to self-promotion than men. Like Anne Dumas, they valued substance over form as a means of gaining credibility with key stakeholders. A pharmaceutical executive elaborated further: “I see women as more practical. Although the women in my organization are very strategic, they are also often the ones who ground the organization in what is possible, what can or cannot be done from the human dimension.”

Making the Leadership Transition

Women may dismiss the importance of vision—and they may be reassured by the many claims made over the years about their superior emotional intelligence—but the fact remains that women are a minority in the top ranks of business organizations. Our findings suggest to us that the shortfall is in no small part due to women’s perceived lack of vision.

The findings of a 2008 study by Catalyst researchers Jeanine Prime and Nancy Carter and IMD professors Karsten Jonsen and Martha Maznevski concur. In it, more than 1,000 executives from nine countries (all alumni of executive education programs) were asked for their impressions of men and women in general as leaders. Both men and women tended to believe that the two genders have distinct leadership strengths, with women outscoring men on some behaviors, and men outscoring women on others. But here’s the catch: When people were asked to rate the behaviors’ relative importance to overall leadership effectiveness, the “male” behaviors had the edge. Across countries, “inspiring others”—a component of our envisioning dimension—landed at the top of the rankings as most important to overall leadership effectiveness. And what of the areas of leadership where men agreed that women were stronger? Let’s take women’s standout advantage: their much greater skill at “supporting others.” That one ranked at the bottom of the list. As a component of overall leadership effectiveness, it was clearly not critical but merely nice to have.

We’ve seen how these priorities play out at close hand, in the personal stories of women we study. Particularly at midcareer, when senior management sizes up the leadership potential of competent managers, they take their toll. A manager we’ll call Susan offers a cautionary tale. A strong performer, Susan rose

through the functional ranks in logistics and distribution, thanks to her superior technical and people skills and belief in running a tight ship. As a manager she prided herself on her efficient planning and organizing and her success in building a loyal, high-performing team. But her boss saw her capabilities differently. By this point in her career, he expected her to sense emerging trends or unexploited opportunities in the business environment, to craft strategy based on a view of the business as opposed to a view of her function, and to actively work to identify and bring on board stakeholders. Eventually a proposal came from outside her division calling for a radical reorganization of it. Still focused on making continuous improvement to the existing operation, Susan lacked the networks that would have helped her spot shifting priorities in the wider market and was blindsided by the idea.

It’s often observed that the very talents that bring managers success in midlevel roles can be obstacles to their taking on bigger leadership roles. That was Susan’s situation, and it’s possible that it is a common trap for women. Having had the message drummed into their heads that they must be rational, nonemotional, and hyperefficient, they might actually place a higher value than men on knowing the details cold and getting the job done. That, in turn, makes their leadership transition more difficult, because they stick with what they know longer. Another woman we interviewed, this one an investment banker, captured the scale of the challenge. “It’s like my whole basis for existence is taken away from me,” she told us, “if I can’t rely on the facts.” Her words reminded us that an executive’s accustomed approach and style define who she is as a leader. To walk away from them is to be left without a clear sense of identity.

The challenge facing women, then, is to stop dismissing the vision thing and make vision one of the things they are known for. In a senior leadership role, it’s the best use of their time and attention. It’s a set of competencies that can be developed. And of all the leadership dimensions we measured, it’s the only thing holding women back.

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Women and the Vision Thing

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ARTICLES

[Building Your Company's Vision](#)

by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras

Harvard Business Review

February 2000

Product no. 410X

Companies that enjoy enduring success have a core purpose and core values that remain fixed while their strategies and practices endlessly adapt to a changing world. The rare ability to balance continuity and change—requiring a consciously practiced discipline—is closely linked to the ability to develop a vision. Vision provides guidance about what to preserve and what to change. A new prescriptive framework adds clarity and rigor to the vague and fuzzy vision concepts at large today. Managers who master a discovery process to identify core ideology can link their vision statements to the fundamental dynamic that motivates truly visionary companies—that is, the dynamic of preserving the core and stimulating progress.

[Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why](#)

by Deborah Tannen

Harvard Business Review

September 1995

Product no. 95510

Most managerial work happens through talk—discussions, meetings, presentations, negotiations. And it is through talk that managers evaluate others and are themselves judged. Using research carried out in a variety of workplace settings, linguist Deborah Tannen demonstrates how conversational style often overrides what we say, affecting who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done. Tannen's linguistic perspective provides managers with insight into why there is so much poor communication. Gender plays an important role. Tannen traces the ways in which women's styles can undermine them in the workplace, making them seem less competent, confident, and self-assured than they are. She analyzes the underlying social dynamic created through talk in common workplace interactions. She argues that a better understanding of linguistic style will make managers better listeners and more effective communicators, allowing them to develop more flexible approaches to a full range of managerial activities.

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