

A better career environment for women: developing a blueprint for individuals and organisations

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the findings from empirical research conducted with women managers about their careers and to propose a template or blueprint for how individuals and organisations might create a better career environment for women.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on a research study that included interviews with 20 senior women managers from a range of sectors and countries and a self-completion survey questionnaire completed by 1,402 women.

Findings – The paper illustrates the difficulties that women continue to face in the workplace and how terms such as leadership, management and team leader may be gender biased. There is a need for employers and for individuals to consider a variety of different approaches to help create a more positive career environment for women.

Research limitations/implications – The findings have implications for career development structures and talent management processes within organisations. They also would be useful for professional associations.

Practical implications – The template proposed offers a useful guide to help organisations reflect on possible gender bias in career development structures.

Originality/value – This paper adds to the understanding of the issues that women managers face and highlight the practical changes employers could make to help address these issues.

Keywords Gender, Careers, Glass ceilings, Stereotypes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a research study undertaken to investigate women's career development. The aim of the study was to explore the current situation for women in the workplace, focusing on their day-to-day experience of business life. We also were interested to consider whether women should take more control for their own careers as we felt that this might be an important area. As some organisational career development structures have become more informal and less transparent over recent years, so the need for individuals to take control and "drive" their own development becomes more important (Morris *et al.*, 2015).

The study explored the key issues that help, or block, women's careers with a view to offering insights into what individuals and employers might do to create a better working environment for women. We felt that although there is a wide range of knowledge (and literature) about diversity and inclusion issues, there are relatively few studies that detail women's career experiences. As a result of the study, we propose a practical framework – a template or blueprint as outlined in Figure 1 – to identify key





Figure 1.
Women's careers: a blueprint for individual and organisational change

factors which contribute to the effectiveness of career development for women. Offering this practical model will hopefully encourage more employers to improve women's careers and talent management processes. A fuller account of the research findings has been published (Dent *et al.*, 2011; Holton and Dent, 2012).

Women reaching the top leadership positions in organisations continues to be a tough challenge for individuals and businesses alike. Although there were some notable businesswomen in the 1990s and earlier, most were entrepreneurs rather than from the corporate (or public sector) world. Audrey Baxter (of Baxter Soups), Sophie Mirman (Sock Shop) and fashion designers Mary Quant, Zandra Rhodes, Anita Roddick (who founded The Body Shop), Vivienne Westwood and Laura Ashley – a name that still exists in many UK high streets – were inspiring role models. In the most powerful place of all, at the heart of government, was Margaret Thatcher who was the Prime Minister for over a decade from 1979 to 1990. She was the first woman to hold that key role. However, in the corporate world, there were few women at middle and senior management or at the board level (Davidson, 1991; Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Hammond and Holton, 1991). In the public sector, it was not until Sir Gus O'Donnell was head of the Civil Service (from 2005 to 2011) that women held more than a few of the most senior appointments (Urwin, 2012).

Glass ceilings and other gendered barriers

Gradually, the term "glass ceiling", used first in the USA, gained popularity, and it describes the situation where women lower down the organisation can see the senior roles but are unable to reach them. In the mid-1990s, a US Government review looked at these issues and highlighted the business case for diversity (US Department of Labor, 1995). Around the same time, Morrison *et al.* (1995) at the Center for Creative Leadership published a glass ceiling survey. The term glass ceiling has been adapted and reinvented in various ways over the years (Mulcahy and Linehan, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2012; Weyer, 2007) and remains a powerful image of the organisational culture for some

women. Being excluded is described by Carly Fiorina, who was the chief executive officer (CEO) at Hewlett-Packard until 2005. Early in her career as the only female manager she discovered that customer events were organised in private “men-only” clubs (Fiorina, 2006). A similar macho culture was mentioned a few years later in the City of London (Leach, 2009; *The Economist*, 2011). Another type of exclusion that occurs is self-imposed when women are less likely to apply for promotion (Litzky and Greenhaus, 2007).

The limited role of women in business has generated much interest and public debate over the past few years. The publication of the Davies Report by the UK Government in 2011 highlighted the role and representation of women on boards. The reasons for the lack of progress are clear in the literature, which highlights a variety of issues that impact on women managers at different career stages (Burke, 2006; Vinnicombe *et al.*, 2015). Subsequent regular reviews of board level progress by Davies (2015) have helped keep the debate alive – and it is a controversial discussion as his proposed idea of quotas for women is an anathema for some. But there is concern over the slow pace of change. A 2012 survey conducted by *Financial News* found that the majority of women (66 per cent) who responded felt that gender made it harder for them to have a successful career. Four years later, in 2016, when the survey was repeated, a similarly bleak situation was revealed as it was still a high proportion – 65 per cent of respondents – who considered gender to be detrimental (Financial News, 2016).

At some business schools, in recent years, the number of women attendees has plateaued. In fact, the total number of women attending development programmes at one European school has not changed significantly for 20 plus years and remains at around the 30 per cent mark. Similarly, low levels of female faculty are identified by Roseberry *et al.* (2016) in a European survey of business schools.

The number of businesswomen at senior and board levels is low and does not reflect the growing number of women at graduate levels or the number who join organisations at junior and professional levels. Simpson (2000) identifies the problems created when an organisational culture is either hostile or resistant to women. One example is the interesting research evidence about gender bias in career structures and promotion systems such as Kumra and Vinnicombe’s (2008) study of a professional firm where women frequently missed out on key work assignments because of assumptions about what women could, or could not, do. The fact that this occurred with an employer that in many other respects had progressive employment policies illustrates the complexity of what may hold women back in terms of career development and progression.

Women’s careers and part-time working

Other more recent studies also highlight the negative impact of part-time employment on career progression (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014). In North American literature (and media reports), it is sometimes called the “Mommy Track” (Sidle, 2011), but it is a barrier that is found elsewhere in other countries. Gender and wage inequalities are reported by many studies, including Erne and Imboden (2015) and others (Matteazzi *et al.*, 2013; Peetz, 2015; Schäfer and Gottschall, 2015). A number of high-profile sex discrimination cases, such as those against City of London firms (Hignett, 2015), indicate continuing levels of gender inequality. How women managers are judged and assessed in the workplace, especially for key events such as promotion and performance reviews, is fraught with difficulties, as shown by Snyder’s (2014a, 2014b) gender comparison of 248

performance assessments. The review identified that different, more critical language was used about women compared to their male colleagues.

The barriers women face in the workplace are well documented in different countries (Arulampalam *et al.*, 2007; Chisăgiu, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Scicchitano, 2014; Wolfers, 2015) and across different sectors (Broadbridge, 2010; Cabinet Office, 2014, Morley, 2014; Snyder, 2014a, 2014b). Stereotypes which surround gender and leadership have been explored by various studies, including Rosener (1990); Schein and Davidson (1992); Schein *et al.* (1996); and De Anca and Gabaldon's (2014) more recent analysis of female directors. The negative perception of working mothers also has been shown to be important in determining career outcomes (Grady and McCarthy, 2008), together with the barriers experienced by those returning after a maternity break (Bennett, 2015). The tension of balancing work and family responsibilities is identified by a number of studies, including Liu and Wilson (2001) and Ely *et al.*'s, (2014) insightful study of women MBA graduates from Harvard which identified the differing expectations between men and women about whose career (in a marriage) would take priority. Although most women expected that their career would rank equally with their partner's, many were disappointed and found that their career took second place. It is interesting to note that these different expectations are also present in the younger, millennial generation of workers (people born between 1980 and 2000). In a study of around 1,000 millennials by Boston (Harrington *et al.*, 2015), although both men and women valued work-life balance, women were more likely to say that they would leave a job to raise their children.

The issues identified in the literature have not changed significantly over decades, or in more recent years since Liu and Wilson's (2001) study of multinationals. The career disadvantages of working part-time together with negative stereotypes and assumptions about working mothers, as well as the problems encountered by women trying to juggle work and family commitments, have been identified across a range of professions, sectors and countries (Easteal *et al.*, 2015; McIntosh *et al.*, 2012).

Although there may be more women at entry-level appointments, there are many sectors, business divisions, key committees and business meetings, such as those for investment, finance, mergers and acquisitions, where few women are among the senior executive and decision-making groups (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). For example, data published in 2012 indicate that women hold only one in seven board level appointments in Europe's top firms (Holt, 2012).

Sample and research approach

Data were collected through interviews and questionnaires as outlined below.

Both sample groups of women were identified from alumni at a UK business school and through a variety of other means, including social media, personal networks, conferences, professional networking groups and associations. The networks included Women in Banking and City Women's Network. Women responding to the survey were also asked to invite other colleagues and friends to take part to help reach a wider audience of working women. This "personal recommendation" or snowball sampling approach may be helpful to other researchers. It does also of course mean that our sample group may not be as diverse as it might have been if we had used random sampling methods.

The survey consisted of five demographic questions (age, nationality, size of organisation, level of seniority and salary). These were followed by nine closed-ended questions (including multiple choice, rating scales and ranking scales). A number of

open-ended questions formulated asked respondents to reflect on career promoters, “what has helped you to achieve your career goals?”, and about potential barriers, “what has hindered your career success so far?” The survey was piloted with colleagues and female delegates. A range of areas in the survey and interviews were explored, topics selected after discussion groups were held with female managers who attended business school programmes and based on our own experiences of coaching and working, teaching and consulting with a variety of different organisations. We asked them about people who had helped women in their career; career promoters and hindrances; work-life balance; what respondents wished they had known earlier in their own career; and any advice they would offer to both individual women and to organisations.

The self-completion online survey questionnaire was administered by Qualtrics software. Paper and electronic copies were also distributed widely at network meetings the authors attended and on executive education programmes held by the business school. The questions included qualitative and quantitative data, and 1,402 responses were received; an excellent result, as this was a higher response than we had anticipated. As the survey was widely distributed, and re-directed by survey respondents, it is not possible to say precisely how many copies were circulated or to provide a response rate.

The majority of survey respondents were from the UK and came from a broad range of backgrounds and sectors; 39 per cent were senior managers and a further 30 per cent were either directors or chief executives. Only 6 per cent were junior managers. The women worked in the public, private and voluntary sectors, both nationally (73 per cent were from the UK, and 18 per cent were from the rest of Europe) and internationally (9 per cent).

Age profile of respondents and size of employer

As Table I shows, the majority of respondents (59 per cent) were working in large companies (employing 1,000 or more staff). More than 45 per cent of the sample were in the age group of 41-50 ($n = 405$). The question offered a number of age bands and responses ranged from a few who were under 30 (4 per cent), whereas hardly any who were over 60 (1 per cent). However, with the exception of this youngest and oldest group, there was a good representation of those aged 31-40 (29 per cent), and 20 per cent aged 51-60.

Limitations and sample representativeness

The majority of respondents (59 per cent) as shown in Table II were working for larger employers, which is inevitably a limitation of our study, as our sample group is skewed towards women working in larger firms. However, one-third of the sample (30 per cent) were working for companies with fewer than 500 employees, and of these, 13 per cent were employed in firms with a workforce of less than 100.

	Response	(%)	Count ¹
Table I. Distribution of respondents by organisational size (number of people employed)	Under 100 employees	12.8	179
	101-500	17.3	242
	501-1,000	10.7	149
	1,000+	59.2	827

Note: ¹ Not all respondents replied to this question

Interview sample group

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women at senior levels from a range of different countries, nationalities and sectors, including retail, technology, construction, oil and gas, hotels and the tobacco industry, as well as one entrepreneur. Some women interviewed were already known to us; others were selected in a random way such as people who completed the survey and indicated they would be willing to be interviewed; some were recommended by another person interviewed or were attending business school programmes during the time of the data collection. Two respondents from this last group included a woman in her mid-30s working in a pharmaceutical company, married without children. Another was the most senior woman in a Chinese oil company in her early 50s, married with children.

Although such a small sample group is not representative, we sought women across a range of different age groups and job levels, as well as from different nationalities, career and life stages. Nationalities for example included Danish, Chinese, Sri Lankan, British, Dutch and South African, as well as those who had worked in North America, Asia and the Middle East. Sectors represented included marketing, HR, global supply, purchasing, project management, tax, medical, computing, technology and IT, engineering, nursing, strategy and operational roles.

Some women had stayed with a single employer, whereas others had moved across different sectors (or continents) for a variety of personal or career reasons. One example was a woman who moved from social work in the public sector to a major pharmaceutical company. Another attended a UK university and then moved to the USA with her first job, moving back to Europe many years later. Job titles of interviewees included HR director, strategy director, country manager and board member (in a multinational) and European marketing director. The companies represented included Johnson & Johnson, Japan Tobacco International, Google, Cisco, China Post, Danfoss and Mott MacDonald, and in the UK, the National Trust, the National Health Service, local and national Government. The interviews ranged between 45 min and 2 hours in length and were mostly conducted as face-to-face meetings. A few (three) interviews were conducted by telephone, as participants were based in Singapore, India and the Middle East. All interviews were recorded and were used to produce a summary of the meeting notes.

Research findings

The research findings identify a variety of ways that individual women can take more control for their own careers; something that many said was important to highlight as their advice to other, younger women who are at the beginning of their career. The

Response	(%)	Count ¹
30 and under	4.1	57
31-40	28.9	405
41-50	45.8	641
51-60	19.8	278
61 and over	1.4	20

Note: ¹ Not all respondents replied to this question

Table II.
Distribution of age
across the survey
sample

survey asked respondents to comment on three different questions about organisational attitudes towards women.

Support from others also makes a difference, and the survey data illustrated in Table III highlights the key role that the boss and colleagues play in career development, as 87 per cent of respondents had a boss “who has supported you in achieving your goals”. The interview data indicated that much of this support occurs on an informal basis rather than being formally structured in career development, or talent management, policies and practice. Establishing a good working relationship with the boss was highlighted as a key source of career support and development, as highlighted by the following comment: “I consider myself incredibly lucky to have worked for some inspiring people – some of the best people in the business”. (Marketing Director)

One woman interviewed in China spoke about learning from her boss how to adopt a more relaxed managing style. It was really helpful to her; learning to balance this new skill while still maintaining the seriousness and discipline, which is more usual among Chinese managers. Some organisations do formalise support with mentoring or executive education programmes or with projects such as “the manager as coach”. This type of support is particularly important in early career and when women are in the minority in their workplace or profession; for example, at a technology conference where only 7 women attended among some 300 delegates (Sanders, 2012). Early career is often a time when women may be uncertain about their leadership capabilities, and so the role of a more experienced mentor or coach can be crucial here. It was mentioned by a number of the senior women we interviewed.

Mentors also were often mentioned in Table III by many respondents (29 per cent mention internal mentors based in their organisation, whereas 20 per cent identified support from external mentors). Some highlighted the value of a variety of mentors who helped provide them with different perspectives – for example, someone from an earlier organisation and a past boss who had moved to a different business area. Mentors and coaches are sometimes thought of as being valuable only at early career stages but the research found they are also useful at senior levels, not least by helping women be more visible in the organisation. This “visibility” is an important part of career success:

I think if I had worked harder at my presentation skills earlier in my career this might have made a difference to me. I spent the first ten or 15 years working away at my tasks with little

Response	(%) ¹	Count
Boss	86.8	1,220
Colleagues	77.1	1,084
Family	69.4	976
Friends	54.9	772
External coach	32.9	462
Internal mentor (a relationship with a more experienced role model)	29.4	413
External mentor	19.7	277
Internal coach (a relationship based on developing skills)	11.3	159

Table III.
People who support
women’s careers

Note: ¹ Respondents could select as many options as appropriate, so each item could equal 100%

thought about how to make myself visible or thinking about how others saw me (Finance manager, service sector).

We were also interested to understand what the organisational culture is like for women and included three questions in the survey – about how men and women are judged with regard to leadership; and how women are judged when promotion issues are involved. The third question was whether women face more barriers than men and a high proportion of respondents did identify this as an issue. Nearly half, 48 per cent of respondents, said that it is “harder for women to succeed in their organisation compared to male colleagues”. A similar number, 49 per cent, also felt that men and women are judged differently in their organisation with regard to leadership style and behaviour.

However, a more positive finding is that just over half the survey sample group, 56 per cent, felt that women were judged equally to men when it comes to promotion in their organisation. Although broadly a positive finding for the majority of respondents, it does also indicate how much more needs to be done before there is a level playing field with regard to promotion issues. The stereotypes which exist for women were discriminatory and as one person interviewed said: “A man here is assumed to be a good manager. A woman has to prove that she is good” (R&D professional, pharmaceutical sector). This issue was also mentioned in other interviews; one person commented that for herself and for other women managers in manufacturing company, there is an increased level of scrutiny:

I think there is a closer look on the women because we are so few and I can see from my point of view in my management team there is really a closer look at me among our divisional management team. I think it's in a positive manner but generally there is a closer look on women's performance, no doubt (Project manager, pharmaceutical sector).

Women often lack sponsors (Ibarra *et al.*, 2010); these are more experienced people who are willing to help women develop their skills and expertise. The support from sponsors is important and can often play a key part in creating career development opportunities in larger, international firms and was mentioned by many interview and survey respondents. The study also found that the negative stereotypes about women cut across sector and national differences, for example, experiences reported by a working mother – of not being serious about her career – were likely to be identified in Holland, the UK, India or France. Role and behaviour stereotypes about women leaders also cut across international boundaries, as do occupational choices. Women who responded to the survey were more likely to have a career in HR, marketing or PR but were less evident in operational, international, strategy or manufacturing roles.

The lack of role models for younger women was mentioned frequently by both survey respondents and by interviewees and has also been noted in other research (ILM, 2012). A number of those who we interviewed (and in the survey) were “firsts”, the first woman to hold a certain role, as illustrated by the following quote:

I was the first female partner to have a young family and come back to work. All the other women partners before me did not have children and this made a huge difference as, all of a sudden, younger women could see it was possible to have both a family and a career (Professional firm, senior director).

Issues raised by survey respondents and by interviewees about what has helped – and what has blocked – their careers indicated the need to help build women's self-confidence (shown as Number 1 “Personal qualities” in Table IV. Two other key

Key factors	Illustrative comments from survey respondents
<p>1. <i>Personal qualities:</i> A good level of self-awareness is a key contributor to career success, and women need to have a well-honed awareness of their own strengths, weaknesses and values Self-confidence and self-belief * – almost all the women interviewed could highlight one or more people around them who helped them develop their self-confidence levels Feedback from others – the need to know that you are good Stereotypes about women’s leadership styles</p> <p>2. <i>Career structures and planning:</i> The importance of having a career plan Making and taking opportunities – greater transparency in career structures and promotion criteria Identifying key areas for development; providing information to help identify next career steps</p> <p>3. <i>Support, networking and organisational culture:</i> Support from others at work – a supportive boss who can see the potential of a younger person and will help provide “stretch and challenge” assignments to build new skills Support from family and friends – a supportive partner and other family members Networking interests – creating a group of colleagues and supporters Operating in a “female-friendly” organisational culture – also, a culture where working mothers can achieve a senior career</p>	<p>“To some extent I have had doubts in my own capabilities and my potential” “The only barriers I have met have been in my own head . . . my own fear of not being good enough . . .” “I suffered from that typical woman thing, which I haven’t wholly escaped from – if I didn’t have all the experience required in a job description then I didn’t apply” “It’s hard to be a female leader in my firm – I feel that I’m judged differently to the men and something they do may be called assertive while for some women, and in certain meetings, may be seen as aggressive” “A lot of confidence is required to sustain a career in financial services which unfortunately is still male dominated”</p> <p>“My barriers are related to international mobility. I have a family and am not mobile which represents a handicap in my company” “I was too risk averse in career decisions. However, I got a mentor, I read lots and went on a business school programme. I took up any offer of professional development that my employer offered me!”</p> <p>“I am working in a male orientated and aggressive environment and it is more difficult for women to influence unless they are very assertive” “Possibly my biggest hurdle has been lack of access to good managers and women in leadership role models” “A strong internal and external network is essential for support and business intelligence” “Support from my line manager is very positive” “Despite talking the talk – about helping me balance work with young children – my new organisation did everything possible to derail me as a working parent”</p>

Table IV.
Key factors in women’s career development

Notes: One of the most common career barriers mentioned by survey respondents were their own personal shortcomings, lack of confidence, etc.

factors are identified in the research are briefly outlined in [Table IV](#). The first about “career structures and planning” (shown as Number 2) are important, such as issues around support: this comes from various sources. These include family, friends, colleagues, from the boss and also through women’s involvement in professional and

company networks. The final factor (Number 3 in Table IV) is about the level of support provided, networking and whether the organisational culture is a place where gender is considered and accommodated. As the final quote in Table IV illustrates that “despite talking the talk [...]”, a company may talk in theory about supporting working parents, but then in practice does not provide this crucial support. Table IV includes some illustrative survey comments for each factor.

The research evidence highlights a number of areas that make it harder for women to achieve their career potential. In some cases, women get stuck at middle management level (Barsh and Yee, 2012), and there are the difficulties experienced by working mothers, the impact of maternity leave and taking years out of the labour force, to bring up the family. One survey respondent said that taking two years of maternity leave had a negative impact on her career. Some barriers also impact men but others such as the low expectations (from society and by individuals) about working mothers remain challenging. The idea that a person is somehow less capable, less committed or less intelligent simply because gender is wrong, and that is why it is so important to provide women with career development, encouragement and advice and to challenge some of the stereotypes, the labels, which exist either as conscious or unconscious bias.

The findings from the research identify key factors that are likely to create career success for women. We also asked respondents what they wished they had known earlier; advice they would offer employers wishing to improve the number of women in senior positions and advice to other women who are currently thinking about their future career choices. As a result, we propose a blueprint model described in the rest of this paper which is divided between what individual women could do and areas that employers could review.

A blueprint for individuals and organisations

The model shown in Figure 1 offers a simple, practical framework for the two key groups involved with women’s careers – the individual and the organisation. Using the term “organisation” is deliberately broad, as some areas will fall within the remit of HR and others would need to be determined by the chief executive and the senior management team.

Advice for individuals (self)

Develop self-awareness

Self-belief and self-confidence are two of the most important promoters of career success and yet also seem to be two of the most common hindrances that women experience, namely, the lack of self-belief and low levels of self-confidence. A good level of self-awareness is a key contributor to career success, and women need to have a well-honed awareness of their own strengths, weaknesses, values, beliefs and needs. As one respondent said, it is all about knowing, “what you want, what you are good at and how you can get even better”. Getting feedback from others was seen as a great way of developing self-awareness – a boss or sometimes the boss’s boss, colleagues, direct reports, customers and suppliers were mentioned. This self-awareness did help build self-confidence and self-belief, two vital attitudes identified by many women as key elements in helping drive their career success.

Have a career plan

Identifying career goals, aspirations and ambitions – in other words having a career plan – is key. Plans can be changed, adapted and developed; the important thing is to have one:

Have a career plan from early on and take ownership for your own career development. Many women that I talk to, particularly the under 25s, I say to them OK, when you're 30 what do you want to have achieved, inside work and outside work? Do you want to be married, do you want to have children? Do you want to be a job grade one? Do you want to be a job grade three? Most of them can't answer the question, they just don't know. They're focused on trying to do the best job that they can and so can't say after two years: "Hey, I've been on the graduate programme for two years and I haven't had my promotion – I need a promotion, what am I missing? What am I doing wrong?" If they're not pushing their career, nobody's going to drag them along (Senior manager, public sector).

When considering whether to apply for promotion, women had a greater tendency than men to worry about having all the relevant experience, skills or qualifications, and, in some cases, they said they waited to be asked! The reality is that in many situations when senior appointments are made, it is more about the relationship and overall fit than about having the exact qualifications and experience. One woman interviewed won a senior role because of her expertise in managing change:

[...]the organisation took the view that the other elements of the job although important could be assigned to others in the team while my experience of managing change was critical and was something that they felt was required in that role (HR Manager, pharmaceutical sector).

Understand the role of others

Most of the success stories reported in the study involved support from others. In terms of support, the most frequently mentioned people were the boss and colleagues. Many of the women we interviewed mentioned a supportive boss as key to their success. Bosses were often described as the person who challenged them and pushed them to try something they would not normally have attempted, as illustrated in a survey quote: "When we were looking at going into a new area my manager pushed me to lead the project which I would not have done otherwise". (Junior Manager, manufacturing)

Many women in the study mentioned that support from colleagues, family and friends as important. Working within a supportive team and having colleagues in the organisation who can act as a sounding board or informal coach can prove to be highly beneficial. Family and friends are undoubtedly of huge support to any woman who is forging a career in business. It is their support, advice and encouragement that many women rely on to juggle their lives. In particular, partners and husbands were mentioned, especially those who shared the family responsibilities. In some cases, it was the extended family such as support from parents and from in-laws. One woman interviewed said that her mother-in-law had always helped provide childcare and family support:

I can see now looking back just how much support she gave me. I know that she was keen for me to have the career that she was not able to have (Senior Vice-President, oil and gas sector).

Networking

Many women mentioned how important networks and networking are as part of the career development process. With the increasing use of online networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Plaxo, there are many more networking options, but the important point for career development is a structure which connects women with lots of people. However, it has to be strategic, as one woman interviewed describes it is about “building friendships and alliances”. (Director, Civil Service)

A few organisations have encouraged women’s network in recent years, and these are helpful in-house resources to provide career support and to link with other women who can act as role models for the younger generation.

Make and take opportunities

Another theme in the study was the way that some successful career women have charted their own path and built their own career, often with ambitious plans of where they wanted to be in the next 5-10 years. Making and taking opportunities has therefore been a key part of their success. Having a career strategy and knowing what needs to be achieved to move in the right direction was mentioned by some; and others could see how they had taken advantage of unexpected, unplanned opportunities that were suddenly presented to them. One woman we interviewed was packed and ready to leave for Australia when she was suddenly asked to change track completely. Would she go instead to Japan where problems had arisen? It truly was a leap into the dark. Leading this new team of 150 staff presented many problems, but, ultimately, it proved to be a great step forward in terms of her career.

It was disappointing to find that although organisations have put policies and procedures in place, the research found that women currently experience many of the same challenges and issues (as identified in [Table IV](#)) as those identified in the past. We heard of some employers offering excellent career advice, coaching and mentoring, but such examples were not widespread or mentioned by a majority of our respondents. A corporate career often takes a long time, and some respondents talked about the need to keep their foot on the accelerator:

I can’t help thinking that if I’d been a bit more strategic and thoughtful about my career, I may have taken a less tortuous route to my goal. My advice to younger women would be to know what you want to achieve, develop a plan and go for it (Female Director, publishing).

I have worked for at least three very supportive bosses, usually at CEO level, who have given me opportunities to develop (Learning and Development Specialist, local government).

Advice for organisations

The other part of [Figure 1](#) is a framework to help employers offer a better environment for women, and the key points are outlined below. A few organisations such as Phillips and International Hotels Group were mentioned by survey respondents for providing a good career environment for women. However, not all employers meet such high standards, and we felt that the proposed framework in [Figure 1](#) could help other employers to create more structure, support and equality.

Chief executive officer and senior management commitment

For women to become truly equal in business life, the role of the CEO and the top team in supporting, and modelling the way ahead is vital. In our research, we heard many stories where lip service was paid to the importance of women in an organisation. A fairly typical story that illustrates this point is shown below. Organisations which have moved beyond “lip service” build in regular reporting at board/CEO levels, provide support for women and identify clear measures of success. Some employers set clear goals. Shell (*Diversity Journal*, 2010), for example, has women’s networks in 20 countries, publishes targets to increase the number of women at senior management level and identifies who is accountable for achieving these goals. It also publishes regular diversity and inclusion reports:

At a European meeting I recently attended, the leadership team for the project put up a slide to illustrate details about themselves – this showed only one woman on the team of 15 and unsurprisingly she earned far less than any of the other members (Senior Partner, professional and financial services).

Stories of this nature were not unusual, especially in relation to women’s presence at senior levels.

Many women in our research talked about the excellent HR policies that their organisation had in place, yet still they experienced barriers. As one noted:

If the top team is male dominated and they continue to replicate themselves on executive floors in a closed system way, nothing will change. It needs a shift in mind-set and culture, sponsored and committed to by the top in order for change to happen.

Moving the culture towards a more female-friendly environment can sometimes be challenging, but the most important characteristic is a genuine willingness to understand the working experiences of women. For example, reverse mentoring in one company – where women mentored senior men at the board level. In another company, the CEO not only supported the women’s network but also attended many meetings to gain a better understanding of the issues that women experienced. Good HR policies and processes are all very well, but the real change happens when behaviour changes and is modelled from the top. The active involvement of all C-suite members modelling an attitude of equality – where people are promoted on merit and women and men are both equally encouraged in career development and growth – would go a long way to levelling the playing field. Although the focus in some companies has been on gender awareness workshops – and this is a helpful process – there also needs to be gender checks and balances for key career areas such as access to learning and development and judgements made at assessment events or for leadership roles; who is invited to take on special projects; pay and bonus awards, promotion, the gender profile of interview short-lists and succession planning. The CEO of one company recently conducted his second annual review of succession planning but with two additional new questions, “where are the women?” and “what needs to happen to ensure that more women are included?” It focused everyone’s minds.

Organisational culture and attitude

Once the top team is on board and modelling change, then the whole organisation will begin a process of movement towards an equal working environment; for instance, having diversity champions in each part of the business to actively promote the role of

women and to accommodate difference; – of course, diversity is not just about gender so these champions are also alert to other diversity and inclusion issues.

Some of the positive examples we heard about included making sure that women were offered the same stretch assignments as men; organising an annual conference for women managers and staff to provide encouragement and role models for younger women; encouraging women to take advantage of mentoring and coaching schemes early on in their career; and looking at innovative and flexible working practices, for example: working longer hours each day to enable a four-day week such as a husband and wife team who operated a job share with each doing one month on and one month off. Others talked about enabling home working with flexible hours to suit personal situations.

Many women were sharing family responsibilities with their partner or husband, and a number of coping strategies were mentioned that helped with the tension often created by trying to manage a demanding career with childcare. One woman compartmentalised her time, though not everyone can be as disciplined. Many others said they suffered some, or many, pangs of guilt for not being a perfect mother:

When I walk out of the office I totally switch off and focus on issues at home. Similarly, when I step into the office I am completely absorbed by what's happening here. I try not to blur the two worlds as I don't think that would be fair on my family (European Marketing Director, technology multinational).

Another rather different approach was to spread the workload (of a senior international full-time role) over seven days instead of five:

It's much simpler for me to work as and when I can manage to, so that might mean Friday evening or on a Sunday morning. I fit work around the kids and what's happening with them. At this level you can never just walk away from the office anyway as there might be an emergency event that has to be dealt with. I'm the first woman in this company to work like this but it seems to be working well and this type of flexibility is great for me personally but my boss is happy too (Operational Director and Country Manager, oil sector).

Although there were some examples of flexible working among the women in the study, it still seems to be something that not every employer is willing to consider. One organisation operates a "reverse mentoring" process. This involves younger managers mentoring more senior managers to help them to understand the challenges facing the younger generation. This same process could be applied to younger women mentoring senior men and women to help understand changing attitudes.

Organisational gender mix

Some organisations realise that it is not just about the number of women employed, rather it is about the opportunities afforded to them. So, for instance, more enlightened organisations are beginning to understand more about the inequality issues by analysing gender mixes:

- at different organisation levels;
- on training and development, as well as leadership programmes;
- applicants for managerial and leadership positions; and

- people taking on new opportunities and stretch assignments.

Opportunities to attend external events such as annual business meetings at Davos, etc. Davos, organised by the World Economic Forum, have been criticised for a number of years for the low number of women delegates; in 2015, women were 17 per cent of the 2,500 participants (Fairchild, 2015; Shanker, 2015).

Also, of course, at the board level and during the selection process of new directors. Much of the gender issue is about fairness of opportunity and attitude, and we heard many stories of women being by-passed and assumptions being made about lack of ambition. For instance: “Organisations should not assume that just because I am a working mother I will not be interested in an overseas assignment”. (Finance Manager, financial services)

Development, mentoring and coaching

Although many of the women in the survey spoke about the importance of taking advantage of any developmental opportunities offered as a key promoter of their career, an equal number complained that these experiences were not offered to them. It is also clear from our research that women can be reticent in asking for developmental opportunities. An assistant manager in education explained: “I don’t like to push the company too hard and ask for too much”. Enlightened organisations are becoming more aware of the need to actively encourage women to put themselves forward for development opportunities. Bosses also play a role here, and the better ones are supportive of the women working in their business area. Our research highlighted the importance of the role of the boss as being paramount in terms of either promoting or hindering women’s career success.

As far as mentoring and coaching is concerned, one of the challenges is access to female mentors and role models and the lack of senior women in organisations made this difficult. In many organisations, career support and development happens informally and so the challenge for many of the women in the study was identifying whom they should approach to mentor or coach them. Publicising this information so that people are aware of others in the organisation who are trained and willing to act as mentors and coaches may be particularly helpful.

Talent management

Organisations that fail to recognise that women play an important role in contemporary business life will undoubtedly be losing some of the most talented people they have. There is much talked about quotas in the boardroom, but, in our view, there is a far more challenging issue – the female talent pipeline.

Women are outperforming men in education – equal numbers of women and men join organisations at entry levels (Adams, 2015). But, by the time they reach middle management, women exit in large numbers – this typically happens between the ages of 30 and 40 (Hall, 2013). You do not need to be an Einstein to determine why this might be. This exodus creates subsequent problems for the female talent pipeline – it is logical that if there are fewer women in middle management, then there are fewer to select from for senior and board appointments. There also is a concern about the lack of transparency, and the limited number of women identified as potential candidates at senior level, when executive and headhunting firms are used. The key challenge is to ensure that the

attitude of the people applying the HR processes is positive, and that innovative approaches to working practices are encouraged and promoted.

Conclusion

Getting women managers to senior executive and board level can partly be achieved by women taking more responsibility or ownership for their own career development. However, alone, that is unlikely to be enough – the key in our view to systemic change is for more organisations to take a decisive, agentic role in creating a better organisational culture for women; a place where women are able to fulfil their potential and contribute to business success. Some employers do understand the challenge. Nationwide Building Society, one of the companies in the Times Top 50 Employers for Women (Opportunity Now, 2015), is one example. Included for the third year in the awards, it reports employee survey data indicating that nearly all, 92 per cent, of female staff say that Nationwide values the diversity of its employees.

Overall, the study found that the barriers to women's careers have not changed significantly over the past few years, and it is rather depressing to find that part-time working and being a working mother remain as barriers to careers in organisations. The glass ceiling is still intact in many organisations. The low number of women at senior levels indicates how great the challenge still is. For example, there are only 4 per cent female CEOs among the leading Standard & Poor's 500 companies in the USA (Catalyst, 2016), and in the UK, among the top FTSE 100 companies, the number is similarly low. See Table V for a list of the six women chief executives in leading FTSE 100 companies (Shapland, 2015). The proportion of women among Europe's top 100 companies is likewise low; women hold only 11 per cent of executive committee jobs (McCullough, 2014).

If more organisations improve career development support and mentoring and, crucially, if more women also understand the importance of taking ownership for their own careers, then the situation for women will improve over the next few years. Early work with the younger generation of women to challenge young women's limited career aspirations (Judge, 2015) will also help create change. Business schools, professional networks and management associations could all contribute more on all these aspects. In summary, the research findings indicate the need for better career development guidance and support; issues that are reflected in other studies (Cabinet Office, 2014; CMI 2013).

Limitations of the study

The study's sample group was large but was limited to women, which means that there is no comparative data from a group of male managers. However, the findings do offer

Name of company	Female chief executive	Date and type of appointment
EasyJet	Carolyn McCall	2010, external appointment
Imperial Tobacco	Alison Cooper	2010, internal
Kingfisher	Veronique Laurey	2015, internal
Royal Mail	Moya Green	2013, external
Severn Trent	Liv Garfield	2014, external
Whitbread	Alison Brittain	2016, external
GSK (GlaxoSmithKline)	Emma Walmsley	2017, internal appointment (announced 2016)

Table V.
Women chief executives of FTSE 100 companies

some valuable insights into women's career experiences. The survey questionnaire has been published and could be made available to other researchers interested in replicating the study with a male and female sample group.

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