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Women in Leadership: Barriers, Achievements, and the Path Forward Insights from Marianna Carbonari



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Insights from Marianna Carbonari, CEO Value for Talent Executive Search and Managing Partner IMSA Search Global Partners Italy

Over the past decade, significant transitions have occurred in the global workplace – from post-covid hybrid workspaces to the acceleration of AI, and the growth of the start-up ecosystem to shifts in employee-employer dynamics and expectations. Leadership priorities along with their corresponding opportunities and challenges have had to change accordingly.

Human Capital Priorities

Harvard Business Publishing's 2024 Global Leadership Development Study finds current human capital priorities across the world and across industries to include: enhancing the employee experience (45%), expanding talent development (40%), increasing upskilling/reskilling (37%), improving diversity, equity and inclusion (35%), adopting advanced HR technology (31%), helping employees adapt to change (27%), and reducing stress and burnout (25%).

Compared to last year, this year's leaders indicate that connecting employees to organizational purpose (50%), emotional and social intelligence (48%), and managing conflict among team members (44%) have increased in importance. Across the board, talent experts are increasingly searching for leaders with high emotional intelligence (EQ) to drive employee initiatives that can make a difference.

Leadership Teams Exhibit Gender Imbalances

Over the past ten years, the profile of the typical leadership team responsible for setting the priorities agenda has evolved, albeit at a slow pace. From a gender perspective, women have increased their representation at every level of corporate management; today women comprise almost 30% of C-suite positions vs. 17% in 2015 (Source: McKinsey & Co Women in the Workplace 2024 study). While this is a significant improvement, it is far from parity.

In the boardroom, women hold less than 23% of the world's board seats. According to projections, while there have been improvements, gender parity will not be reached until 2038 without more action (Source: Deloitte Global Women in the Boardroom Report).

Women Leadership Correlates with High Performance

Interestingly, research correlates leadership gender diversity with financial performance. According to The Conference Board, "Organizations with at least 30% women in leadership positions are 12 times more likely to rank in the top 20% for financial performance."

Nevertheless, Leadership Gender Gaps Persist

So, why do leadership gender gaps persist? It is not due to education. Women achieved educational parity with men several decades ago. A new book, **The Broken Rung**, asserts that the leadership inequality starts at the entry level. Women represent 48% of employees entering the corporate workforce and then during the first round of promotions, only 81 women for every 100 men are promoted. Thus, women are not getting their fair share of experience and skill building that leads to greater leadership and earning power. The discrepancy continues to escalate throughout their careers.

Around the world, men continue to hold most of the top paying positions. According to an October 2022 Pew Research Center survey, "When asked about the factors which may play a role in the gender wage gap, half of U.S. adults point to women being treated differently by employers. Smaller shares point to women making different choices about how to balance work and family (42%)." Unfortunately, often these decisions are made for them as unfavorable family leave policies, childcare limitations, and unfair pay practices are systemic.

Correcting the Gender Imbalance

According to the World Economic Forum, countries with greater female political representation have better policies supporting gender-equal labour markets, family leave, pay transparency and childcare. For example, Belgium ranks 4th worldwide for women in the boardroom, with 38% of board seats held by women. This is just behind Italy (40.4), Norway (43.5) and France (44). In these countries, government actions – from quota legislation to targets to disclosures – have forced greater gender parity on boards.

Marianna Carbonari, CEO Value for Talent Executive Search and Managing Partner IMSA Search Global Partners Italy asserts: "I believe bridging the gender gap demands a multifaceted strategy that drives change at every level. Education plays a pivotal role—ensuring equal opportunities for girls and boys, particularly in STEM, while challenging gender stereotypes from an early age. In the workplace, achieving pay equity, expanding access to leadership roles, and implementing better work-life balance policies are essential steps. Stronger anti-discrimination laws and measures like gender quotas can accelerate progress, but cultural transformation is just as critical. Increasing diverse representation in media, engaging men in the dialogue, and supporting advocacy movements all contribute to meaningful change.

True gender equality won't happen overnight, but with collective action and sustained commitment, we can close the gap and build a more just and inclusive future."

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