Tailoring Organisational Practices to achieve Gender Equality

A Best Practice Guide
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1. Introduction

The Gender Equality in decision-Making (GEM) project aims to address the question of how women and men can be more equally represented in senior management positions. The project looked specifically at the human resource management processes that impact on the progression of women’s careers and, subsequently, on gender balance in key decision-making roles in organisations. As part of the project, research was conducted on organisational processes and female and male employees’ experiences of recruitment and selection, performance management and promotion/succession planning practices in three large multinational organisations, one large private organisation, one semi-state employer and three higher education institutions in the UK and Ireland. Resulting from this research the best practice model below has been developed.
1.1 The Case for Gender Equality in decision-Making

The Gender Equality Index reveals that gender equality has not yet been fully achieved in the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2015). The index measures six core domains of gender equality policy: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. One of the most problematic areas identified is the unequal representation of women and men in decision-making, particularly on company boards, although some progress has been made over time.

While gender balance can be viewed as a social justice issue and considered the right thing to do ethically, there is a strong business case to be made for gender diversity. Research by Carter and Wagner (2011) for Catalyst established that companies with the highest representation of women leaders financially outperform, on average, companies with the lowest. Furthermore, research conducted by Catalyst and the Harvard Business School (2011) suggest that gender-inclusive leadership contributes to higher levels of corporate social responsibility within organisations (Soares et al, 2011). While there is a growing body of research showing the benefits of gender diversity and the positive relationship between an increase in the numbers of women in leadership positions and business performance (European Commission, 2012), women still remain underrepresented in senior decision-making roles. Even with this knowledge, organisational hierarchies still do not reflect the gender breakdown of the wider labour force or that of their own employees.

![Board Membership in the EU](image)

*Source: European Commission’s Database on Women and Men in Decision-making, S2 2015*
In countries that have taken a decision to introduce a voluntary system of gender targets, such as the United Kingdom (UK), evidence reveals that significant improvements in gender balance have been achieved. The Female FTSE Board Report 2015 (Vinnicombe et al) showed that the 23.5 percent of people on the boards of FTSE 100 companies are now women; this is an increase from 12.5 percent in 2011, which illustrates that a voluntary target-based approach without legislative mechanisms can be used to achieve changes in gender balance. While a voluntary system of gender targets is common in the UK, other countries, such as Norway, have introduced gender quotas. While quotas and voluntary targets can affect the level of representation of women on boards, their ability to significantly impact gender diversity in the talent pipeline below board level is limited.

Although much of the research and debate on gender balance focuses on women’s lack of representation at boardroom and executive suite level, recent research from the United States (US) by Lean In and McKinsey & Company (2015) found that women continue to be underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline.

1.2 Overview of the Guide

While changing organisational culture is an immense undertaking and takes significant time and commitment, incremental change can be achieved by adapting particular human resource processes and policies to ensure a level playing field for both women and men. In this guide, we focus on organisational processes that promote the use of more equal and transparent practices in recruitment and selection, performance management and promotions processes. The aim of the guide is to increase our understanding of the importance of systematically integrating gender awareness into organisational policies and processes and, importantly, managing the way in which processes are implemented at departmental and individual level. We draw on best practice examples from the eight organisations that took part in the GEM project. The organisations have been anonymised and referred to as Organisation A, B, C, etc., within the guide. In addition, we draw on publicised examples of best practice from other organisations.

Recruitment and Selection

Undoubtedly, significant advancements have been made at the macro level through various pieces of legislation to ensure that recruitment and selection practices operate on an equal basis. However, the existence of subtle biases and a lack of transparent practices can still have a profound impact on recruitment and selection decisions that affect female candidates. According to Koch et al (2015), interviews are frequently open to biases. Sources of bias include the interviewers’ perceptions of ‘feminine’ dress, physical attractiveness and the candidate’s suitability for a ‘masculine’ job.

Notwithstanding that biases are difficult to eradicate and acknowledging that practice can vary from the stated and intended policies pertaining to recruitment, there are steps that organisations can take to ensure that their recruitment and selection practices support the achievement of gender balance. These steps vary from actions that can be taken at the design and development stage of recruitment and selection policies to actions that can affect the way such policies are operationalised.

Performance Management

When employee performance is being assessed, a number of issues can affect a manager’s perceptions of an individual’s performance and thus can indirectly affect the manager’s evaluation of the performance. With regard to gender balance, such evaluations at an individual level can contribute to the collective underrepresentation of women in senior decision-making roles. Almost all organisations claim that their system of performance management is merit based. Indeed, managers and HR practitioners in such organisations advocate that the system is designed to highly reward the best performers and motivate improvement among poorer-performing employees. However, a body of research has emerged (Castilla, 2008 and Castilla and Benard,
2010) that highlights the manner in which meritocracy can fail to deliver on its promises. Castilla (2008) argues that although policies are often adopted with the stated intention of motivating employees and ensuring meritocracy, policies with limited transparency and accountability can actually increase bias and reduce equity in the workplace.

**Promotion and Succession Planning**

The phrase ‘glass ceiling’ refers to the barriers facing women in reaching top-level positions and became widely known after it first appeared in a copy of the Wall Street Journal in 1986. However, some three decades later, data from numerous international sources suggest that variations of the glass ceiling are still very much a feature of today’s workplace. While there has been significant progress in increasing women’s presence in director and C-suite\(^1\) roles – for example, all FTSE 100 companies now have at least one female non-executive director (Women on Boards Davies Review, 2015) – gender balance is far from having been achieved.

The phenomenon of tokenism, meaning a perfunctory gesture towards the inclusion of members of underrepresented groups, is still a feature of organisational life. Kanter (1977a) first referred to ‘token’ women in management and highlighted the personal consequences for women who find themselves in that role, including additional performance pressures, a sense of isolation within the group and the encapsulation into stereotyped roles. Kanter (1977b) was foremost in arguing that for women to really make an impact on the culture of an organisation and inform decision-making, they need to be present in greater numbers so that they can support each other and achieve change. Kramer et al’s study (2006) of women’s representation on boards revealed that when three or more women are board members, they form a ‘critical mass’, which, in turn, leads to “the presence of women becoming normalised and removes gender from being a concern”. Kramer et al (2006) argued that to “improve board governance, boards should actively seek qualified women board members and should not be satisfied with just one or two women on their boards”. Contrary to the view of some researchers that women opt out of senior roles, the Lean In and McKinsey & Company report (2015) finds that women and men want to be promoted in about equal numbers (75 percent and 78 percent respectively). However, despite a desire for promotion, women are significantly less likely than men to achieve that aim within their organisation.

\(^1\)‘C-suite’ is a term used to refer to a corporation’s most important senior executives. The ‘C’ in the term comes from the fact that top senior executives’ titles tend to start with the letter C, for chief, as in chief executive officer, chief operating officer and chief information officer.
Achieving Gender Equality in decision-Making through Recruitment & Selection
2.1 Introduction

There are steps organisations can take to ensure that their recruitment and selection practices help to achieve gender equality in decision-making. The steps can vary from actions at the policy design and development stage to actions that affect how practices are operationalised. Here, we provide an overview of several practices we recommend adopting in order to create recruitment and selection procedures that are more effective in achieving gender equality in decision-making at all levels.

3 Section A of GEM model
2.2 Best Practice 1: Job Design and Description Formulation

Before the particular requirements of any role are finalised, we recommend that organisations review the nature of the role with regard to whether or not it can be performed adequately on a non-standard basis. For example, flexible working options, such as working remotely, compressed working hours or reduced hours, should be considered for roles at all levels, including management, and should be available for both men and women.

The use of language and requirements stipulated in job descriptions has been identified as potentially discouraging women candidates from applying. Research from a Hewlett Packard report featured in Harvard Business Review (2014) tells us that men will apply for a role for which they meet only 60 percent of the requirements while women will not apply unless they have 100 percent of the stated requirements. The GEM research supported this finding and revealed that women are less likely than men to apply where they feel they lack even some of the criteria listed in the job description. To encourage more women applicants to apply and to allow for maximum flexibility in the selection phase, only those qualifications and competencies that are, in fact, absolutely necessary for a role should be listed as ‘essential’ criteria.

In addition, the choice of words used in the job description needs to be carefully considered to ensure that none of the language is stereotyping or describing people rather than behaviours. The GEM research found that phrases like ‘strong negotiator’ in a job description conjured images associated with men. Therefore, we suggest that organisations be mindful of the language used in job descriptions and try to adopt language that describes a particular set of behavioural characteristics rather than personality-based traits. In line with Catalyst research (2015), we recommend that organisations use a combination of both masculine and feminine words in job descriptions.

Organisation D – Encouraging Greater Gender Balance in the Technology Sector

As the number of women entering STEMM roles is generally lower than the number of men, many organisations in the STEMM sector can find it difficult to achieve gender balance across the enterprise. Recognising this, Organisation D has adopted a variety of practices to promote greater gender balance at all levels. One of the first steps the organisation’s Talent Acquisition team took was to review their job descriptions. Research from Catalyst (2015) reveals that the language and number of items listed on a job description can determine whether or not women are likely to apply for particular roles. The job descriptions were categorised into job families. Creating job families essentially involves grouping jobs together according to profession, skills and competencies, and level of knowledge required for organisational roles.

To encourage more women to apply for jobs, Organisation D’s hiring managers and HR business partners then set about ensuring that the language in the job descriptions was gender neutral. As shown below, terms in the first column are typically associated with masculine behaviours and thus can lead to roles being stereotyped as ‘male jobs’. Because creating gender-neutral job descriptions is considered best practice, a combination of both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ terms should be used.
Sample Job Description Language

Research has shown the following words to have a MASCULINE connotation:

- Decisive
- Determined
- Challenging
- Competitive
- Lead
- Independently
- Superior

Research has shown the following words to have a FEMININE connotation:

- Committed
- Cooperative
- Connected
- Dependable
- Interpersonal
- Loyal
- Responsible
- Supportive

In addition, given the acknowledged issues facing organisations where women are less likely than their male peers to apply for a position, the competencies, skills and job requirements were reviewed at Organisation D and a clearer differentiation was made between critical and desirable requirements for each job. Organisation D also operates a practice of encouraging hiring managers to keep the recruitment phase open until a minimum number of female applications have been received.
2.3 Best Practice 2: Good Practice in Advertising

The organisations that participated in the GEM research all operate as equal opportunities employers and aim to ensure that all positions are advertised in line with the stated recruitment policy and for a minimum period of time.

Advertising in the same places or concentrating recruitment repeatedly in the same areas can, however, limit the pool of candidates reached in terms of gender diversity. Organisations should be mindful of reliance on employee referral when searching for new hires. The GEM research found that employees in some organisations were likely to refer individuals from within their existing social, professional and educational networks. In a male-dominated area, this can result in a man being referred. We recommend that women in organisations (or men in female-dominated areas) should be strongly encouraged to put forward candidates for referral.

Finally, when it comes to advertising positions, although there is no legal obligation to do so, we suggest that all acting roles (where an individual takes on the responsibilities of another individual’s role, also referred to as ‘acting up’) and temporary positions be advertised in line with the organisation’s existing recruitment and selection policies. While organisations may sometimes fill a position on a temporary basis for business needs, this can create inherent problems when appointing an individual to the role on a full-time basis because, having completed the role for a period of time, the incumbent is likely to have a significant advantage. Therefore, to ensure fairness and transparency in appointments, we recommend that all roles be advertised in a consistent manner.
2.4 Best Practice 3: Gender Balance in the Recruitment Phase

Research from the GEM project found that many organisations struggled to find women applicants for many roles in senior management positions and in science, technological, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEMM) areas. A number of the organisations involved in GEM introduced the idea of a ‘gender quota’ in the applicant pool. To promote gender balance in the shortlisting process, Organisation D, for example, encourage hiring managers to leave the recruitment phase open until a minimum number of applications from women has been received.

Organisations should review their recruitment sources regularly and consider the use of new sites and forms of recruitment to diversify their candidate pool. Using LinkedIn’s Diversity Groups is one way organisations could widen their applicant pool (see below).

Three Tips for Diversity Recruiting Using LinkedIn

1. Build a list of keywords relevant to your diversity targets and use them in your recruiter search strings. For example, if an organisation is looking to increase the number of women in technology roles, incorporating a list of women’s niche associations or schools in the search string should identify possible suitable applicants who may not otherwise have been found.

2. Use the Similar Profiles function. Once you have identified a suitable candidate, click on Similar Profiles to generate up to 100 more profiles that are similar to that of the suitable candidate.

3. Join groups relevant to your key diversity targets and share job opportunities in the organisation among this group.

Source: https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/2012/02/tips-diversity-sourcing-linkedin
2.5 Best Practice 4: Selection Panels and Weighting Criteria

The composition of the selection panel has an acknowledged impact on the outcome of the selection process. This is particularly the case in senior appointments when the majority of the senior managers involved in the selection decision are men. The GEM research identified organisations that operate a policy of having a minimum of 30 percent gender representation on selection panels. These organisations also take care to ensure that the women on the panel represent a mix of seniority or authority rather than relying on women from the HR department or external to the hiring process.

Organisation G ensures that all shortlisting and interviewing of candidates is undertaken by a gender-balanced selection panel (30 percent minimum representation of each gender).

Another factor that came to light in the GEM research is that unconscious bias training for selection panel members can help them to be more aware of and better understand biases that can occur in the selection process (such as biased perceptions of women’s technical skills or their willingness to work long hours). The introduction of unconscious bias training for managers is an initiative widely believed to improve the fairness of selection processes by alerting hiring managers to the impact that unconscious biases can have. A related concept is ‘wilful blindness’, which is a legal term for the acts of a person who intentionally fails to be informed about matters that would make them liable. Wilful blindness effectively describes an attempt to avoid liability for a wrongful act by intentionally putting oneself in a position to be unaware of facts that create liability. Indeed, it could be argued that some organisations continue to operate in a state of wilful blindness by failing to explore their policies and practices and believing them to be gender neutral. Certainly, it is true that it is difficult to hold a manager accountable for executing policies in a particular way if that manager is completely unaware that her/his actions are disadvantaging a certain group of individuals and where there was no intention to do so.

Unconscious bias training for employees (particularly management) makes individuals aware of their biases and goes some distance towards tackling the issue of wilful blindness by increasing awareness not only of the bias but also of the impact that decisions can have when a bias is not recognised. While unconscious bias training can provide an opportunity to create awareness of and address bias, this needs to be reinforced regularly rather than being a once-off training requirement.

Organisations should invest in training for all members of selection panels to ensure they understand their role. Ashcraft (2010) highlights the importance of understanding biases in selection decisions and that panel members should be trained to avoid vague terms like ‘poor fit’ and instead provide solid examples of why they feel the candidate was given a particular score in certain areas. Finally, training for selection panel chairs is recommended to ensure that the chairpersons invite equal input from all members of the committee.

The selection process includes a number of key stages that have an impact on the effectiveness of a gender-neutral process. The GEM organisations all follow a stringent selection procedure. The selection process must be transparent and merit based. This can be done by reviewing the existing selection criteria and associated weighting (importance attached to each criterion) for all roles before they are advertised. An example of the process employed by Organisation G is provided overleaf.
Organisation G-
Shortlisting and Selection Process

Stage 1:
In advance of the shortlisting panel meeting, a weighting is established for each criterion stated in the job description. The weightings are agreed jointly between HR and the hiring manager.

Stage 2:
The criteria are communicated to the chosen selection panel members. Selection panel members should be made aware that they are obliged to apply the same criteria to all candidates and that, once initial weightings have been assigned, the criteria are not subject to change.

Stage 3:
Each individual panel member records the score they assigned to each candidate at initial shortlisting. An agreed number of candidates will be called for interview, e.g., the five individuals who received the highest scores.

Stage 4:
Previously agreed interview criteria will be used for the interview process. Changes to the weightings and criteria at interview are not permissible. Each selection board member scores the candidates individually. The selection panel is then expected to reach a consensus score for each candidate through, for example, a thorough discussion on how each candidate demonstrated the extent to which s/he meets the criteria.

Stage 5:
The criteria scores are recorded by HR on the candidate’s record. Any candidate who seeks post-interview feedback is provided with the consensus score s/he received for each criterion as well as the cut-off score for the next round of selection or appointment.
2.6 Best Practice 5: Post-interview Feedback for Unsuccessful Candidates

A number of the organisations that participated in the GEM project have a policy of providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants after the interview. This ranges from making the interview scores on each criterion available to the candidate to a post-interview conversation with the hiring manager. Although not all candidates may seek or wish to receive feedback, this information can prove invaluable to individuals when applying for future roles. Furthermore, having a policy on the provision of feedback demonstrates an organisation’s commitment to being open and transparent in the selection process. Indeed, at the level of the individual, such a policy can be useful for hiring managers as it provides guidelines around delivering appropriate, constructive feedback. This information can be particularly important for internal candidates who were unsuccessful in promotion applications because it can encourage them to reapply in the future with a greater level of confidence.
Achieving Gender Equality in Decision-making Through Performance Management Practices
3.1 Introduction

Managers and HR practitioners want to work in organisations where performance management systems are truly meritocratic and reward the best-performing employees. However, performance management policies and practices that have limited transparency and accountability can actually decrease meritocracy, increase biased decision-making and diminish equity in the workplace. The five best practices highlighted in figure X below are based on findings from the organisations that participated in the GEM project. In this section, we also highlight a number of practices from other organisations; these practices help to ensure that performance management systems are indeed meritocratic in nature while assessing fairly the work of all employees.
3.2 Best Practice 1: Competency-based Evaluations

A competency-based performance management system is a formalised method of establishing the skills and behaviours that employees need to have and exhibit in their current roles and for future growth in their organisations. Careful attention should be paid to ensuring that the goals set for performance appraisals are aligned with the competencies listed in job descriptions (see Best Practice 1 in section 2). While translating these competencies into individual performance criteria can be a complex task, it is a hugely important part of an effective performance management process.

We recommend that managers examine the competencies required to achieve each goal that has been set for each employee. Managers should consider how these competencies and goals relate to the job description for that role.

As illustrated below, Organisation C has developed a range of competencies against which employee performance is rated.

### Organisation C Competency Standards

Organisation C is a leading global financial services firm. In line with the competency-based approach mentioned in the recruitment and selection policy, Organisation C’s Leadership Standards framework was designed to reflect the core competencies and behaviours expected of individuals in leadership positions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVES CLIENT VALUE</th>
<th>Creates unique value for internal and external clients based on expertise and in-depth knowledge of the stakeholder environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DELIVERS RESULTS</td>
<td>Raises the bar and creates a clear path towards sustainable results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEADS CHANGE</td>
<td>Pioneers and accelerates productive and innovative changes that support Organisation C’s vision and global strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTS AS AN OWNER</td>
<td>Takes responsibility for addressing problems, finding solutions and making prudent decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS AS A PARTNER</td>
<td>Collaborates and partners to break down barriers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUILDS GREAT TEAMS</td>
<td>Creates a competitive advantage by emphasising talent, learning and apprenticeship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These leadership standards are written in gender-neutral language and are made known to all employees at different levels.

Furthermore, the criteria on which performance evaluations are based should be clearly communicated to all employees. Adopting a competency-based assessment process where employees are assessed against competencies listed in their job description makes communication and interpretation of the performance management system more transparent.

The ‘glass ceiling’ is not something that happens at a specific point in time in one’s career. Instead, it is the cumulative result of many instances of bias or discrimination over the course of a career that leads to

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women’s careers developing at a slower pace than men’s.\(^3\)
This is particularly important to bear in mind in relation to performance management because even small differences in performance appraisal outcomes and feedback can, over time, affect career progression.

3.3 Best Practice 2: Adopting a Coaching Approach That Centres on Development Needs

The link between performance evaluations and reward has often overshadowed the role that performance management plays in employee development. The GEM findings indicate that some organisations are addressing this by abandoning annual performance meetings in favour of multiple performance conversations held at different times of the year. To remove the emphasis on rewards, at least one of these meetings focuses solely on development needs and opportunities.

Organisation D: ‘Honest Conversation’ Approach to Performance Discussions

For many years, Organisation D operated a traditional approach to performance management: managers assigned rating scores to each employee’s performance, and the scores were then linked to pay. The organisation felt that the system did not focus sufficiently on development needs and, consequently, dismantled the practice in favour of having conversations with a narrative description of performance throughout.

As well as focusing on development needs and opportunities, performance conversations critically involve the provision of feedback. Adopting a coaching approach to performance management not only enhances the focus on development but also helps to address the issue of language and type of feedback provided.

A coaching approach to management redefines the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate. Rather than providing prescriptive direction, delegation and supervision, a coaching approach expects managers to help employees to find ways of helping themselves to enhance their own performance through problem solving.

Coleman (2010) refers to the three key elements of career success: job performance, personal image and organisational exposure. Interestingly, an individual’s performance in their day-to-day role and the results they produce account for only 10 percent of how successful they will be in their career.

To assist employees to progress in their careers, a good manager must help employees to look beyond their performance and focus on their image (what other people think of them) and their exposure (the extent to which their work is visible and they are known by individuals more senior than themselves in the organisation).

Adopting a coaching approach to performance enables managers to help employees to improve their awareness of how they are perceived by others as well as challenging them to develop their skills and abilities. In doing so, individuals are more likely to address the other two elements of career success outlined by Coleman (2010): image and exposure, which, combined, account for 90 percent of career success.
3.4 Best Practice 3: Performance Management System Calibration

According to the GEM findings, in order to foster a fair performance management process, organisations should examine how managers are using their performance management systems and take steps to ensure that the process is being used as intended. Calibration is a process for ensuring that evaluations are awarded fairly and consistently within and across different areas of the organisation. The process involves managers meeting to discuss the performance of their direct reports and team members with the aim of ensuring that the same standards are applied to all jobholders. We recommend that organisations use calibration as part of their performance management systems.

We also recommend that organisations ensure that all managers use the performance process in a consistent manner to safeguard reliability, i.e., different managers assessing the same employee would achieve the same rating. Managers should also be using the same criteria to evaluate employees who have the same role, irrespective of gender.

Organisation B System Calibration

Organisation B regularly holds meetings of senior managers to review performance ratings against the set criteria to ensure that the system is operating in both a valid and reliable manner and is being used by all managers.

System calibration should also address validity, i.e., managers should assess employee performance against the requirements and goals set for them rather than assessing an individual on trait-based or personality-based criteria. By taking this approach, organisations such as Deloitte are essentially asking managers what they would do with each team member rather than what they think of that individual (see the box below for an example of this).

We recommend that within calibration, organisations should do more than merely examine scores and rating descriptions (e.g., ‘commendable performer’). Attention should also be paid to the type of feedback given to employees. Research conducted at Stanford University featured in the Wall Street Journal (2015) revealed that in hundreds of performance reviews, women were described as “supportive”, “collaborative” and “helpful” twice as often as were men. In addition, there were twice as many references to team accomplishments than to individual outcomes for women. Furthermore, feedback for men was far more likely to be linked to specific business outcomes and to refer to their technical strengths.

Raising managers’ awareness of this practice and implementing appropriate training for managers on evaluating performance will help to eliminate these issues. One example of an action that can be taken comes from cloud-computing firm VMware Inc., which has trained managers to recognise unconscious bias (see section 2.5) in their behaviours; the system sends each manager a one-page memo reminding them about gender bias and to avoid attributing women’s contributions to external factors or luck when evaluating performance. The provision of unconscious bias training for managers supports this aim.

Deloitte’s Approach to Performance Management

At the end of every project or quarter, in place of traditional performance management forms, Deloitte ask managers to respond to four future-focused statements about each of their respective team members.
These questions are:

1. Given what I know of this person’s performance, and if it was my money, I would award this person the highest possible compensation increase and bonus [measures overall performance and unique value to the organisation on a five-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”].

2. Given what I know of this person’s performance, I would always want him or her on my team [measures ability to work well with others on the same five-point scale].

3. This person is at risk for low performance [identifies problems that might harm the customer or the team on a yes-or-no basis].

4. This person is ready for promotion today [measures potential on a yes-or-no basis].

3.5 Best Practice 4: Supporting Employees in Lateral Moves

Supporting employees in lateral moves within the organisation allows them to build visibility across the organisation. As women are underrepresented in core business function roles, they have a lower chance of reaching senior roles than their male peers. Critically, for women who come from support functions such as HR or finance, lateral moves increase business awareness and knowledge of other areas of the organisation and, crucially, can be of benefit to them when applying for promotions. Since roles located in core business functions are more closely aligned to the company’s core operations, they provide critical preparation for top roles; therefore, this disparity can impede women’s paths to senior leadership (Barsh and Yee, 2012). Changing role to another at the same level can, in fact, represent a chance to address pay gaps and secure future promotional opportunities for women. Research featured in the Harvard Business Review (2106) revealed that 89 percent of respondents said they would consider making a lateral career move with no financial incentive for multiple reasons, such as to pursue a new career path or for a professional challenge.

Procter & Gamble

A report featured in The New York Times outlined how Procter & Gamble was experiencing an executive attrition rate that was twice as high for women as for men, with women reporting that they changed companies to secure more challenging roles. The company’s subsequent efforts to bring more women into line management were found to have improved the retention rate of women and increased the number of women in senior management.
3.6 Best Practice 5: Stretch Assignments

In the previous sections, we referred to exposure and visibility within organisations. It is acknowledged that mobility across multiple sites of a large organisation, either through regular travel or secondments, provides an excellent opportunity to increase individuals’ exposure and visibility (PWC, 2010 4).

However, one of the core issues identified by women in this research was frustration with a belief that mobility is rewarded by organisations when it comes to promotional opportunities. For those individuals who were limited in terms of their ability to relocate or who needed to undertake long periods of travel due to family or care commitments, the path to promotion was thus viewed as being more difficult. Individuals also expressed the feeling that organisations viewed mobility as a proxy for greater commitment to the organisation.

We recommend providing ‘stretch assignments’ that do not require a commitment to be geographically mobile. A stretch assignment is a project or task given to an employee that is beyond their current knowledge or skill level in order to help them develop their skills further. Stretch assignments would allow a wider pool of individuals to enhance their skills and work at different levels within the organisation. Even short-term secondments at other in-country locations or stretch assignments at the same location present opportunities for individuals to increase their visibility in the organisation (PWC, 2015 5).

Sometimes women can be overlooked for mobility when managers believe they are actually being helpful to them by, for example, not considering them for special projects involving travel. This represents a form of sexism – benevolent sexism – which can have negative consequences for women’s careers.

Benevolent Sexism

Glick et al (2000) define benevolent sexism as a subjectively positive orientation of protection, idealisation and affection directed at women. Organisations should be aware that both female and male managers can unwittingly employ benevolent sexism with female employees when they overlook women for tasks that demand travel or long hours because they feel such activities may interfere with family life. Although the manager’s action stems from a motive of protecting the employee, the result is still the same – a lack of opportunity for the individual to gain exposure and visibility within the organisation.

We recommend that organisations look at stretch assignments where employees can be moved between different functions of the organisation; this can enhance knowledge and push employees beyond their comfort zone of experience. Crucially, this also aligns with a critical factor in achieving gender-balanced organisations, i.e., moving more women into core business functions rather than support-based roles such as finance and HR.

4 The 2010 PWC Talent Mobility 2020 report anticipated a 50 percent increase in mobile employees by 2020, highlighting the growing importance of mobility in realising strategic business goals and attracting and retaining the best talent.

5 The 2015 PWC Moving People with Purpose: Modern Mobility Survey report describes short term assignments as one of the biggest changes in employee mobility internationally. PWC envisages that short-term moves will become a core way in which organisations can develop emerging, high potential talent, as well as providing exposure to working in different cultures.
Achieving Gender Equality in Decision-making through Promotion & Succession Practices
4.1 Best Practices in Promotion and Succession Planning

The five best practices highlighted in the GEM model below are based on the findings from the eight organisations in which the research was conducted. Here we address what is potentially the most challenging issue for organisations and women: ensuring that candidates are promoted within their own organisations.
4.2 Best Practice 1: Top Management Support

While HR might be responsible for designing and monitoring policies that affect the gender composition of organisations, its role in achieving gender balance is aided when a member of the top management team is given responsibility for achieving gender balance – what gets measured gets done.6

Furthermore, senior management must actively demonstrate their support for making gender balance a priority for the organisation by doing more than merely integrating it into strategic goals and plans.

The actions required for gender balance to be achieved must be properly resourced. This may include investing in executive coaching for women, establishing employee resource groups or addressing reward allocation mechanisms that perpetuate a gender pay gap.

Management Initiatives to Support Gender Balance

One of the most prominent findings in the GEM research was that organisations make considerable effort to raise awareness among male executives of the need for gender balance. While some organisations had rolled out unconscious bias training to both female and male executives, others had begun to actively encourage men to take on roles as sponsors for women who had been identified as high-potential candidates.

The GEM research found that organisations D and G had introduced specific training on gender issues and attempted to raise a conscious understanding of masculine privilege through programmes such as the Catalyst-designed MARC (Men Advocating Real Change) initiative. The primary purpose of the MARC programme is to support and inspire men to drive meaningful change with regard to gender roles within their own organisations. While women are welcome to join the programme, according to Catalyst, the primary target is male leaders.

One of the simplest ways in which top management can show their support for gender balance is by setting gender targets at different levels of the organisation or on key decision-making committees. A number of the organisations that participated in the GEM research have done just that and have made significant progress towards balancing the number of women and men employees at each level of the organisation. For example, Organisation C reviewed its gender balance ratio at each level of the company and set targets for increasing women’s representation above middle management level.

See below for details on gender targets at Lloyds Bank, which the financial institution has shared publicly.

Lloyds Bank

In 2014, Lloyds Bank made a public commitment to increase the proportion of senior management roles held by women to 40 percent by 2020. The company has subsequently reached a figure of 29 percent representation of women in senior management roles and was voted among The Times Top 50 best places to work for women in 2015.

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4.4 Best Practice 2: Creating Organisation-wide Talent Databases

Some of the organisations that took part in the GEM project operate talent databases in which employees are expected to update their profiles regularly with their latest achievements, training completed, etc. Employees are encouraged to indicate on their profile their aspirations for future roles in the organisation and the extent to which they are willing to undertake travel as part of their job.

Organisations can encourage employees to prepare an ‘elevator pitch’ to help them progress their careers within the organisation – see below.

The Elevator Pitch

A number of GEM project organisations encourage employees to develop a one-page slide outlining their key skills and their aspirations for future career advancement within the organisation.

Where an employee is interested in future opportunities in a given area, they may choose to share their elevator pitch with key individuals in that area of the organisation who could be influential in future recruitment decisions.

The talent database and elevator pitch can prove to be useful for managers by making them aware of individuals who are interested in new roles or opportunities. Some managers may previously have had misconceptions about individuals, such as working mothers not being interested in particular opportunities. The explicit communication of such information and its availability on an accessible forum should lessen the reliance on social networks within organisations when it comes to being aware of who might really be interested in job opportunities.
4.5 Best Practice 3: Targeted Management Development Programmes

Organisations commonly invest in leadership/management development programmes for employees who have reached particular levels in the organisation. Employers who are truly committed to increasing their numbers of women leaders need to examine the outcomes of their women’s leadership development programmes to determine if the programmes have done more than simply prepare women for leadership roles: they need to examine if women have actually secured such positions (taken as an outcome measure). Ultimately, this is the true test of whether or not the programme is returning an investment from a human resource development perspective.

Cates (2014) raises an interesting point about women-only development programmes with regard to networking opportunities: she argues that such programmes may “leave out many of the typical power players in organisations—men”. Several of the GEM project organisations operated women-only leadership development programmes, and some ran leadership development programmes for both women and men. While the women interviewed saw merit in women-only leadership programmes, they viewed the general programme as being more clearly linked with career success. We recommend that women are given a choice regarding the leadership development programmes in which they wish to participate.
4.6 Best Practice 4: Mentoring and Sponsorship

Several of the GEM project organisations operate formal mentoring programmes. In addition, many of the women employees interviewed indicated that they had informally developed mentoring relationships. It is noteworthy, however, that a 2008 survey by Catalyst revealed that while more women than men actually report having mentors, the mentors women acquire tend to “have less organisational clout” (Ibarra et al, 2010). Therefore, while women do benefit from mentors, their male counterparts tend to benefit more given the stronger organisational position of their mentors.

Aside from guiding development and helping individuals enhance their performance, a mentor with high levels of influence within the organisation is well placed to speak in favour of their mentee when it comes to critical career opportunities such as promotions. In essence, the mentor is acting as what Hewlett (2013) refers to as a “sponsor”.

Hewlett argues that for women to progress their career at a faster pace, they should look beyond the traditional mentoring role and instead focus on identifying a key individual at a senior level who is willing to act as an advocate for them and highlight their potential to others.

A 2014 EY report, The corporate sponsor as hero: Advancing women into leadership roles, defines sponsorship as a long-term, hands-on commitment to “encouraging, fighting for and creating advancement opportunities for high-potential individuals”.

We recommend that organisations currently operating mentoring programmes review the effectiveness of the programmes in light of the numbers of women achieving promotion.

Where an organisation feels that mentoring efforts are not sufficient in helping high-potential women secure promotion, they might consider introducing the idea of sponsorship.

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4.7 Best Practice 5: Employee Supports

Several of the organisations that took part in the GEM research operate a range of employee resource groups (ERGs).

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Organisations B, C and D operate a range of employee resource groups (ERGs) for their staff. An ERG brings together employees who share the same characteristics (e.g., gender), experiences (e.g., remote workers) or interests (e.g., environmental).

The idea behind ERGs is to provide support within the workplace for these specific groups while recognising difference and promoting inclusion.

An employee may choose to be a member of more than one ERG. Such membership provides opportunities for networking with individuals with whom the employee might not otherwise be in contact during the course of their work. This benefits the organisation as well as broadening communication links.

Finally, for individuals who take on the responsibility of running ERG events, such as specialist seminars, their own visibility to senior leaders in the organisation is enhanced, which provides them with opportunities to display talents beyond that of their immediate job role.

Other forms of employee support that were evident in the GEM research related to flexibility. Part-time working, remote working and flexible working hours featured prominently and were options that were embraced by women and men participants alike. While part-time work and flexible working hours tended to be a feature of women’s employment, remote working was also taken up by many men. Some remote workers felt that their working arrangements limited their opportunity for advancement since they were physically less visible in the organisation, even though their outputs may have been highly visible. Interestingly, this was also a concern shared by part-time employees and those on flexible working hours. Many felt that their working schedules limited their progression opportunities because such arrangements were not viewed as compatible with more senior-level roles.

Core Hours Policy

Organisation H introduced a policy of ‘core hours’, which means that critical meetings were only to be scheduled between the hours of 10am and 3pm.

The aim of the policy is to reduce the likelihood of employees with flexible working arrangements missing a meeting or having to put alternative arrangements in place to make the meeting.

To overcome these barriers, organisations should endeavour to support flexible working arrangements in senior as well as middle and junior roles. Flexible working, including part-time work, is congruent with ‘feminine’ ways of working; however, these working arrangements are frequently viewed as incompatible with more senior roles. Hence organisations need to challenge the ‘masculine’ expectations that continue to be associated with the culture of senior roles.

HR practitioners have long lamented the fact that when flexible working policies are introduced, take-up is low because men (and women) perceive that it will negatively affect their career advancement. Abele and Spurk (2011) showed that parenthood had a negative influence on women’s
working hours and therefore on career progression. However, Abele and Spurk also found men’s career success to be unrelated to whether or not they had children. Organisations need to do more to encourage men to take up flexible working practices. This includes encouraging male role models at senior levels to engage more with flexible working themselves.

Organisational leaders can take action in two ways. Firstly, we suggest that some managers embrace an element of flexible working themselves, thereby combating the belief that senior roles require standardised contractual arrangements. Secondly, organisations can ensure that managers’ assessments of employees’ outputs or their potential is not diminished by the employees’ lack of time spent in the physical environment. Thus, we encourage organisations to challenge cultures of visibility and presenteeism and, instead, assess outputs and efficiency more objectively.

Organisations E and G have practices that support both women and men with care responsibilities.

Organisation E takes steps to run workplace programmes that support new fathers. This puts a focus on the concept of shared domestic duties and recognises that working fathers also face challenges.

Organisation G has a policy that individuals returning to work from all forms of care leave be given a six-month period during which their job is reconfigured to allow them to focus on elements of their role that are critical to career progression.

Shared Paternity Leave

Organisation A moved beyond statutory minimum entitlement for women and men employees and introduced a shared paternity programme to encourage men to take longer portions of leave while their partners returned to work.

The introduction of supports that facilitate both women and men in returning to work after a period of leave is vitally important. Some of the GEM project organisations operate a maternity leave support programme that allows women employees to choose how much contact they wish to maintain with the organisation while on maternity leave.

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5

Transformative Action
to achieve

Gender Equality
in decision-Making
5.1 Introduction

While the previous sections of this best practice guide focus on introducing practices or tweaking policies, this concluding section focuses on actions that can potentially drive structural transformation in organisations.
5.2 Disaggregated Data Analysis and Disclosure

Firstly, we recommend greater analysis of HR data. For example, by disaggregating data on recruitment, performance, turnover and rewards with regard to gender, organisations can develop a clearer picture of gender ratios and gender pay gaps at all levels. Furthermore, by analysing existing or projected data, organisations can assess the impact of organisational changes, policies and practices on both men and women. We recommend that organisations take steps to make their data more widely available both within the organisation and publicly as part of diversity initiatives.
5.3 Membership of Meaningful Initiatives

While many organisations sign up to be members of initiatives that promote gender equality, not all such initiatives require organisations to make solid commitments to change. However, initiatives such as the Athena SWAN accreditation programme, which was developed by the UK’s Equality Challenge Unit, require accredited organisations in the higher education and research sector to conduct gender balance audits and to make improvements before reaccreditation is sought. In doing so, the initiative creates an impetus for change. We recommend that organisations seek to become members of diversity initiatives that assist them in measuring their progress towards achieving gender equality in decision-making.
5.4 Policy Interaction

Finally, the GEM research revealed that while many practices in organisations are designed to address the overrepresentation of men in senior decision-making roles, the outcomes of these practices can be negatively affected by wider organisational plans. Therefore, we recommend that organisations review the extent to which their policies are compatible with each other. For example, an organisation might actively seek to increase the number of women in the technical areas of its business while at the same time encouraging an employee-referrals programme to curtail recruitment costs. Increasing organisational diversity through reliance on the social and personal networks of a largely homogenous group of employees is unlikely to yield strong success.

Likewise, an organisation wishing to increase the representation of women at its most senior levels will find it difficult to do so if decision-makers are bound to an internal promotions policy whereby women are not proportionally represented in middle management roles. We recommend that senior management, particularly those with responsibility for human resource management, review the impact that wider policies might have on the success of initiatives that promote gender equality in decision-making.
References


EY (2014) The corporate sponsor as hero: Advancing women into leadership roles.


