**Harvard Business Review**

# How to Close the Gender Gap

by Colleen Ammerman and Boris Groysberg

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**Summary.**   Most companies say they're committed to advancing women into leadership roles. What they may fail to recognize, though, is that systemic barriers are holding women back. As a result, women remain disadvantaged at every stage of their employment and... **more**

**Women's career opportunities may seem** limitless today. Women make up about half of all college-educated workers in the United States, and they hold jobs in virtually every industry, working in more than 300 occupations tracked by the federal government. Yet women

remain underrepresented in positions of power, often dramatically so: Just 8% of Fortune 500 companies are led by women, and less than 1% by women of color.
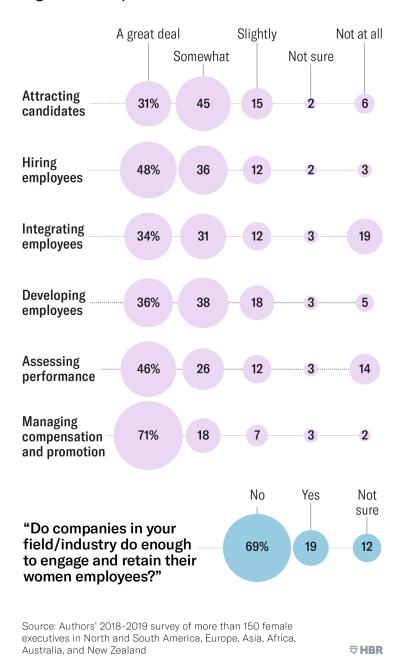
Fundamentally, this gender imbalance reflects a systemic talent-management problem. In the words of a (male) C-level executive at a major investment bank, "The more senior the group, the fewer women there are. And yet if you look at some of the younger groups—people that are right out of college or a little further along in their careers—there's a more balanced representation. We're losing very high quality talent, and there's no reason we should have this much asymmetry as we progress."

Women who have broken through the barriers see them all too clearly. We recently surveyed more than 150 female executives in a wide range of businesses around the globe and found strong agreement that gender bias and structural disadvantages are still impeding women's success and warping people management at all stages, from recruitment through employee retention. These executives saw an especially uneven playing field when it comes to compensation and promotion, with nine out of 10 agreeing that women are at least somewhat disadvantaged in those matters. Roughly the same number agreed that companies need to audit management processes to identify gender differences in career outcomes, and more than two-thirds said that firms in their industry aren't doing enough to engage and retain women.

# Perceptions of Barriers for Working Women

A global, multi-industry survey of female executives found broad agreement that women face bias and discriminatory practices in key areas of talent management.

**"How much are women disadvantaged in organizational processes?"**

| | A great deal | Somewhat | Slightly | Not sure | Not at all |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attracting candidates | 31% | 45 | 15 | 2 | 6 |
| Hiring employees | 48% | 36 | 12 | 2 | 3 |
| Integrating employees | 34% | 31 | 12 | 3 | 19 |
| Developing employees | 36% | 38 | 18 | 3 | 5 |
| Assessing performance | 46% | 26 | 12 | 3 | 14 |
| Managing compensation and promotion | 71% | 18 | 7 | 3 | 2 |

| | No | Yes | Not sure |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Do companies in your field/industry do enough to engage and retain their women employees?" | 69% | 19 | 12 |

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Talent acquisition, engagement, and retention are critical for any organization, and companies around the world say they're committed to advancing women into leadership roles. But many firms simply

aren't focused enough on their female talent. In a recent Mercer survey of more than 1,000 companies in 54 countries, for example, 81% said it was important to have a plan for advancing gender equality—but only 42% actually did.

To move beyond this impasse, companies need to identify the patterns that prevent them from fully leveraging women's talents and contributions, and they must then use that knowledge to make systematic changes. They need to pay particular attention to addressing inequities in seven main areas of talent management: attracting candidates, hiring employees, integrating them into the organization, developing them, assessing performance, managing compensation and promotion, and retaining good performers.

This article describes common barriers holding women back—and an action plan for shattering them. The recommendations we provide are based not just on our own research and insights but on an extensive body of work by other scholars from varied disciplines. For a complete bibliography of the sources we drew on, visit hbs.me/gender-gap.

## Attracting Candidates

Before you even have an applicant pool, your organization may have inadvertently weeded out qualified women. Consider how managers frequently identify candidates—by relying on personal networks for recommendations. This approach taps trustworthy sources but doesn't usually lead to much variety in the pool, because people tend to be drawn to those who are like them (a principle social scientists call *homophily*). Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, found that he needed a different kind of outreach in order to diversify the leadership ranks of the NIH's 27 centers and institutes. When reflecting later on his efforts, he commented, "Of the last six [center directors] I recruited, five were women. I don't think it would have turned out that way if we had done the search in the usual crank-turning way of asking, 'Who do we know that's

good?' It took some additional steps to make sure we weren't missing people who weren't on those short lists, which were mostly populated with men."

Job descriptions also often discourage qualified women from applying. Research has shown, for example, that women are less likely to apply for a job if the ideal candidate is described with traditionally masculine characteristics. A study of Canada's top two employment websites found that for occupations where men predominate, job announcements included stereotypically masculine terms (such as *competitive* and *forceful*), and for those where women predominate, the announcements used stereotypically feminine terms (such as *supportive* and *understanding*). The gendered language deterred women from applying to "men's" jobs, even when they believed they had the requisite skills.
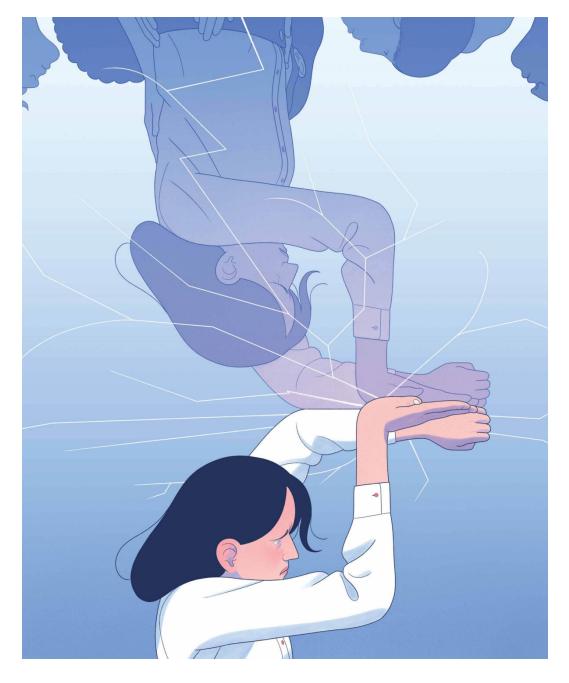
Other studies have shown that unclear job descriptions also discourage qualified women from applying, whereas clear ones encourage them—without discouraging men. Additionally, when postings are over the top in describing the perfect candidate, women are less likely to put themselves forward. An easy fix is to strip postings of superlatives—instead of *excellent coding skills,* for example, go with *coding skills.* And if qualifications are only "nice to have" and not core to the role, strip them out too.

## Hiring Employees

Once you start considering applicants, gender bias can creep into the selection process in numerous ways, beginning with your review of résumés. Studies have shown, for example, that applicants whose résumés suggest that they are from historically disadvantaged groups are less likely to be called for interviews. Acknowledging such patterns is a critical first step in helping interviewers assess candidates impartially.

Exactly why might the résumés of equally or better-qualified women be set aside in favor of men's? This kind of discrimination, which is often not deliberate, can have different drivers. For one thing,

managers may not use the same standards to evaluate male and female candidates. For example, when asked to compare two applicants for the position of police chief—a role traditionally dominated by men—study participants gravitated toward the male candidate and then actually *redefined* the job criteria to benefit him. Managers may also hold women to higher standards: In one study, women economists received less credit for coauthored papers than did their male peers, resulting in lower promotion rates.

Additionally, when managers believe that women as a whole are less skilled than men in certain areas, they tend to bypass female applicants, no matter how well qualified their résumés suggest they are. Managers may also be biased against women who identify themselves as parents or of child-bearing age; mothers are less likely to receive a callback from potential employers, even when their résumés are identical to those of male applicants or childless women.

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One way to help with these problems is to ensure gender diversity among the people reviewing résumés and conducting interviews. One woman of color we spoke to explained that her identity spurs her to bring a heightened awareness to evaluating candidates. "When I'm looking at a selection where we get a list of names for jobs," she told us, "I look at it very differently than someone else does." Interviewer diversity also sends a message to prospective employees, as one health care executive noted when describing his global company's efforts to boost gender equity. "Women were attracted," he said, "because they saw more women interviewing them; you build a reputation of being a good and fair employer."

It's also important to create a formal process that focuses reviewers' attention specifically on job criteria. The less clarity interviewers have about how to assess candidates, the more likely they are to view potential employees through the lens of gender (and other) stereotypes.

Removing information about candidate gender through blind auditions and anonymized résumés has been shown to increase the proportion of women who advance in an application process. Of course, as candidates proceed to meet with hiring managers, at a certain point it becomes impossible for evaluators to remove gender from the equation. Nonetheless, they can minimize its impact by relying on formal procedures. After the head of a large IT organization implemented an interview rubric that equally weighted technical skills, leadership skills, and alignment with the organization's values, the organization hired more women.

## Integrating Newcomers

You've progressed through finding, vetting, and hiring a candidate, so you now have a brand-new employee. But is she going to succeed?

If she's positioned as an outlier or a token, probably not. Women who are poorly integrated into the workplace may fail to build and benefit from relationships with their colleagues. As one of our interview subjects pointed out, "When boards or senior leadership bring high-performing women of color into companies, they often don't give them the right level of subtlety and counsel in terms of integrating and onboarding. I think it's a real high-wire act."

The investment banking industry provides a good example. Research has revealed that star women stock analysts face barriers in forming the kinds of relationships that are critical for success, because their male colleagues are simply not that willing to spend time with them. It's a vicious cycle: In situations like this, women's outlier status is then taken as evidence that they are not cut out for the team or the company.

Deals and decisions are frequently primed, if not made, outside the office, often in environments traditionally considered to be masculine, such as sports arenas. Interactions with colleagues in these environments combine work with leisure, fostering deeper feelings of connection that can lead to greater trust, cooperation, and mutual support in the professional realm. Women board members and executives have told us about being instructed to take up golf, lest they find themselves left out of the real power structure. Recently there have also been reports of a #MeToo backlash, with men withdrawing from interactions with female colleagues out of anxiety or anger at the movement's impact on the workplace.

## Before you even have an applicant pool, your organization may have inadvertently weeded out qualified women.

There's good news, though: Research shows that when companies implement collaborative work approaches—creating cross-training programs, for instance, or assembling self-directed teams with members based in different functions—the percentage of women in management rises. (The effect is stronger, though, for white women than for women of color.) Meanwhile, research on cross-race relationships has found that white executives who mentor Black employees can play a crucial role in countering biased views about their protégés—a critical need for Black women, who contend with multiple barriers. Creating the conditions, and the expectation, for employees to build positive working relationships can help ensure that women are truly part of the team.

### Developing Employees

Career growth requires taking on stretch assignments, but those are often most accessible to white men. In academia, women are less likely than men to be invited to give talks—important résumé boosters. In a study conducted at a pharmaceutical company,

researchers found that senior managers funneled challenging projects to men more than women, even when controlling for workers' age, education, job tenure, performance, and perceived ambition. Another study across multiple industries likewise found that challenging assignments went disproportionately to men, even though women expressed equal desire for them. This discrepancy was driven by managers who believed that women needed to be protected from difficult experiences.

When women and men don't have equal opportunities to shine and grow, work itself becomes gendered, with lower-status projects and roles seen as the province of female employees. Even within jobs, "task segregation" occurs, with women expected to handle less-rewarding work. Women are also more likely to be asked to volunteer for duties that do not advance their standing or development—"office housework" that adds little to their résumés. Moreover, when they decline to perform such tasks, they are viewed negatively.

The women who move up into senior management tend to be those who have had mentors and sponsors earlier in their careers. They had allies in leadership positions who played a defining role, steering key assignments to them, including them in high-level meetings, and keeping their names in the mix for promotions. "The most important decisions made about your career usually happen in a room that you're not in," noted one executive we spoke to. Even women identified as high-potential by their companies are, on average, less likely than their male peers to receive such sponsorship, and women of color are at the greatest disadvantage. It's imperative for managers to actively support the careers of their female employees, and for men to ensure that they aren't mentoring only people who look like them.

## Assessing Performance

Regular performance assessments shape the paths of most professionals. Although this process typically involves some level of formality (evaluation rubrics, calibration meetings, review periods), managers ultimately use their judgment to determine how

assessment tools are applied. As a result, what they believe about how women should act—or do act—exerts enormous influence on the outcome. In addition, assessment processes are informed by shared assumptions about what success looks like. Such assumptions are not necessarily grounded in what serves the company's overall health but may instead be based on standards that reward exaggerated displays of masculinity, such as dominance, aggression, and hypercompetitiveness. When such displays are endorsed, top performance becomes conflated with competition for power and status—behavior that is often counterproductive in team-based and collaborative work.

More broadly, women suffer the infamous "double bind." Archetypal leadership characteristics such as authoritativeness, decisiveness, and directness are typically coded as masculine, which means that women who demonstrate them appear to be violating gender expectations and are often characterized as difficult to work with or temperamental. But when they act in accordance with traditional gender norms, exhibiting warmth and a communal orientation, they're often seen as less capable and effective. Many of the executives we surveyed said that colleagues' perceptions can make or break women's careers. As one put it, "I did not understand how much likability was going to be this big, unquantified thing that matters so much more than performance in some cases.... For women it kills you if you're not likable."

Additionally, women's performance on tasks is often held to a more stringent standard than men's, with women having to accomplish more to earn the same rating. A study conducted at a law firm documented this phenomenon: Although men and women lawyers received equally positive comments in their performance evaluations, the men received higher numerical scores. Double standards are common in critiques of employees' work styles, too—if a woman takes time to ponder a problem, she may be seen as having "analysis paralysis," whereas a male peer who behaves the same way may be deemed thoughtful and thorough. Even if bias isn't present when managers evaluate their direct reports, prior discrimination may have

already artificially depressed women's performance relative to their ability. A study of stockbrokers across two large firms, for example, revealed that women's lower sales were the result of their systematically receiving lower-quality accounts.

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Companies can "de-bias" the performance evaluation process by training attention on objectively measurable qualities. Recent research has found that women tend to promote their accomplishments to a lesser extent than men who perform at the same level, which means that relying on employees' self-assessments to inform performance ratings will favor men. Another problem: Researchers looking at technology and professional services firms found that the performance feedback given to women, compared with that given to men, was less tied to specific business outcomes, regardless of whether the feedback was praise or constructive criticism. That lack of specificity meant that women had less clarity about the factors contributing to strong performance and less insight into what they needed to do to advance. The feedback women receive may not even be as truthful: One study found that evaluators were less candid with women about how well they were doing their jobs.

## Managing Compensation and Promotion

Gender-based compensation disparities often start before an employee is actually hired. When the terms and parameters of a salary negotiation are vague, women consistently end up with lower starting pay than men, even when controlling for other relevant factors. By contrast, when women learn that an offer is negotiable, they negotiate as often as men do.

Companies can level the playing field by providing clear information. An online recruiting platform for engineers completely eliminated the gender salary gap for new hires simply by listing the median salary for every position. Prior to this change, women asked for lower annual salaries than men did—more than $4,000 lower, on average. When candidates were presented with the median data, the asks equalized.

Promotion practices are another area of concern. Many companies encourage or require employees to nominate themselves for internal openings, but gendered social norms can disadvantage women in these situations. That's because women, unlike men, often generate a backlash if they appear ambitious, so they may be reluctant to put themselves forward. More importantly for managers, self-nomination processes assume that the most vocal employees are the best candidates—an assumption that can prevent managers from accurately gauging those employees' qualifications or considering the potential of others. One leader we interviewed pointed out that when managers default to favoring people who toot their own horns, all they're really doing is learning what those employees think of themselves. What managers should do instead, she told us, is gather "data and objective facts about whether or not [a] person is performing well in their job."

## Retaining Good Performers

"We don't have trouble attracting women," the head of the women's initiative at a large professional services firm said some years ago. "What is hard is retaining them."

So what drives turnover among women? When women aren't treated fairly in the processes we've described, they're not likely to stick around. Their chief concern is lack of advancement or the perception that they won't be able to keep growing at their current employer. One study found that women in both public- and private-sector jobs were significantly less satisfied with their promotion opportunities than men were, which prompted them to leave at a higher rate.

Studies of "up-or-out" professions such as consulting and law, however, have shown that junior women are less likely to leave if other women hold senior positions; their presence in the upper ranks demonstrates that career progression is possible.

## Colleagues' perceptions can make or break women's careers. As one executive put it, "For women it kills you if you're not likable."

When more women are in positions of power, sexual harassment—another drain on the retention of women—also declines. Organizational cultures in which harassment flourishes tend to be ones that excuse or ignore bad behavior from highfliers and star performers, sending the message that women's well-being is less important than keeping rainmakers happy. That's a message received not only by those actually victimized but also by bystanders who read the writing on the wall when it comes to their own value.

Many women also leave their jobs after realizing that they're paying the "motherhood penalty"—they get fewer opportunities and lower wages than childless women or men (even those who are fathers) because they are presumed to be less committed to work. One woman we spoke to recounted how this penalty had hurt her career. "The moment I said I was pregnant," she told us, "my team was restructured, and two of the three people that I had reporting to me were put at my same level. And I was taken from a team of 30 people to a team of six people. It was a demotion."

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## Improving Gender Equity in Your Organization

To foster the success of your female employees and your company as a whole, you must recognize problems in your management activities and then take steps to fix them.

| TALENT MANAGEMENT PROCESS | PROBLEM | QUESTION TO ASK | WHAT TO DO |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Attracting candidates** | You lack women candidates relative to your expectations or industry norms. | Are aspects of your recruitment turning away qualified women? | • Seek candidates outside managers' individual networks, which may be homogeneous.<br>• Assess the language used to describe jobs and your company. |
| **Hiring employees** | Women candidates do not make it to the offer stage at the same rate that men do. | Are aspects of your hiring process eliminating women whose qualifications and potential meet or exceed those of male candidates? | • Educate managers about gender bias and how it might influence hiring decisions.<br>• Anonymize résumés.<br>• Diversify interview panels.<br>• Select finalists and evaluate them against defined criteria, rather than hiring on a rolling basis. |
| **Integrating employees** | Women seem to be marginalized by their teams and departments. | Are new hires forming the relationships that enable them to contribute optimally and thrive professionally? | • Create opportunities for employees to work toward shared goals with people who are different from them.<br>• Discourage exclusionary social activities, and make sure women are not treated as outliers or extraneous team members. |
| **Developing employees** | Women are not building their skills and experience as fast as male peers are. | Do employees have access to training, coaching, stretch assignments, and other components of development, irrespective of gender? | • Assess how developmental opportunities are awarded, and implement objective criteria for allocating them.<br>• Increase women's access to mentors and sponsors. |
| **Assessing performance** | Women's performance ratings are lower than those of male peers or lower than expected given hiring assumptions. | Does gender bias affect your evaluation processes and decisions? | • Educate managers about gender bias and how it might influence the feedback and performance ratings they give employees.<br>• Assess the criteria used to rate performance, and eliminate ambiguous, vague, and malleable standards. |
| **Managing compensation and promotion** | Women receive lower compensation than male peers or are promoted at lower rates. | Does gender bias influence your processes for determining compensation and making promotion decisions? | • Establish clear, transparent parameters for salary offers and increases.<br>• Regularly review the outcomes of promotion and compensation processes by gender. |
| **Retaining good performers** | Women are leaving your company at higher rates than men or sooner than expected. | Do women believe they can advance at your company, and are they rewarded for strong performance? | • Combat the stigma attached to flexible work arrangements by focusing on measurable aspects of performance.<br>• Don't turn a blind eye to harassers.<br>• Regularly track attrition and retention by gender. |

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The stigma surrounding flexibility and other family accommodation policies can also derail women's careers even if they manage to hang on to their jobs. In organizational cultures where extreme dedication to work is prized and superstars are those who respond to email at all hours and overdeliver to clients, taking advantage of policies that promote work/life balance carries a professional cost. Women working flexible schedules tend to be seen as less committed and less motivated than those working standard hours, even when their actual performance is identical. The widespread adoption of remote work in the Covid-19 era could help to mitigate the stigma attached to telecommuting and flextime, but only if companies are proactive

about changing their cultures. Otherwise, we may wind up with a two-tiered system in which workers who stay remote in the post-pandemic world have second-class status.

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Narrowing the gender gap should be a deliberate, ongoing process. Measurement of outcomes such as turnover, hiring rates, compensation, and promotions is essential, and all managers must engage in continual learning and reflection. Change is effected by people, not policy. Implementing the right tools and frameworks is critical, but without managers who are invested in monitoring the results and being accountable for them, the best practices will fall short of their potential for fostering equality.

Fortunately, you don't have to be a CEO to make a difference. If you take appropriate measures to identify and address bias within your sphere of influence, you can be a change agent for your team, however big or small. All of us—men and women, C-suite leaders and frontline supervisors—have a stake in fostering equality in the workplace. As a manager, you can enable women to deliver the results they are truly capable of, which will facilitate not only their success but yours as well. For too long companies have relied on women to break through the glass ceiling one by one, leaving the ranks of leadership still gender-skewed. With a systematic approach, you can finally shatter the barriers that keep women, and your company, from thriving.

*Editor's note: This article is adapted from* Glass Half-Broken: Shattering the Barriers That Still Hold Women Back at Work*, by Colleen Ammerman and Boris Groysberg (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021).*

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