

Fixing the “Broken Rung” in the Ladder to Success

Women have made great strides in attaining C-suite status — as chief executive officers, chief financial officers, and chief operating officers — but, according to a recent study, they’re still underrepresented at a vital stage — the entry management level.

By Sandra Guy, SWE Contributor

There is a “broken rung” in the ladder to success, and fixing it is key to women’s achieving parity in the workplace, according to the McKinsey & Company “Women in the Workplace 2019” report (<https://womenintheworkplace.com/>).

“If [companies] were better able to hire and promote to first-level manager, we could add 1 million more women to corporate management in the next five years,” said Jess Huang, a McKinsey partner and one of the report’s authors. “For every 100 men promoted to first-level manager, only 72 women enjoy that same success,” she said. “So men end up holding 62% of managerial positions versus women at 38%. This is a big issue that we need to fix to get to parity.”

This early inequality has a long-term impact on the talent pipeline. Because men significantly outnumber women at the management level, there are significantly fewer women to hire or promote to senior managers. The number of women decreases at every subsequent level until the C-suite, the report showed. Even as hiring and promotion rates improve for women at senior levels, women as a whole can never catch up. There are simply too few women to advance.

The situation shows glaring differences by race, as well as by gender. Only 12% of the employees at the manager level were women of color, and 17% were men of color, according to data submitted by the companies that responded to the survey.

SCOPE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2019 Women in the Workplace report comprised workplace-experience surveys of more than 68,500 employees, as well as HR practices surveys of 323 companies that together employ more than 13 million people. For additional insights, interviewees included women and men of different races and ethnicities, LGBTQ women and men, and women with disabilities at all organizational levels.

The report uncovered another disconnect outside of a numerical one: Insiders’ interpretations — or misinterpretations — of a company’s priorities may serve as a barrier to women’s promotions. The report revealed that human resources department leaders are more likely to say achieving goals, strong leadership, and being good at managing people are the highest priorities. Employees, however, said they believed that their organizations most value navigating internal politics and being well-liked.

As a result, employees who are up for manager positions may be evaluated based on both official and unofficial requirements. To eliminate this disconnect, leaders should clearly communicate what really matters in their organizations — meeting goals and being effective leaders, the report said.

The 2019 findings build on data from the past four years of similar studies, as well as research that McKinsey & Company started in 2012. The five years of research have resulted in best practices for supporting and promoting women in the workplace.

The policies that work well require a company to:

- Ensure that women obtain the tools they need to become managers, such as leadership training, sponsorship, and high-profile assignments.
- Set and publicize a bold goal to increase the number of women at the management level. Diversity targets for hiring and promotions ensure



that the processes work to shape employee representation.

- Require diverse slates of candidates for hiring and promotions at the management level.
- Establish clear and consistent evaluation criteria before review processes begin.
- Require unconscious bias training for employees who are involved in entry-level hiring and performance reviews.

Given that hiring and promotions are powerful levers in driving pipeline diversity and employee satisfaction, there’s a strong business case for adopting these best practices, the latest McKinsey report concluded. At the heart of such initiatives’ success is not numerical change, but behavioral and attitudinal change, especially by bosses who can help their employees climb the career ladder, the report said.

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

Fewer than half of the women and men surveyed said they believe the best opportunities go to the most deserving employees, and fewer than a quarter said that only the most-qualified candidates are promoted to manager. On both fronts, women are less optimistic than men.

About a third of the employees said managers advocate new opportunities for them a great deal, and fewer than a quarter said managers regularly help them manage their careers.

Fewer than half of employees at the management level or higher serve as sponsors, and only one in three employees said they had a sponsor.

“Given that fairness and opportunity are so critical to employee outcomes, companies should be encouraging managers — who play a key, everyday role in shaping employees’ day-to-day experiences — to challenge bias,” Huang, one of the report authors, said. “Empowering people at the manager

Case Studies

The report outlines specific steps and case studies of companies succeeding at supporting and promoting women, particularly at the upper rungs of management. One example is JP Morgan Chase, which launched what it calls the 30-5-1 campaign to encourage employees to support female colleagues. The program encourages employees to set aside 30 minutes a week to have coffee with a valued female colleague; five minutes a week to recognize a female colleague’s success; and one minute a week to share that success with others at the company.

Yet another key to strengthening women’s roles is to combine specific programs with an inclusive work environment, said Cindy R. Pace, Ed.D., vice president and global chief diversity and inclusion officer at MetLife. “It’s not ‘do one thing and everything will fall into place,’” said Dr. Pace, who started at MetLife in 2013 to lead the company’s global women’s initiative. The initiative remains core to the insurer’s business strategy.

“We are putting diversity and inclusion at the center — as core to our values, to succeed together,” Dr. Pace said. She has overseen the women’s initiative’s expansion. It includes three programs:

International Women’s Day Forum, an annual web-cast that creates an understanding of what it means to innovate for change. It also delves into what people can do to continue creating innovative solutions that foster collaboration, build inclusion, and engage customers throughout the world.

The forum also celebrates the contributions of women globally and lets employees around the world connect with influential thought leaders. MetLife announced at the 2019 event that it is the first insurer to join the UN Women Global Innovation Coalition for Change. The coalition is a partnership between UN Women and key representatives from the private sector, academia, and not-for-profit institutions focused on developing the innovation market to work better for women and to accelerate the achievement of gender equality and women’s empowerment.

level, providing them with the right resources to address talent and bias, is critical.”

Finally, employees said they appreciated their employers’ efforts to offer time off for family reasons, flexible work hours, and the ability to work remotely. But they said companies can do more: Work/life flexibility was the number one issue that employees raised in the 2019 report, followed by the need for more mentorship and sponsorship.

Yet more than one in four employees who took leave said it hurt their careers or finances — and this was particularly true for women. Twenty percent of women who’ve taken a leave said it negatively impacted their careers, compared with 10% of

men. Women were also twice as likely to say it had a negative effect on their financial well-being.

About 40% of companies fail to offer extended parental leave. Most notably, the average length of paid maternity leave has remained at 10 weeks

since 2016, compared with an increase in paternity leave to seven weeks from four weeks over that same period, and to the 20 weeks that women, on average, receive in Europe.

McKinsey recommended that, because parental leave is critically important to many employees, companies would be well served to provide it more generously. ✨

“IF [COMPANIES] WERE BETTER ABLE TO HIRE AND PROMOTE TO FIRST-LEVEL MANAGER, WE COULD ADD 1 MILLION MORE WOMEN TO CORPORATE MANAGEMENT IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS.”

– Jess Huang, partner, McKinsey & Company

Developing Women’s Career Experience, a nomination-based, 14-month program to help prepare emerging women leaders for more complex leadership roles and broader experiences. The program not only trains women in key leadership skills such as business acumen and strategy, but also increases the sense of urgency to promote women. The effort has paid off, with many participants taking on expanded roles and responsibilities within six months of completing the program.

“We’ve found it’s not just about developing people to be experts — but to help them be able to lead,” Dr. Pace said. “Leading is different from managing as an expert. Within our program, as a leader, there may be things you’re leading that you don’t have deep expertise in. But you have to be able to excite people to aspire to meet those goals.

“How do you now lead when you’re no longer in the expert role? What does that require?” Dr. Pace said. “It’s really around knowing how to develop the right leadership skills so you’re motivating, inspiring, and coaching.”

Women’s Business Networks (WBNs), where MetLife employees focus on fostering a global community where all women thrive through career development and engagement activities. Through its WBNs, MetLife runs “Lean In Circles” — a program that brings small groups of employees together for monthly peer support and mentorship.

MetLife also uses external recruiters to identify diverse talent, ensures that job requirements are gender neutral, and trains recruiters on selection process issues that could impede diverse hiring.

More than half of MetLife’s managers and entry-level workers are now women. MetLife recently launched *Aspire to Lead*, a three-day program aimed at helping women who are new to management roles build skills in leadership and relating to others so they’ll be more successful.