THE KEY TO
ADVANCING
WOMEN
IN THE WORKPLACE

A survey report produced by
the Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership
and
the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London

Executive Summary

How can organizations be more creative and intentional as they establish programs and systems for developing the talent of *all* their employees? Following the 4th International Simmons Leadership Conference in Dublin, Ireland in November 2019, we surveyed conference attendees to gain a better understanding of how women in leadership positions view their current jobs, their career prospects, barriers to advancement, and the tools they need to succeed. The survey results yielded several clear-cut findings and recommendations that organizations can implement to attract and retain top talent. Our respondents are energized and, for the most part, eager to take the next step in their career. This is an exciting base to build upon.

What women say works – and also what they want more of – includes methods that not only benefit the individual employees, but also maximize an organization's ability to access the broadest possible pool of talent to build their leadership structure. The methods for developing this broader pool of talent include:

- launching mentoring and sponsorship programs with input from women seeking leadership roles

- investing in advanced skills and leadership training

- embedding a culture of flexibility, including around work schedules

- taking into account family responsibilities, and as appropriate, allowing employees the ability to work remotely

- willingness to take into account employees' family commitments

Introduction

Following the 4th International Simmons Leadership Conference in Dublin in November 2019, we surveyed conference attendees to gain a better understanding of how women in leadership positions view their current jobs, their career prospects, barriers to advancement, and the tools they need to succeed. The survey was conducted through a new research partnership between the Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership and King's College London's Global Institute for Women's Leadership. The response rate was an impressive 44%[1], with 94% of the respondents' female and 66% in supervisory roles. The survey results yielded several clear-cut findings and recommendations that organizations can implement to attract and retain top talent.

The survey focused on three primary areas: perception of current role, organizational support, and recommendations to facilitate the advancement of women in the corporate setting.

For information on the demographics and employment background of survey participants, please refer to the box "Composition of Survey Participants."

Job Satisfaction

Encouragingly, we found a group of people who are mostly happy in their roles and are keen to advance in their careers. Ninety percent of survey respondents were either satisfied or extremely satisfied in their current role. Additionally, 76% of respondents indicated they were ready to take on greater leadership responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the survey revealed several obstacles to that desired outcome. A sizable minority of 22% stated that they had **ruled out more prominent roles in their organization because they felt they would require too much sacrifice**.

This means a significant proportion of women in the workplace, many of whom are capable of and desiring leadership roles, feel discouraged, due to what they consider a significant lifestyle change or sacrifice to achieve their career objectives. As a result, organizations are not gaining access to the broadest possible pool of talent, which hinders their ability to compete in the marketplace. Significant amounts of research confirm this survey finding[2] demonstrating that women who want to rise in their companies—many of whom have multifold childcare, family and home responsibilities—face multiple challenges that prevent them from advancing their careers.

ROLE MODELS
One of the survey's findings is that the role model effect (*if you can see it, you can be it*)

Job Satisfaction

of representation in leadership can be powerful. When asked if they see someone who looked like them in leadership positions in their current organization, 66% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. However, while a substantial majority have role models whom they can see themselves in, a significant minority (22%) say they **do not see people that look like them in positions of authority in their organizations**. Research in several sectors (including financial services, academia, and consulting) has shown how important this mirroring is due to the phenomenon of social cloning[3] in which people in positions of influence and power tend to hire in their own image. Given the male-dominated nature of the sectors studied, this puts women at a distinct disadvantage. In addition, social cloning can extend beyond gender, as hiring managers

recruit and bring aboard those who have similar career paths and leadership styles[4] Therefore, it is essential for organizations to take all these factors into account when looking at both hiring and promotion protocols.

CAREER PROGRESSION FACTORS

We asked respondents when they were contemplating taking on a 'bigger role' with more responsibility, what were their two most important considerations. Interestingly, the top two responses (29% and 23% respectively) included **concerns about if they had the right experience and competency for the role and if they had the requisite leadership skills**. Following closely behind, were "how the new role would impact my family," and "being able to work flexibly."

Organizational Support
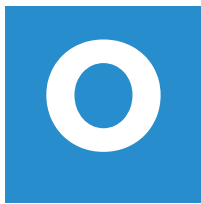
O verall, the vast majority of survey respondents (88%) said that they felt supported by their organization "to work in a way that works for me." When asked what their organization could do to better support them in "taking advantage of bigger opportunities," the respondents offered dozens of ideas (too many to capture as meaningful data points). The survey participants pinpointed several overlapping areas, however, where organizations can step up to make their top female talent better supported and more effective—in the process benefitting both the individual and the organization.

MENTORING AND SPONSORSHIP

The most highly cited sphere in which it was felt organizations could do more to support the respondents was through mentorship or sponsorship.

When asked, "What could my organization do to support me in taking advantage of bigger opportunities?" replies included:

'A supportive mentor to help me navigate the increasingly politicised environment in more senior roles.'

45 – 55-year-old, Female

'Provide mentorship with a person who has gone through similar roles and constructive feedback. Never overlook formal training and expect us to know it all.'

45 – 55-year-old, Female

'Provide better coaching at higher levels – I get no time from my boss and need help thinking through new challenges.'

25 – 34-year-old, Female

'Sponsorship. I am an SVP. Bigger opportunities would be a President so I need sponsorship at that level.'

55 – 64-year-old, Female

'Sponsor- not just support.'

45 – 54-year-old, Male

Organizational Support

While the importance of mentors and sponsors is largely taken for granted within organizations, the research on the effectiveness of mentorship and sponsorship shows a mixed picture, particularly when examining the impact on women. As women tend to have less access to informal career-enhancing networks ('the old boys club') mentorship programs do provide formal access to networks that have the potential to boost their career.[5] However, it is difficult to establish if mentorship programs *cause* career enhancement, as those who actively seek out mentors are more likely to be self-motivated than those who do not put themselves forward.[6] This self-selection makes it harder to unpack the impact of mentorship. Nevertheless, meta-analyses in this area do point to small positive effects on objective career outcomes, such as promotion and pay.[7] Note, these studies are not broken down by sex, so any gendered effect is

not known. In short, mentorship programs can work well for those who have access to them. However, **it is more difficult to establish if or to what extent mentoring improves underrepresentation and advancement**.

In addition, some of the respondents indicated that mentorship alone was insufficient, and they wanted a sponsor as well. The words "mentor" and "sponsor" are often conflated, but they serve distinct roles. Mentors offer career advice and share their own experiences, while sponsors actively champion their mentee in the organization.

One study which examined this issue, based on 40 'high-potential' men and women in a large multi-national, found that men were more likely than women to have sponsors, and their mentors tended to have more organizational influence.[8]

Organizational Support

Lastly, respondents indicated that they wanted organizations to ensure that mentorship programs are as inclusive as possible both in terms of selecting mentors who have the influence to advance the career of the mentee, and in ensuring that mentorship programs generally operate within core-working hours, thus accommodating those with responsibilities outside of work, who more frequently are women.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING

A significant number of respondents identified skills gaps that impede their ability to advance in the workplace. They felt that if their employer supported them to develop these areas, they would be ready to take the next step in their career. When asked, "What could my organization do to support me in taking advantage of bigger opportunities?" the replies included:

> *'Individual development and not trying to put me in a template.'*
>
> **25 – 34-year-old, Female**

> *'Offer more financial support for further education.'*
>
> **35 – 44-year-old, Female**

> *'Offer more formal development.'*
>
> **45 – 54-year-old, Female**

The bottom line is that it would serve both the individual women and companies as a whole to provide employee education and training opportunities. Investing in current talent allows employers to retain the institutional knowledge and specific expertise that is integral to an organization's operations.

Substantial research in this area reveals several specific barriers holding back the advancement of women. Some research has shown that managers perceive employee development programs to be too demanding for women with children (with similar considerations not being taken into account for men with children).[9] Other research in this area shows that women reported that men of comparable position on the organization chart were being encouraged to take up training opportunities while women were not receiving the same encouragement.[10] The timing and location of training opportunities are also crucial, with a study showing that female workers report being unable to take up training opportunities because they were running outside of normal working hours.[11]

NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTABILITY AT WORK

Another area referenced repeatedly in the survey responses was the need for employers to be flexible to accommodate employee needs, so they have the latitude to pursue their next career move, while at the same time allowing them to fulfill their

Organizational Support

family and caregiving responsibilities. When asked, "What could my organization do to support me in taking advantage of bigger opportunities?" the replies included:

" *'Leadership roles come with an expectation of making yourself more available more of the time, so involves sacrifice in family life.'*
45 – 54-year-old, Female

'At the moment everything is done very well to support me. To keep this up will become much harder once children get involved which is not the case yet.
25 – 34-year-old, Female

'Ensure that I could achieve success within the hours allocated instead of having to give up so much personal time.'
45– 54-year-old, Female "

As these comments demonstrate, there is a perception that leadership advancement requires longer working hours, which will then infringe on family and personal time. A practical step that organizations can take to support employees is to make roles more flexible, such as allowing employees to work remotely, and to restructure their workweek to better fit with the realities of family life. Research shows that increasing flexibility through family-friendly policies in the workplace can benefit not only employees but employers too. Employers can see cost savings, increased productivity, improved recruitment, and retention of staff and reduced absenteeism.[12]

However, these family-friendly policies, such as increased flexibility, need to be implemented in a way that sustains employees and the organization in the long term. In addition, some sectors will be more resistant than others. Studies have shown that women who work flexibly may suffer a penalty for doing so in terms of career development, particularly in sectors with a culture of long work weeks.[13] For example, a study of female lawyers who successfully campaigned for flexible working policies were subsequently given less interesting cases and came up against frustrated line managers.[14] Another study, this time in the IT sector, showed that managers believed that the implementation of flexible working arrangements was a legitimate reason to exclude women from career development and progression.[15] To reduce this stigma, employers need to have senior role models and well-trained line managers to ensure these policies are genuinely mutually beneficial.

Organizational Support

THINKING CREATIVELY ABOUT LOCATION

Frequently, senior roles require extensive traveling and potentially relocation. This can be daunting when trying to achieve a sustainable work-life balance. Concerns about this issue featured heavily in our findings. When asked, "What could my organization do to support me in taking advantage of bigger opportunities?" the replies included:

'Recognizing the fact I am a working mother with young children, that will need flexibility. I will not be able to be 'on' all the time and travel away from my family on a dime.'

45 – 54-year-old, Female

'More balance in the role to help support my work/life balance requirements. Reduce the requirements for travel'

35 – 44-year-old, Female

'Look at my skill set and experience and the ideas and work I do that they value…and see this as a valuable package to reward and use—instead of simply considering the lack of business need for a leader in my area/region because they want to keep power at the centre and not act globally.'

35 – 44-year-old, Female

'Be less head-office & US centric'

45 – 54-year-old, Female

Organizational Support

In a number of sectors studied (including aviation and politics)[16] near-constant travel is required. But this can apply to any industry, especially for employees in senior positions. In the research, it is clear that this type of working culture is difficult for those with domestic and caring responsibilities. And it is not only those in the corporate sector who experience this strain. In many professions, such as academia[17], to build the contacts and networks crucial to the profession, travel is often required for conferences and meetings.

For the majority of professions, these challenges are not insurmountable. As the survey respondents noted, organizations need to think more creatively about where roles are based. They also must utilize online meeting technology when possible. These steps alone would widen the pool of talent (internal and external) for building leadership teams. Naturally, there are advantages of meeting face-to-face, but the sacrifice of talented employees who do not wish to relocate or who need to work remotely carries too great a cost to the organization.

Conclusion: Next Steps

Overall, the survey results reveal that respondents are energized and, for the most part, eager to take the next step in their career. This is an exciting base to build upon.

The survey results outline a pathway to increase recruitment, retention, and advancement of women leaders. The areas of concern are consistent with wider research in this realm.

Organizations need to be more creative and intentional as they establish programs and systems for developing the talent of all their employees. This will not only benefit the individual employees but will also maximize an organization's ability to access the broadest possible pool of talent to build their leadership structure. The methods for developing this broader pool of talent include:

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> *The biggest takeaway from the survey is that employers need to ensure their development strategies are inclusive, particularly in respect to gender. This means designing tailored support systems and programs, including skills development and mentorship."*
>
> *— PROFESSOR ROSIE CAMPBELL, Director, The Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London*

> *While the survey respondents largely expressed high job satisfaction, they also presented a broad and extensive range of suggestions that would increase satisfaction through supportive company policies and access to tools that took into account the specific contingencies facing women in the workplace. Those of us who are leading the way to gender parity in leadership have work to do! "*
>
> *— SUSAN MACKENTY BRADY, Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Chair for Women and Leadership; CEO, The Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership*

The Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership and The Global Institute for Women's Leadership, King's College London will use these survey results to continue to advocate for and develop plans for instituting these recommendations in organizations. To learn the steps you can take to accelerate your career, see the sidebar, "Tools you can Use."

* Please note in the interests of transparency that the delegates at the Simmons Leadership Conference were in many cases selected for attendance and funded by their employer to attend.

Conclusion: Next Steps

Tools You Can Use
Invest Time in YOU.
Action Steps for Career Acceleration

1 **EXERCISE YOUR LEADERSHIP MUSCLES.**
Participate in on-line or other kinds of educational opportunities. Many organizations either have internal programs and/or partnerships with conference providers or training firms. If you know of a development experience that would benefit your effectiveness (and thus, your organization), yet it isn't something your organization currently offers, make the case to attend. Consider attending the Simmons Leadership Conference or the Strategic Leadership for Women Certificate program!

2 **FIND A MENTOR.**
If you don't already have a mentor or mentors, identify a few individuals inside and outside of your organization with whom you'd like to connect. A mentor acts as a sounding board for ideas and decisions that relate to your career, providing counsel, insight, and guidance.

3 **LOOK FOR ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCES THAT WILL AID YOUR SKILLS AND GROWTH.**
Seek out opportunities to participate in or lead a high visibility project. Create and deliver a formal presentation to a group within or outside your organization. Organize a team to focus on implementing a new process, system, or practice. These experiences will draw positive attention and expand your network and skill set.

4 **ASK FOR THE FLEXIBILITY YOU NEED.**
If you would like added flexibility in where and how you work, make a case, and speak with your manager. It can't hurt to ask—but be sure to think about how this will benefit your organization or team. Don't lead with why this is just good for you.
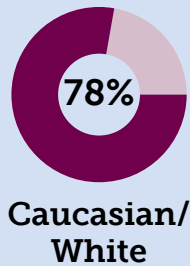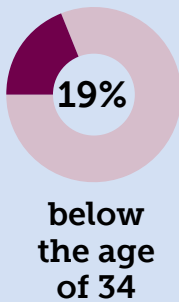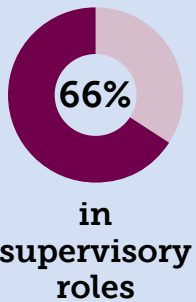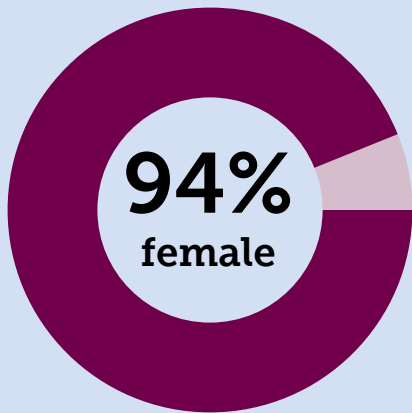
5 **BE THE AGENT OF CHANGE FOR OTHERS.**
If you are a manager and in a position of authority, look at the policies and current constraints that prevent flexibility for your employees. Are these well-intended policies or "working norms" still needed? Will productivity be adversely impacted should more flexible ways of working be put in place? Ask yourself, is the argument, "that's how we have always done it," still applicable? What can be changed so all employees can have more choice in how and where they work? Mentor and champion other women.
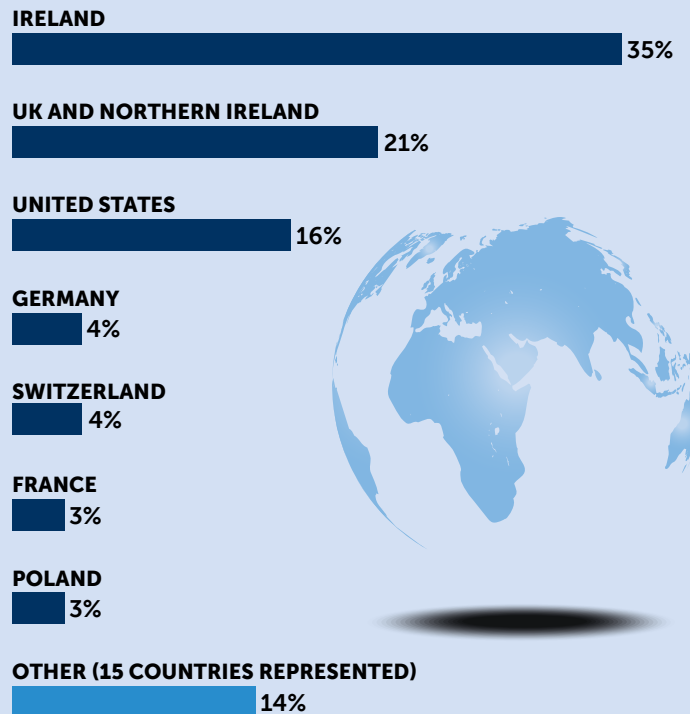
Appendix

Composition of Survey Participants

The attendees of the 2019 Simmons International Leadership Conference in Dublin were offered the opportunity to take a confidential survey (available in the conference app). Forty-four percent (246) of the attendees responded to the survey. Here is a snapshot of the demographic makeup of survey respondents.

94% female

66% in supervisory roles

19% below the age of 34

78% Caucasian/ White

COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE:

Country	Percent
IRELAND	35%
UK AND NORTHERN IRELAND	21%
UNITED STATES	16%
GERMANY	4%
SWITZERLAND	4%
FRANCE	3%
POLAND	3%
OTHER (15 COUNTRIES REPRESENTED)	14%

Endnotes

1. See box for information on survey participants

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