

Securing The Female Talent Pipeline

Talent is the backbone of any business, ensuring there is a strong pipeline of talent coming up through the ranks of an organisation is key to achieving growth. Despite many advances in workplace equality, women are still not making it to the top in large numbers. While non-executive appointments have increased board-level diversity, many companies continue to report shortages of female senior managers. As most senior management positions are filled by internal candidates, this indicates that the internal talent pipeline is not effectively delivering gender diversity. Boosting this female talent pipeline is one of the major challenges facing HR directors today; tackling this means raising awareness of the business case as to why having more gender diversity is beneficial to an organisation and pushing it up the corporate agenda.

It's been two years since the Lord Davies UK report 'Women on Boards' recommended a target of 20 per cent female representation by 2015. While the signs are encouraging, change remains slow. A number of countries have pressed ahead and imposed quotas on organisations including India, Malaysia, Belgium, Italy, France and Spain. Debate in Europe is on-going around introducing a 40 per cent quota across all EU states for women on boards. With the potential for the government to mandate compulsory targets, the challenge of how to increase gender diversity at senior management level and beyond has never been more pressing.

However, focusing only on boards is just one part of the equation, clearly a successful approach must encompass the whole business – focusing on creating a strong female talent pipeline from bottom to top.

Together with Alexander Mann Solutions we have explored the challenges and solutions around securing the female talent pipeline particularly at middle management level in detail via a report called 'The Pipeline Report'. As middle management is the key drop out point for women, where the numbers of women in management position decreases dramatically from 40 to 15 per cent, this is where we focused our attention.

Despite the mounting evidence, just 40 per cent of HR leaders consider improved

business performance to be a benefit of increasing the number of women in senior roles. This is a barrier to the career progression of the many thousands of talented female middle managers in the UK, leaving some dissatisfied with their jobs, concerned about career progression, or even tempted to resign, leaving organisations and the corporate world altogether.

This is why clarifying the business case for boosting the female talent pipeline is vital to enabling more female middle managers to attain senior positions.

In the UK alone there are more than two million women working in managerial positions, unlocking this potential talent could be worth up to £5billion. That's just in the UK; imagine what the figure would be globally! Indeed the Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg has described women's contribution to the Norwegian economy as worth more than the nation's oil reserves. Ensuring that female professionals' capabilities are harnessed more effectively could significantly enhance company productivity, providing a real boost to national economies.

To achieve this boost, HR leader's and female middle manager's perception and ambition need to align. There is a considerable gap between the views of HR leaders and the concerns of female middle managers. The Pipeline Report showed 63 per cent of HR leaders want to see women driving their own advancement. However, many female middle managers expect their employers to take much – if not all – of the responsibility for career path clarity and opportunities for progression.

Female middle managers need to take responsibility for developing their careers. Women, when compared to male colleagues, are less likely to push for promotion, instead adopting a 'wait and see' attitude. This leads to a perceived lack of confidence in female managers. Women should be encouraged to be ambitious for their careers and not shy away from taking on responsibility.

One way to resolve this issue is to involve female middle managers in success planning. Participation in succession planning, training and development programmes is an essential component of improving the talent pipeline. HR leaders

need to ask are women fully accessing the programmes on offer to place them on the senior management track, and if not, why not? These programmes need to be continually reviewed and regularly updated to ensure they are addressing the issues around female middle managers progression.

Both HR leaders and female middle managers agree role models are central to progression yet only 51 per cent of female middle managers identify female role models from senior executive management. This clearly shows that there is a challenge for some companies to ensure that the few female role models they do have are highly visible.

Companies can also take practical day to day steps to improve the talent pipeline. Extending flexible working options would be a great help to women in reaching more senior roles, but organisations must ensure flexibility is a real option at all levels and not just theoretically available. Can female middle managers talk about flexibility without fear of prejudicing their chances? While 74 per cent of female middle managers are satisfied with the level of flexibility in their current jobs, they agree that lifestyle choices are a major obstacle to career progression. In some cases, women with children who can't achieve the work-life balance they desire may drop out of the pipeline altogether.

Recognising that gender diversity has a positive impact on company performance is vital to unlocking the full potential of female staff. Female middle managers should be a particular focus in understanding diversity issues in the talent pipeline. Not only do they play a vital role in operational performance, but they are also a source of future leadership and in fact themselves role models for women in their early careers.

Having gender diversity is within the power of every organisation, no matter how large or small. By working collaboratively with the female workforce, businesses will be able to increase the engagement of the female middle managers with benefits for both the bottom line and employees.

Karen Gill, Founder of everywoman
contact@everywoman.com