

RESEARCH REPORT

# What Women Want— And Why You Want Women— In the Workplace



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## Executive Summary

This study of 745 women and men leaders highlights new findings on what women want in the workplace and why organizations should want women.

### **Key findings on why organizations should want women:**

- Participants from organizations with a higher percentage of women rated their organizations more favorably on 7 items related to job satisfaction, organizational dedication, burnout, and employee engagement.
- Participants with female bosses felt more supported (especially female participants) and experienced less job-related burnout.

### **Key findings on what women want from organizations:**

- Women want to work for organizations that help them find their calling.
- Women want flexibility in where, when, and how they work.
- Women want leadership opportunities—but they also want the resources and support required to make these opportunities successful.

This report also includes action steps for organizations and leaders who want to help women get what they want out of work, and recruit, retain, and promote women.



## About the Study

*What Women Want* is a scientific study conducted in partnership with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) and Watermark. The aim of this study is to help organizational decision makers better understand how—and why—to recruit, retain, and promote women in the workplace. To this end, we conducted an online survey, asking women and men leaders around the globe about their experiences in the workplace, as well as what they want out of an ideal workplace environment. The results of the study are detailed in this report. For more about the methodology and analyses used in this study, please see the **Research Methodology and Analyses** section at the end of this report.

This study included 745 leaders and aspiring leaders. On average, participants worked full time, and had a great deal of experience in the workplace. Overall, men and women worked about the same amount of hours per week, and had comparable levels of workplace satisfaction and dedication to their organizations.

# ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

745 survey respondents

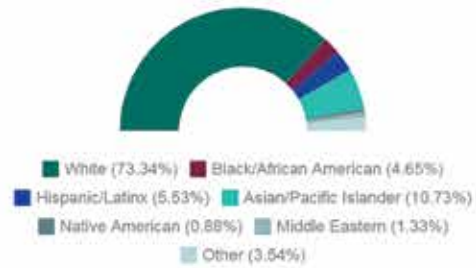
## DEMOGRAPHICS



Average Age



Race/Ethnicity



65%  
Have children



56.5%  
Married



92.6%  
Bachelor's degree  
or higher

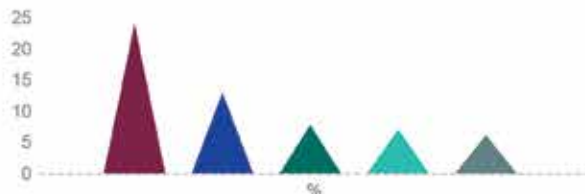


76%  
Live in the USA

## Work Experience



Executives/C-Suite (21.56%) Directors (28.20%)  
Managers (25.24%) Individual Contributors (24.92%)



50%  
Work in orgs with +1000  
employees



Average workweek  
= 45.36 hours



42%  
Have 20+ years of  
experience in their field



## Why Organizations Should Want Women in the Workplace

Organizations that do not want women in their workplace are, frankly, out of luck. Women currently make up 47% of the US workforce and 51% of all management, professional, and related positions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017; DeWolf, 2017). Globally, the outlook is similar, with women accounting for 49% of the workforce (International Labor Organization, 2016).

Besides doubling your talent pool, recruiting women into your organization may also increase your company's financial performance. Previous research shows that Fortune 500 companies with the highest representation of women on boards financially outperform companies with the lowest representation of women on boards (Joy, Carter, Wagner, & Narayanan, 2007). Moreover, gender-diverse teams have higher sales and profits compared to male-dominated teams (Hoogendoorn, Oosterbeek, & Van Praag, 2013); and a recent Gallup study found that gender-diverse business units have higher average revenue than less diverse business units (Badal, 2014).

But women might do more than boost the bottom line. In this study, we found that **having more women in your organization might actually make your organization a better place to work**. Specifically, survey respondents estimated what percentage of individuals in their workplace were women. Answers ranged from 0–100%, with the average being about 45% (pretty close to the national average). **Having a higher percentage of women in an organization predicted**

- More job satisfaction
- More organizational dedication
- More meaningful work
- Less burnout

## Companies With More Female Employees Have:



MORE  
JOB  
SATISFACTION



MORE  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
DEDICATION



MORE  
MEANINGFUL  
WORK



DECREASED  
BURNOUT

In addition to this, having more women in the workplace also was positively related to employee engagement and retention. Specifically, when asked why they stay with their current employer, people from organizations with a high percentage of women were more likely to cite positive and meaningful organizational culture, including having

- **Enjoyable work**
- **A job that fits well with other areas of their life**
- **Opportunities to make a difference**

These new findings persist even when controlling for differences in participants' age, industry, organization size, leadership level, ethnicity, and gender. In fact, while both men and women in our survey responded with this same positive pattern of results, our findings were even stronger for men on some measures—specifically being satisfied with their job, enjoying their work, and not feeling burned out. Thus, in our sample set, **having more women in an organization is associated with positive organizational outcomes for both men and women.**<sup>1</sup>

## TAKE ACTION

### What can organizations and leaders do?

These findings suggest that organizations without a strong representation of women are missing out on opportunities to get better talent, make more money, and have more satisfied and dedicated employees. It also suggests that *percentages of women matter*. It might not be enough for organizations to employ “token” women if they want to reap the multiple benefits of a gender-diverse workplace. Because of this, leaders should take a careful look at the gender balance in their organizations. If women are still the minority, they should make an effort to hire more women. As a bonus, organizations that have more women also attract and retain more women (Badal, 2014). So investing in women now will likely make it easier for an organization to have more women down the road.



If you are having trouble getting women to join your organization, it is worth reviewing your job descriptions and interview processes to make sure you are not accidentally ostracizing women or falling prey to implicit bias. Some researchers suggest that simply switching out words in job postings can change the number of women who apply for positions. For instance, words and phrases such as “ninja,” “dominant,” or “boastful” might implicitly signal to women that you are really looking for a male for the role; while terms such as “adaptable,” “trustworthy,” and “self-aware” are more likely to attract female applicants (Peck, 2015). For more information about which are the best words to use to attract women, check out [Textio](#). Furthermore, companies like [Gap Jumpers](#) can help create “blind” job applications that hide applicants’ gender and demographic information.

If you are having trouble getting women to stay in your organization, you might have organizational culture and climate issues that need to be addressed. (Keep reading this report for more info on how to retain women.)



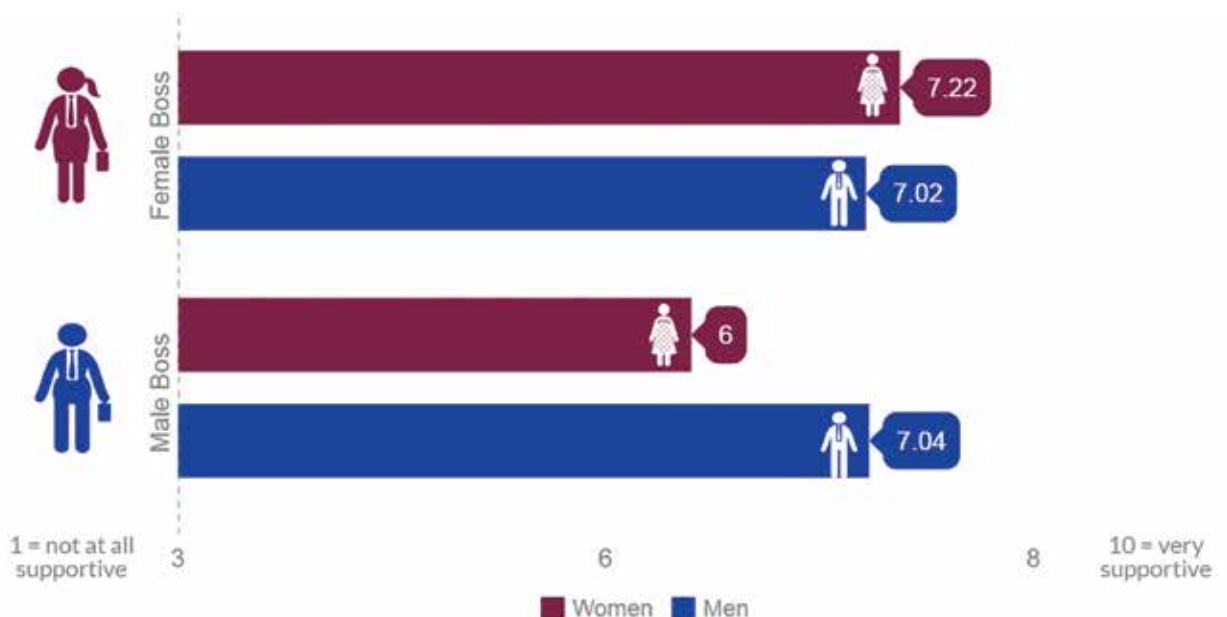


## Why You Should Want to Work for a Woman

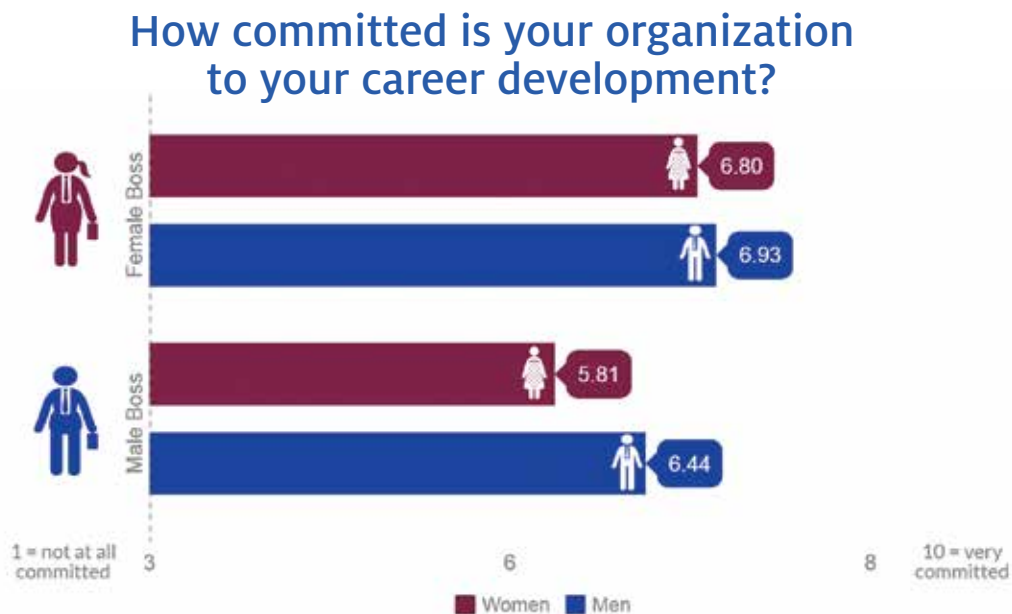
Gallup polls since the 1950s have shown that both men and women in the US prefer male bosses over female bosses. In 1953, 66% of Americans preferred a male boss, 5% preferred a female boss, and 25% had no preference. In Gallup's latest poll, 33% prefer a male boss, 20% a female boss, and 46% said it would not make a difference (Riffkin, 2014).

But it might make a difference after all. In our study, **people with female bosses reported their bosses were more supportive of their career development compared to people with male bosses.** Moreover, when we explore the data by participant gender, we find that for men, both male and female bosses were equally supportive; but for women, male bosses were rated as less supportive of career development than female bosses. In other words, **while having a female boss is unlikely to limit men's career development, having a male boss might hinder women's career development.** This is no small matter, considering that previous research shows employees perform better when their bosses are supportive. (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006).

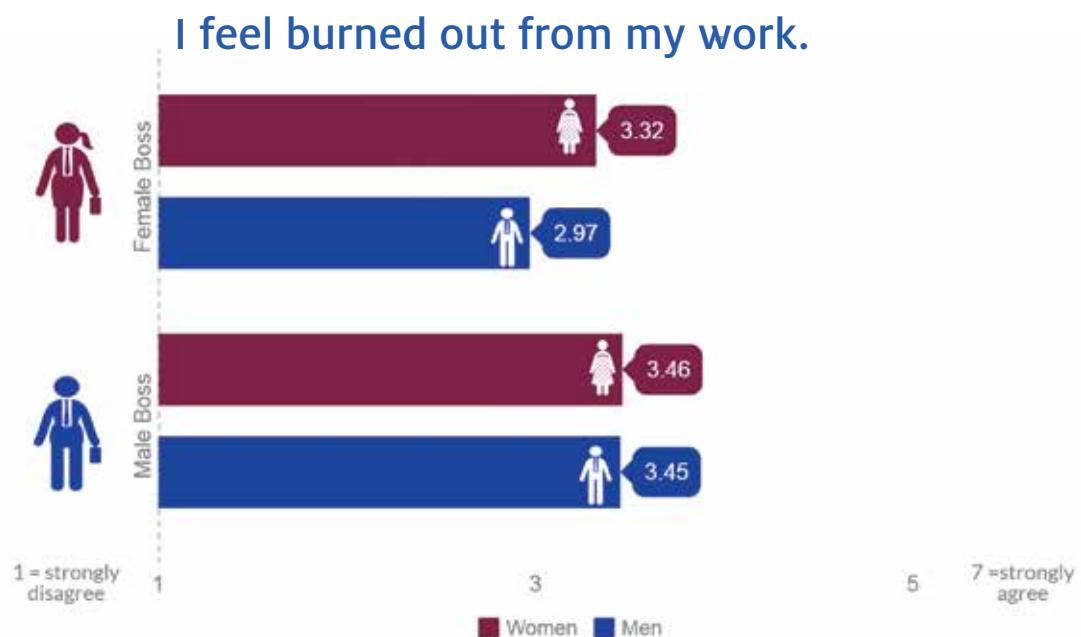
### How supportive is your boss of your career development?



Female bosses also seemed to be able to convey more support from the entire organization. **For both men and women, those with female bosses reported feeling that their organization at large was more committed to their career development** (compared to those with a male boss).



Finally, in addition to being more supportive when it comes to career development, female bosses might also be more effective at helping their subordinates manage the pressures of the workplace. Among our respondents, **people with female bosses reported feeling less burned out compared to those with a male boss.**



These data challenge common assumptions that men make better bosses, or that women struggle with leadership. However, other research suggests these results are not a fluke. A recent US Gallup study found that female managers are more likely to aid employees with their developmental goals, and that people who work for female managers are more engaged in the workplace—especially female subordinates (Fitch & Agrawal, 2015). Similarly, research has found a “female advantage” to hiring women leaders—women tend to be more likely to use effective leadership styles (Eagly & Carli, 2003).



## TAKE ACTION

### What can organizations and leaders do?

These results clearly suggest that women can make great managers and bosses, and that putting women in leadership positions could help employees feel supported, engaged, and less burned out. However, in order to have women in leadership roles, companies have to feed their leadership pipeline. Previous research has shown that women tend to get both fewer and less favorable leadership development experiences and that the experiences they have often get discounted by employers (Clerkin & Wilson, 2017). Organizations that want to fully leverage women's leadership potential must both hire women leaders and also develop their frontline female employees so they can lead in the future. Keep reading this report for more about how to retain women and cultivate female leaders.





## What Do Talented and Successful Women Want From Work?

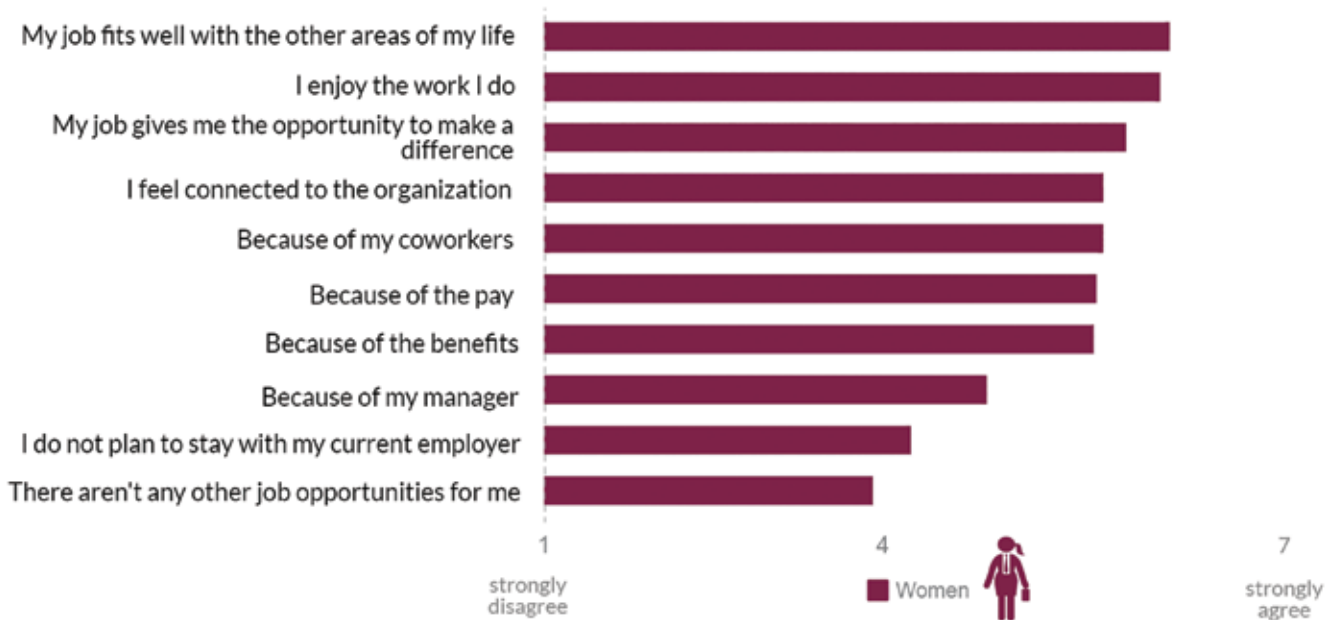
Much discussion and research on women's leadership has centered around whether women are a good fit for the workplace, what hurdles they must overcome if they want to survive in the workplace, and why women get lost on the way to the top. Less research has focused on the women who have made it, and what they want from organizations. In the next sections of this report, we address just that. Our survey participants are highly successful women who occupy mid-to-top levels in organizations. We asked them what organizations can do if they want to recruit and retain top-notch women, and what they want most out of the workplace.



## Women Want to Find Their Calling

Want to retain top-talent women? The most common reason women in this study gave for why they stay with their current employer was that their job fits well with other areas of their life.<sup>2</sup> The second most popular reason was that they enjoy the work that they do, followed by believing that their job gives them the opportunity to make a difference. Statistically, women were more likely to stay with their employer for these reasons over what might be considered more concrete, traditional reasons such as pay, benefits, or because of their manager. These results reinforce findings from the American Psychological Association's 2012 Workplace Retention study, which found that among over 1,000 Americans surveyed, job fit and enjoyable work are the two biggest reasons employees stay with their organizations (APA, 2012).<sup>3</sup>

### Why do you stay with your current employer?





Moreover, when women shared their personal answers to the question

**“What are the most important things that organizations could do to make you want to work for them?”**

many talked about having personally meaningful work that connects to their values, purpose, and work-life fit.

**“Have a good sense of values** underpinned by a corporate plan. Have a culture of professionalism and collaboration across departments. All colleagues to have the freedom of being creative and being supported via mentoring and qualifications to develop one’s ambitions.”

**“Connect the work we do to a higher purpose.** Flexible work environment. Opportunity to learn, grow, and take on new assignments or new roles. Competitive compensation. Treat people with fairness and respect.”

**“Offer opportunities that make best use of my skills** and have a meaningful, relevant contribution to the company.”

Together, these reasons describe a specific type of employment social scientists refer to as a *calling* (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). In order for an occupation to be considered a calling, a person must

- Feel drawn to pursue the job
- Find the job intrinsically enjoyable and meaningful
- See the job as a central part of his or her identity

Research shows that experiencing work as a calling is related to increased well-being and job satisfaction—regardless of gender (Wrzesniewski et al. 1997).

## TAKE ACTION

### What can organizations and leaders do?

One way supervisors can help women (and people of all genders) find meaningfulness and enjoyment in their work is through *job crafting*. While any job has certain tasks and requirements, job crafting is about customizing *how* these tasks and requirements are accomplished in a way that is personally meaningful and aligned with one's values and strengths. Job crafting has been shown to be an effective way to turn an occupation into a calling without having to go on the job market (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010).



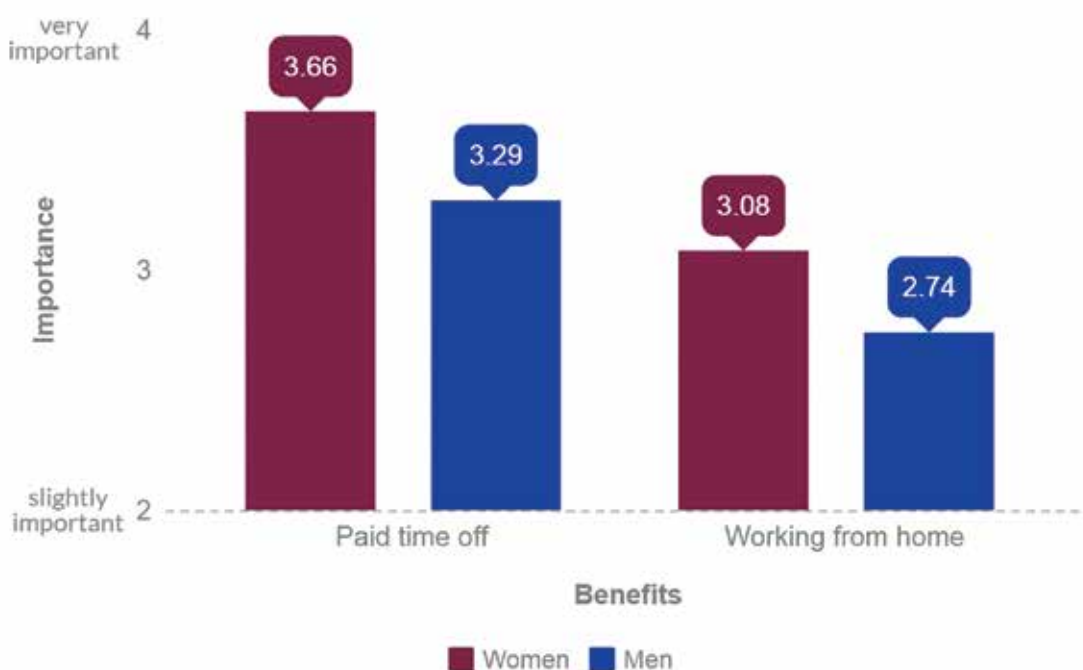
People can craft their jobs by adjusting where they spend their energy, how they interact with others, which opportunities they pursue, and how they think about their tasks (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2008). Supervisors can aid employees in job crafting by taking the time to learn about their values and passions and brainstorming ways to make these dreams a reality within their current roles. Coaches can also be hired to help employees find alignment between their goals and their jobs to make sure that their work experience is moving them toward their calling. To read more about how women can cultivate meaningful careers, check out [Standing at the Crossroads: Next Steps for High-Achieving Women](#).



## Women Want to Flex

Another way that employers can help women enjoy the work they do and make sure their work fits with other areas of their life is by giving them flexibility. Women in this study rated 12 common workplace perks and benefits from “this is very important to me” to “this is not important to me.” Flexibility concerns rose to the top of the list. Overall, both women and men weighed workplace perks remarkably similarly, with paid time off, healthcare benefits, paid leadership development, flexible schedules, and opportunities to move up all rated as important to very important; while fitness classes and cafeterias were rated as slightly to not important. However, two gender differences stand out—women rated **paid time off** and **working from home** as more important compared to men.

### How important are each of these benefits?





Flexibility was also a common theme when women answered the question **“What are the most important things that organizations could do to make you want to work for them?”**

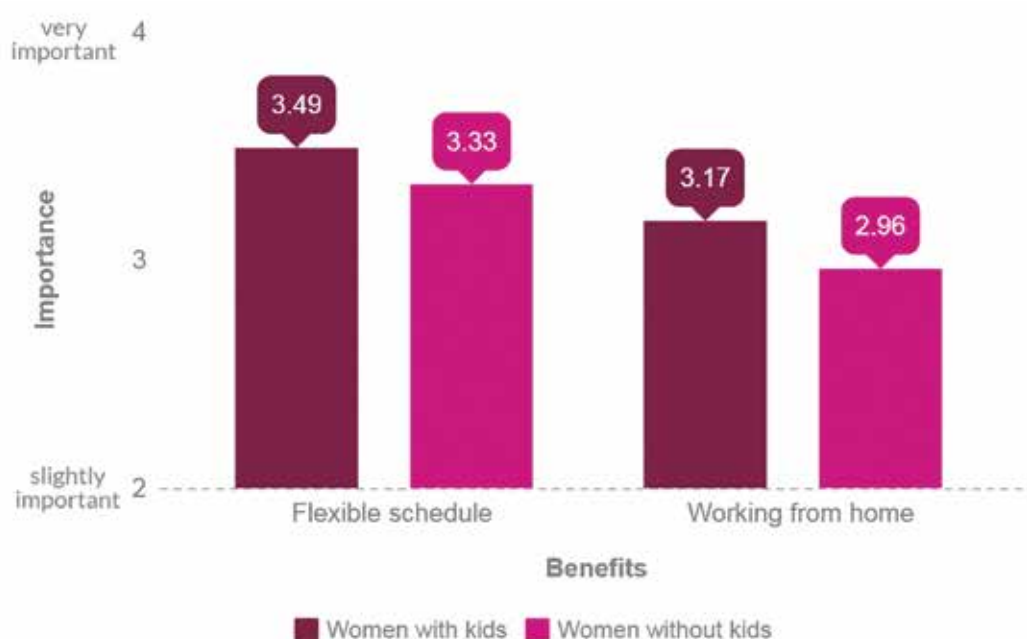
**“Make work/life balance a reality, not just buzzwords through culture. This means allowing space for vacation to happen for employees where work is not required/expected, decent hours of work per week, staffing at appropriate levels, health and wellness activities that people actually have time to participate in.”**

**“Allow me opportunities to contribute where I feel I can; provide resources to accomplish goals; work-life balance including flexible working options without being frowned upon.”**

**“Provide professional development, offer leadership positions, allow flexible schedules, and grant opportunities to work from home.”**

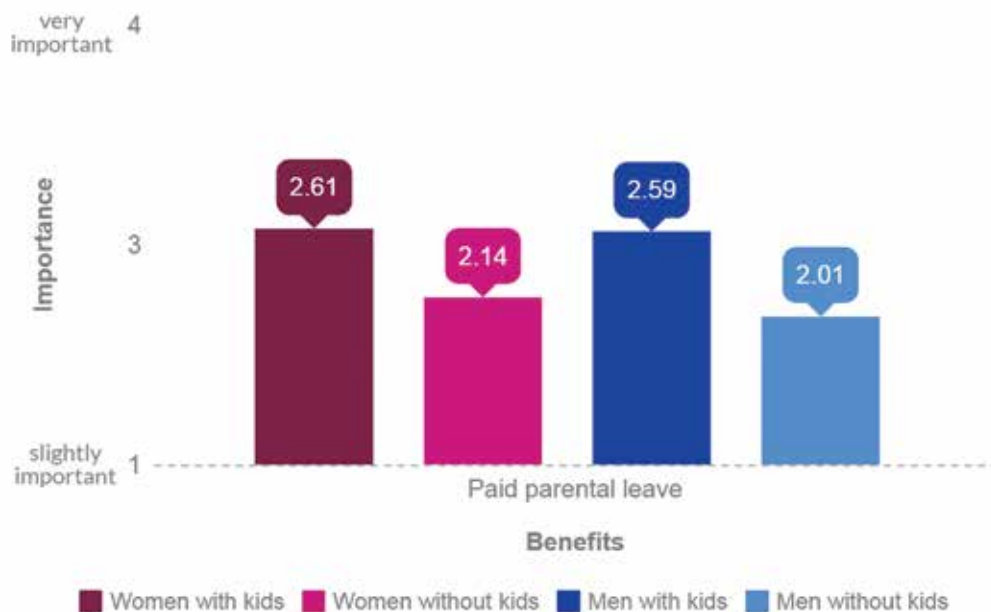
These findings support a previous CCL study, which found that high-achieving women want both a fulfilling career and a fulfilling personal life (Ruderman & Olcott, 2004). In particular, making sure women have work flexibility might be critical when it comes to retaining talented women who also want to raise families. Among our sample, **women with children rated having a flexible schedule and being able to work from home as more important compared to women who did not have children.** This expands upon Gallup’s *Women in America* study which found that flexible work schedules and working from home were two of the most major factors among stay-at-home mothers considering returning to the workforce (Gallup, 2016). Our study suggests that these factors might be just as important among mothers already working.

## How important are each of these benefits?



Both women and men with children also rated paid parental leave as more important compared to those without children.

## How important are each of these benefits?



## TAKE ACTION

### What can organizations and leaders do?

This pattern of results suggests that women want flexibility in *how*, *when*, and *where* they work. Therefore—when possible and practical—allowing employees to work remotely, and to work hours that support their lives outside of work, are great ways to increase your organization’s ability to attract and retain women. As a bonus, being a flexibility forerunner is likely to attract a wide variety of talent—not just women. Recent trend research shows that having flexibility in work hours and location has gone from being a rare perk to arguably the most sought after workplace benefit (Schawbel, 2016). Because of this, some companies are starting to take flexibility to the next level—offering limitless vacation time, or options to work while traveling the world. In today’s global and highly competitive world, flexibility means finding the best talent no matter where or when they need to work.

The good news is that there are increasingly more resources, such as [Remote.co](#), to help companies ramp up how to work with remote workers. For more information about how to help your employees flex, check out the [Workplace Flexibility Toolkit](#) created by the *United States Department of Labor’s Office of Disability and Employment Policy* and by the *Women’s Bureau*. This toolkit includes hundreds of fact and tip sheets, reports, articles, websites, and FYIs for employees and employers who want to implement workplace flexibility strategies.





## Women Want REAL Leadership Opportunities—and They Can Spot the Fake Ones

Traditional beliefs about gender roles might suggest that women are less interested in moving up in the organization and taking on leadership roles. However, in this study, there were no statistical gender differences when it comes to how interested men and women are in raises, promotions, and leadership development opportunities:

- **74.1%** of women (and 60.1% of men) said they were interested to extremely interested in moving up one or more levels in their organization (e.g., promotion).<sup>4</sup>
- **88.2%** of women (and 78.3% of men) said that they were interested to extremely interested in an increase in salary (e.g., raise).
- **81.4%** of women (and 81.8% of men) said they were interested to extremely interested in leadership development training.

Similarly, there were no statistical gender differences in how often participants asked for or received these opportunities. However, women still experienced significant challenges in being seen as equally viable leadership candidates compared to their male peers. When women shared their personal answers to the questions “**What are the most important things that organizations can do to make you want to work for them?**” and “**What are the most important things organizations can do to help you with your careers?**,” many women talked about wanting gender equal opportunities to move up in the organization:

“Show a true commitment to women in leadership positions. Embrace diverse thinking and ideas. Hire experienced women executives without asking them to come in 2–3 levels down.”

“Make me feel that I am important and give me opportunities to prove that I can move into another, better role.”

“Allow me to take on challenging assignments, offer leadership training, don't treat me like a child but rather like a professional.”

There was also no statistical gender difference in willingness to take on leadership roles. In fact, 75% of women and 81% of men said they have *never* turned down, or been reluctant to take on, a leadership role. However, among those that refused leadership roles, there were qualitative gender differences in *why* they said no. Men generally said they turned down positions because they did not want the role; they didn't like the supervisor or tasks of the new role; they were not willing to relocate; they did not want longer hours; or were not being offered enough money.

Similarly, women also shared concerns about workload and long hours (although it was sometimes phrased around work-life balance and family obligations); not wanting the role; not wanting to relocate; and not wanting to work with difficult people. No women mentioned pay. Women did, however, mention confidence issues—not being confident in their qualifications, not seeing themselves as leaders, or not being sure others wanted them in the role. But perhaps most notable, many women said that they turned down the role because they felt they were being set up for failure. For example:

“Feared I might be being set up for failure/as scapegoat.”

“The resources were not available for success, so I chose not to set myself up for failure.”

“With a full understanding of the role and its requirements, did not want to take it on—[it was a] no-win situation.”

It turns out these women might have good reason for their concerns. Research shows while both men and women high potentials are usually given leadership opportunities, men are given more resources—both in terms of funding and team size (Silva, Carter, & Beninger, 2012). Additionally, women are more likely to get “glass cliff” positions—leadership opportunities that are high stakes, precarious, and have a high likelihood of failure. For instance, Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 companies are more likely to appoint women to their boards following an extended period of poor performance and stock market decline (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Some experts believe that women get glass cliff assignments because traditionally feminine attributes (e.g., nurturing, patience) are valued in times of crisis; others argue that women may just make easy scapegoats, or may be less likely to turn down bad deals.



## TAKE ACTION

### What can organizations and leaders do?

Organizations and leaders who want to retain women need to give women opportunities to get promotions, raises, tackle challenging assignments, and develop their leadership skills. Research shows that there is often a well-intentioned “protective hesitation” when it comes to women in the workplace (King, et al., 2012). People want to protect women from hardships (such as a more challenging workload, needing to relocate, etc.) and because of this, do not offer women the same opportunities. The easiest way to avoid making such assumptions is simply to ask—let women be the ones to decide if they would rather not relocate or move up into a more challenging position.

But it is not enough to offer opportunities. Organizations and leaders should also make sure they are setting women up for success. Research shows that women are given fewer resources and less support when tackling challenging assignments—and our findings suggest that women know it. Organizations that want women to lead should track and regulate resources and support (e.g., time, money, people, sponsorship) allotted for stretch assignments in order to stay consistent regardless of gender. Effective leader development experiences need to be challenging, yet obtainable, with clear rewards for efforts and successes.





## What's the Holdup?

Previous research and discussion on women's leadership have come up with many theories about what women might be doing that is keeping them out of the corner office. However, in our study, we found no gender differences on a number of key topics that are typically blamed for women's challenges. For instance, **we found no statistical gender differences<sup>5</sup>** in

- Number of hours worked
- Whether people had negotiated for their own compensation
- Whether people had asked for or received promotions, raises, or leadership training
- Whether people had asked for or received a sponsor or mentor
- Whether people had ever turned down leadership opportunities

Of course, it should be duly noted that our sample consisted of leaders and individuals with highly successful careers. Therefore, it may be that such gender differences disappear among people who have already made it to the top of organizations.

Yet, our qualitative data suggests that even though the women in our study worked as hard as men and seem to be just as successful, they might have had some additional challenges along the way. When asked to share what they believed was the **single greatest disadvantage women face in the modern workplace**, women's responses were numbered and varied. Many mentioned the fact that gender discrimination and bias are still prevalent in the workplace, and pointed to unequal pay as a prime example of how such bias limits women's careers. Others suggested that implicit bias and unspoken assumptions (e.g., women are emotional, mothers don't have time for leadership) are the biggest hurdle. Some participants admitted feeling that they were always at a disadvantage being a woman in a system created for and by men. Still others mentioned lack of representation, role models, and mentors; while some believed that they themselves might be their own worst enemy—lacking confidence and assertiveness.

## What do you believe is the single greatest disadvantage women face in the modern workplace?

“Balancing family and work.”

“Perception that negative reactions to anything are women being ‘emotional.’ Men reacting in the exact same way would not be considered ‘emotional.’”

“Men do not realize how different the world is for women, so they can’t take steps to level the playing field in many ways, even if they were inclined to do so.”

“Impostor syndrome—I am my own worst critic.”

“The ‘Good Ol’ Boys Club.’”

“There is a much narrower band of acceptable behavior for women leaders in the workplace.”

“Being heard. Sometimes I feel like I’m invisible.”

“Unequal Pay.”

One thing is clear—there is no single reason why women still sometimes find themselves on unequal and unjust footing in the workplace. Nevertheless, there are a number of things that leaders and organizations can do to continue to recruit, retain, and promote women—including increasing the percentage of women in the organization, helping women find meaning in their work, offering flexible work options, and giving them real opportunities to lead.

Above all, women in this study shared that what they really want is to be seen, heard, and interacted with fairly. As one participant put it when asked what she wanted from organizations: “To be treated with dignity and respect.”



# Research Methodology and Analyses

## Participants and Procedures

An anonymous online survey was administered via both the Center for Creative Leadership's and Watermark's e-mail newsletters and websites in 2016–2017. These samples largely consist of members and alumni from the two organizations, however, all social media followers were invited to participate. As a token of appreciation for completing the survey, participants were given access to a free leadership development webinar.

Our final sample consisted of 745 men and women (560 women, 183 men, 2 decline to state).<sup>6</sup> The average age was 47 (standard deviation 10.18). 78.5% identified as heterosexual, 1.9% as queer, 19.5% decline to state. The majority of the sample are White/Caucasian (61%), married (56.5%), and have children (65%). Most participants currently live in the US (76%) and 70.5% have spent most of their lives in the USA. Participants came from diverse organizational backgrounds (24% in technology, 13% in education/academia, 7.8% in independent consulting, 7.1% nonprofits, 6.2% healthcare, 5.9% manufacturing, 5.8% financial services, <5% other industries). Their organizational level was diverse as well, with 20.5% at the Executive/C-level, 26.9% director, 24% management, 23.7% staff, and 4.4% other. 50% work in orgs with 1,000+ employees. 42% have worked in their field 20 or more years. The participants were highly educated (92.6% have at least a bachelor's degree, 46.5% have a master's, 15.9 have a doctorate or professional degree).

## Analyses

**Why Organizations Should Want Women in the Workplace:** Data for this section were analyzed using a series of hierarchical linear regressions, with participants' age, industry, organization size, leadership level, ethnicity, gender, and data source (i.e., CCL or Watermark media outlet) entered in the first step, and the estimated percentage of women in the workplace in the second step. Additional regressions were also run separately for men and women. All findings reported were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Why You Should Want to Work for a Woman:** Data for this section were analyzed using a series of general linear models with gender of participant and gender of boss entered as independent variables, and age, industry, organization size, leadership level, ethnicity, gender, and data source entered as control variables. All findings reported were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Women Want to Find Their Calling:** Pairwise t-tests were used to compare women's preferences for why they stayed with their current employers. All differences reported were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Quotes were taken from open-ended survey questions.

**Women Want to Flex:** Gender differences reported in this section were found using a series of univariate general linear models, with gender as the independent variable; leader level, age, and data source as control variables. Additional general linear models were conducted adding parenthood status as an additional independent variable and splitting the file by gender. All differences reported were statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Quotes were taken from open-ended survey questions.

**Women Want REAL Leadership Opportunities—and They Can Spot the Fake Ones:** No statistical differences were found in this section ( $p > .05$ ). Qualitative themes for why men and women refused leadership opportunities were culled from multiple choice questions and open-ended data.

For more information about this study, please contact [Cathleen Clerkin](#) at the Center for Creative Leadership.





## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this study does not provide evidence of cause-and-effect. For example, perhaps organizations with a better workplace culture attract more women; or, perhaps women in organizations cultivate more desirable organizational climates.
- <sup>2</sup> Out of a list of 10 options
- <sup>3</sup> In the APA study, a larger percentage of women than men endorsed these top 2 statements, however, no statistically significant gender differences were found in our study. This may be due to smaller sample size, or because we largely surveyed leaders, rather than the workforce at large.
- <sup>4</sup> These percentages are in agreement with findings from Lean In and McKinsey & Co. (2016), which found that 75% of women and 78% of men want to be promoted.
- <sup>5</sup> It should be noted that “null” statistical findings do not prove that there are no differences, simply that no differences were detected in our sample.
- <sup>6</sup> Because the majority of participants recruited through Watermark were women, our sample skews female (roughly half of participants recruited through CCL were female). Data source was controlled for in all gender comparisons.

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