Empowering Women to Build and Benefit from their Networks

Many organizations are working to increase the representation of women in leadership positions, particularly at senior levels. Research suggests that greater gender balance in senior leadership is associated with greater profits, social responsibility, improved customer experiences, and other benefits.

Yet, women remain underrepresented in management positions, particularly at the highest levels.

Historically, professional networks have been part of the problem — often called the "old boys club" — and women continue to face unique challenges in developing and leveraging professional networks. However, professional networks can also be part of the solution to addressing persistent gender gaps in career success and economic opportunity. This ebook draws on recent studies and articles to present actionable strategies for leaders and development professionals aiming to empower women to build and benefit from more influential and supportive professional networks.

Introduction

Professional networks are critical for workplace effectiveness and career advancement. These contacts provide support, information, and access to opportunities. Yet, the extent to which men and women can effectively build and benefit from their networks can impact workplace effectiveness and career trajectories. Women frequently encounter systemic barriers to developing and leveraging their networks as effectively as their male counterparts. Addressing these challenges requires a targeted approach, focusing on empowerment, inclusivity, and intentional network development.

Challenges Women Face in Building Their Network

Substantial research has documented barriers women face when building their professional networks. Among these barriers are the following three challenges.

Access to Networks: Women report having limited access to influential, often male-dominated networks, impacting their visibility and opportunities for career advancement.

Perceived Utility as a Network Contact: Bias leads some people to view women as less desirable network contacts because of a perceived lack of competence, power, and influence in their organization.

Disproportionate Domestic Demands: Women are often responsible for more household duties, including a larger portion of childcare, limiting their opportunities to engage in after-hours events or networking opportunities.

Despite these challenges, men and women have similarly O.D.D. (open, diverse, and deep) core professional networks. This finding doesn't mean the challenges mentioned above don't exist in many workplaces. Rather, women have adapted and have found ways to overcome these barriers and build similar networks as men.

Leader Network Diagnostic (LND) data

We analyzed a subset of our professional networks database to compare men's and women's networks. Our analysis of 6,851 individuals who have completed the Leader Network Diagnostic (54% women and 46% men) found that most men and women have closed and deep core professional networks of similar size (10 contacts).

Women and men have similar network attributes

	Size	Network Openness			Network Depth			
		Open	Closed	Very Closed	Very Distant	Not Close	Close	Very Close
Women	10	21%	55%	23%	3%	22%	44%	31%
Men	10	20%	54%	25%	3%	20%	46%	31%

Men and women also tend to have similar diversity in their networks when it comes to the proportion of their contacts who work in different units, physical locations, managerial levels, and outside their organization.

One notable exception is the gender composition of men's and women's networks.

	Network Diversity				
	Demographic (cross-gender)	Geographic (other location)	Horizontal (cross-unit)	Stakeholder (external)	Vertical (cross-level)
Women	**53%**	66%	67%	38%	53%
Men	**25%**	67%	67%	40%	48%

Over half of the connections in women's core professional networks are to men (i.e., cross-gender connections). In contrast, only a quarter of the connections in men's core professional networks are to women. **This finding suggests that access to powerful, male-dominated networks might still be a barrier for women.**

Challenges Women Face in Benefiting from their Network

Emerging research finds that, even when men and women have networks similar in size, structure, or composition, they often get different returns from their connections. This research points to several challenges women face in benefiting equally from their networks.

Gendered Expectations: Women navigate complex social dynamics and gendered expectations of receiving resources or value from their connections that influence their networking strategies and outcomes.

The Backlash Double Bind: Women networking with high-status network connections can face scrutiny or backlash, potentially limiting their willingness to utilize these connections.

Resources Exchanged: Men and women have a similar mix of contacts at various organizational levels (higher, same, and lower), and a similar percentage of their contacts (as a whole) provide them with resources. Yet, we identified a consistent and troubling pattern when looking deeper into who provided those resources—A smaller percentage of women's internal higher-ranking contacts provided them with key resources.

The Influence of Gender on Network Resources

High-ranking contacts in a network are valuable because they can access important resources, influence decisions, and help others by recommending them for new career opportunities.

Women receive fewer resources from their high-ranking contacts compared to men, including significant differences in receiving help with work, energy, and sponsorship for career advancement.

These types of support are essential for anyone to succeed in their job, remain motivated, and progress in their career. Therefore, even though these differences might seem small, they can have a significant impact over time.

Resources from Internal Higher-Ranking Contacts

Resource Functions	Perform		Progress		Prosper		Prepare	
	Assistance	Energy	Sponsorship	Innovation	Support	Friendship	Development	Purpose
Women	67.0%	53.7%	68.2%	59.8%	33.9%	21.8%	65.3%	35.3%
Men	72.2%	58.0%	73.4%	62.7%	36.2%	25.2%	67.9%	36.7%
Difference	-5.2%	-4.4%	-5.2%	-2.9%	-2.3%	-3.4%	-2.6%	-1.4%

It is also important to note that when we look at how men and women are engaging with their contacts at the same and lower levels, we see that **women are mentoring a higher percentage of their same- (+5.3%) and lower-raking contacts (+3.5%) than men.** Again, these small percentages can have a big cumulative effect. Organizational leaders must be aware of who carries more of the weight of developing others within their workforce.

These findings suggest that the give-and-take between men and women and their network contacts at different levels may be out of balance.

Strategies for Empowering Women in Networking

1. Creating Inclusive Networking Opportunities

Leaders and development professionals should focus on creating and promoting opportunities to build network connections during work hours and at family-friendly networking events. Gender imbalance within an organization's workforce and at different levels of the managerial hierarchy results in men and women having different opportunities to connect with others of the same and opposite gender. Creating networking opportunities that encourage inclusivity and diversity helps to ensure women have equal access to high-status networks and industry leaders. Moreover, reducing the additional burden that many employees feel to "network after hours" can enhance the well-being of all employees regardless of gender.

2. Encouraging Equity in Mentorship and Sponsorship

Encourage the establishment of mentorship and sponsorship programs aimed specifically at women, focusing on connecting them with influential leaders within and outside their organization. This can help in overcoming barriers to accessing advice, support, and career opportunities. Organizations should also provide guidance to higher-ranking contacts about the variety of resources the mentees and proteges need, emphasizing the importance of ensuring men and women alike receive resources that will help them perform well and advance in their careers.

3. Educating on Effective Networking Practices

Provide training and resources on effective networking strategies that address the unique challenges women face. This includes navigating gender dynamics, building confidence in networking situations, and covering best practices in building and maintaining professional connections. For women, this includes communicating a communal approach or intention to their network development and use. Emerging research suggests doing so is important for women to avoid backlash to "agentic networking," such as forming connections with high-status contacts or acting as a broker between one's network connections. Acting agentic (meaning concerned with individual pursuits or task accomplishment) is consistent with societal gender-based expectations for men but inconsistent with expectations that women are and should be communal. Importantly, training should not discourage women from developing or leveraging their networks. Rather, it is important to raise awareness regarding measures women can take to counteract potential backlash by communicating a communal motive and why de-stereotyping networking to overtime change expectations that lead to backlash are important steps toward addressing gender differences in network returns.

4. Promoting the Value of Diverse Networks

Highlight the importance of diverse networks for organizational success, encouraging leaders to actively support and engage with women in professional settings. This can reduce individuals' tendencies to prefer to connect with similar others (i.e., homophily) and also begin to change organizations' culture and individuals' perceptions around networking and gender.

5. Addressing Systemic Barriers

Organization leaders must identify and address systemic barriers that limit women's access to networking opportunities and inclusion in important workplace networks. This important work includes reviewing policies, practices, and cultural norms that may inadvertently disadvantage women in professional settings.

Conclusion

Empowering women to develop and leverage their professional networks is essential for achieving gender equality in the workplace. It's also a pragmatic strategy to improve business outcomes. It is important to acknowledge the unique challenges women face in building and benefiting from their networks and enact actionable and realistic solutions to help women succeed in the organizations we have today, not in a hypothetical ideal. By implementing targeted strategies that address these challenges head-on, organizational leaders and development professionals can facilitate women's workplace effectiveness and career success and initiate profound change. This dual approach—empowering women within the current organizational realities while advocating for systemic change—can transform workplaces into more inclusive, equitable environments. Our collective effort can and should aim to improve organizations, creating a foundation where empowerment and equality aren't just ideals but everyday realities.

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Supporting Resources

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