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Women in Management: Problems and Prospects

by Allison Falor

According to David Bloom, Harvard economist, "The rise in the number of working women is probably the single most important change that has ever taken place in the American labor market" (1986, p. 25). In the next twenty years the most important expected change is in the kinds of jobs that women hold (Galagan, 1986, p. 4). One change already in place is a sharp increase in the number of women in management. From 1970-1985, the proportion of women in management nearly doubled. In fact, close to one-third of management positions are filled by women ("Why Women Get the Jobs," 1986, p. 14). Despite these numbers, few women make it beyond entry-level positions. Women are seriously underrepresented in administrative management, filling "only 5-10% of top executive positions" (Bloom, 1986, p. 27).

Earnings of women managers reflect this underrepresentation in high level management. Typically, many of the managerial positions filled by women are dead-end, removed from a firm's centers of power and profit (Stead, 1985, p. 24). Although starting salaries are roughly equivalent for males and females, female salaries lag in later years. Two studies show that four to ten years after receiving an MBA, women earn about 80% as much as men with the same number of years of experience (Stephan, 1987, p. 38). On average, women managers earn about half as much as male managers (Stead, 1985, p. 25).

Why do so few women break into upper level management jobs? This article will explore this question along with some prospects for increasing the number of women in executive management.

Barriers Women Encounter

A variety of reasons have been advanced to explain why so few women move beyond low level managerial jobs. One explanation states that a worker's motivation, productivity, and career success are largely
determined by a firm’s organizational culture. Organizational culture typically reflects the sex stereotypes common in society. Males are frequently encouraged to be assertive, a trait often associated with managers, while assertive behavior in females may be discouraged. Femininity may be seen as incompatible with management, with women often perceived as illogical and emotional. A survey carried out by the *Harvard Business Review* found that one in five of the men surveyed thought “women are temperamentally unfit for management” (Galagan, 1986, p. 4). Senior management may feel uncomfortable working with women; some managers report that they have trouble supervising women (Stephan, 1987, p. 39).

Because of affirmative action legislation, blatant hiring discrimination based on sex has decreased, but subtle discrimination after hiring is common. Employers may wait until promotion time to advance men rather than women. If those who control promotion have a sex-typed image of the “ideal” manager, that image excludes women (Kanter, 1987, p. 14). If a “good old boys’” network is in place, women often find strong opposition to their efforts to climb the corporate ladder. They may find themselves bumping into an invisible barrier, a “glass ceiling,” at promotion time. Senior management may keep women away from a firm’s power centers by assigning them to creative job titles that sound impressive but represent lateral rather than vertical moves (Stephan, 1987, p. 39). In addition, the greater the risks that senior management must assume, the more likely will their choice for promotion be the safe and familiar, or in other words, male (Kanter, 1987, p. 16).

Sex stereotyping affects individual women as well as organizations. Traditional female socialization may discourage such traits as assertive behavior (Fischer, 1987, p. 122). Socialization also affects women’s attitudes and expectations towards a career. Women’s career expectations are often lower than those of men; women may show less ambition, and plan less systematically. One study, for example, showed that women expect to earn only about 60% of what men expect to earn (Stephan, 1987, p. 38). Women also show greater ambivalence to a career than men; many work part-time. They may have a stronger taste for home time than for occupational time (Zalokar, 1986, p. 381), and may leave their jobs more frequently than men as they move with their husbands to new locations or have children. Because many women tend to move in and out of the labor market, they have less job training and experience than men who stay on the job (Fischer, 1987, p. 116).
Prospects for Change

Since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, discrimination on the basis of sex has been illegal. Title VII of the Act forbids discrimination in hiring, firing, pay, and terms or conditions of employment. A recent national survey showed broad support for affirmative action (Stead, 1985, p. 27). Given this public support and court decisions on affirmative action, firms are taking greater care to avoid sex discrimination against employees.

Education, like the law, helps women on the job. As the formal education of women has improved, they are better prepared for careers in management. In the two decades between 1965 and 1985, the percent of women with some college education more than doubled, from 20 to 42%. An even greater increase appears in the number of women earning degrees from business schools. Women now earn 40% of these degrees compared to 10% in 1970 (Bloom, 1986, p. 27). In 1980, one of every four graduate school students was a woman, a substantial increase over the 1960's when only one in 25 graduate students was female (Stephan, 1987, p. 37). Women with increased formal education are more likely to return to work after having a child (Zalokar, 1986, p. 14).

As well as gaining more education, women are also forming support groups to help one another cope with the work environment. These range from large organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) to "good old girls" networks in many cities. As women talk with one another about work, they can exchange information about career problems and opportunities. In this way, they can help each other advance in much the same way as men use "good old boys" networks. The sheer numbers of women in the work force can also help women advance on the job. With greater numbers, they feel less alone and more willing to speak up and take risks.

As women become more educated and develop support groups, their attitudes and expectations tend to change. In the 1960s, women primarily entered traditional female occupations; they became teachers, nurses, librarians, secretaries. In the 1980s, women entered many more traditionally male occupations. Younger women born in the decade after WWII show a deeper attachment to a career and less preference for time at home than older women born in the decade before the war (Zalokar, 1986, p. 379). If this trend continues, women will become less ambivalent about a career and their job expectations will rise.

Many firms have made changes to help women balance the responsibilities of home and job. Firms may allow flexible scheduling that permits employees to work a regular number of hours each week, but...
sometimes in three of four days instead of five, and sometimes at hours
different than the traditional nine to five. A majority of medium and large
firms provide some form of maternity leave (Bloom, 1986, p. 29). Assistance with child care is expanding rapidly. In 1978, fewer than 50
employers helped their employees with child care; eight years later, over
2,000 helped (Bloom, 1986, p. 28). Child care has become a political issue
popular with both Democrats and Republicans. A number of states are
experimenting with low interest loans and tax benefits that encourage
companies to provide child care for their employees (Bloom, 1986, p. 30).

Conclusion

Although opportunities for women in management have increased in
recent decades, a "glass ceiling" keeps too many out of high-level posi-
tions. Deeply rooted sex stereotypes are a major barrier to women achiev-
ing equality with men in the job market. Affirmative action legislation,
higher levels of education, support groups, and women's changing ex-
pectations have helped women gain ground in the struggle for equality
in position and pay. Many firms have also helped through new policies
for flex-time, maternity leave, and child care.

In the end, demographics will push organizations to hire and promote
women. With a decrease in the growth rate of the labor force, firms will
be forced to compete for well-educated employees. At the same time,
the trend among women is to attach greater importance to work and in-
crease career expectations. Increased competition for employees and
women's rising expectations can make it more likely that women break
into upper management.

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