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Looking Through the “Glass Ceiling:” Compensation Equity & Promotional Challenges

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EDITORIAL OFFICE

Leaders and Non-leaders: A Comparative Study of Some Major Developmental Aspects

*Karin Amit, Micha Popper, Revuen Gal,
Tamar Mamane Levy, & Alon Lisak*

2

Faculty Development through Training: Political and Public Relations Implications

Claretha Hughes

20

An Empirical Investigation Focusing on the Composition and Performance of the Fortune 500

*Joseph T. Martelli, Patricia B. Abels, &
Kara M. Ward*

31

Looking Through the "Glass Ceiling:" Compensation Equity & Promotional Challenges

Michaeline Skiba & Joseph Mosca

46

Women in Management and Emotional Disequilibrium in the Workplace

Willia Glover

55

International Truck and Engine Parts and Partners Case and Teaching Note

Gurram Gopal & Eric Stasken

64

Narcissus in the Workplace: What Organizations Need to Know

Mark Arvisais

79

Guidelines for Contributors

95

Looking Through the “Glass Ceiling:” Compensation Equity & Promotional Challenges

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine how a select group of current businesspeople view women’s pay equity and promotional opportunities. Research participants were selected from the memberships of two national professional associations and a graduate student class within a university’s MBA program. Although the collected information was limited in its scope, it shows great potential regarding but not limited to such dimensions as the importance of mentors, acquisition of knowledge of one’s chosen professional discipline as well as the law, and the need for work-life balance.

BACKGROUND

Historically, women in the U.S. have experienced invisibility in society in general and in most areas of the business sector in particular. In recent times – particularly over the last 40+ years – a woman working outside of her household is viewed as a normal occurrence. This sign of dramatic change in the composition of the U.S. workforce is shown in the following report:

“In 1950, the overall participation rate of women was 34 percent. The rate rose to 38 percent in 1960, 43 percent in 1970, 52 percent in 1980, and 58 percent in 1990. The number of women in the labor force rose from 18 million in 1950 to 66 million in 2000, an annual growth rate of 2.6 percent. The share of women in the labor force grew from 30 percent in 1950 to almost 47 percent in 2000, and the number of working women is projected to reach 92 million by 2050 (Toossi 2002, p. 18).

Women’s participation in the workforce is broadening and, in some industries, they are sharing the same roles and responsibilities as men. However, it is not surprising that a number of major industries remain highly segregated by gender, and this occupational segregation may be due to the nature of the job functions themselves. According to Shapiro, “the largest list of industries, the ones in which women gained a substantial presence during the last century, included some forms of manufacturing, many forms of retailing, commerce, the professions, leisure and recreation, and public administration – in short, all types of industries except those requiring heavy labor or a few, such as truck driving, where men by one means or another managed to retain a strong hold or where employers felt less compelled to replace them with women (Shapiro 2006, p. 23).”

Although women are more visible in the workforce, they continue to be confronted with considerable challenges that coincide with their visibility. These challenges include such dimensions as work-life balance and gender discrimination. In terms of work-life balance, one study of working women in the United States, Sweden and the Netherlands concluded that these women “...have given more effort to household chores and childcare and less effort to the workplace compared to male employees. Although these women provided lesser focus in the workplace, their total workloads appear to be somewhat greater and more unevenly distributed than those of men due to heavier workload at home (Gjerdingen et al 2000, p. 1).” This same study indicated that heavy workloads may adversely affect women’s health and impact their careers due to compensatory reductions in work commitment and job status.

In terms of gender discrimination, one researcher who studied employment practices in the software engineering field found that women tend to start at lower positions and earn lower salaries than men and, perhaps more disturbingly, the salary gap is found in studies that equate years of experience, level of education, and industry (Isaacs 2005). Another study of 6,000 managers found that a quarter of the women employed in senior jobs did not feel adequately involved in decision making and did not think it was safe to speak up (Paton 2005).

Today, most of us want to believe that workplace equality for women is no longer an issue. Laws that include the Equal Pay Act, Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and Equal Employment Opportunity Act prohibit employers from discrimination based on sex, race, marital status, religion, national origin, age, or receipt of public assistance. Educational opportunities for women are increasing and, as a result, more women are moving into managerial levels that were once considered the exclusive province of men. Nevertheless, compensation and promotional opportunities for women have lagged behind these advancements and, while not as prominent as a few decades ago, the "glass ceiling" still exists.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

According to a 2004 report on women and diversity published by the Diversity Best Practices/Business Women's Network in Washington, DC, women were paid an average of 79.7 cents for every dollar paid to men in 2000. The average earnings for women (workers and non-workers) were \$16,554, compared with \$35,942 for men (workers and non-workers) (US General Accounting Office 2003). More disturbingly, three years later, the median wage comparison demonstrated persistent inequity, as the ratio of women's median wage to men's median wage reached 81.3% in 2003 (Economic Policy Institute 2003). At the present time, most data sources suggest that these wages have not significantly changed. In fact, the Institute for Women's Policy Research stated, "Given the current rates of change, it will be 50 years before women achieve equal pay with men and nearly 100 years before they gain equal representation in Congress" (BusinessWeek online 2004).

In more recent years, statistical data on women's salaries vary according to their sources and foci; however, they do not show wide disparities in overall compensation results. For example, according to *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*, published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor and which presents data culled from a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households, research findings included the following:

Women held half of all management, professional, and related occupations in 2004.

Nearly 60 percent of women who worked at some time in calendar year 2003 worked full time and year round, compared with 41 percent in 1970.

From 1979 to 2004, women's earnings as a percent of men's salaries increased by 18 percentage points, from 62 to 80 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005).

Similarly and as recently as the first quarter of 2005, another body of research indicated that on average, women holding the same position as men earn only 78 percent of what their male counterparts earn, regardless of the fact that, at that point in time, women held 56.3 percent of executive director positions within the United States (Jones 2005). An alarming and related trend from this same study revealed that the larger the organization, the more significant the gap between male and female executive directors.

The Equal Pay Act was implemented over 30 years ago, and changes in civil rights legislation enacted in 1991 allowed for jury trials and substantial compensatory and punitive damages against companies that

discriminate by gender. Nonetheless, it appears clear that economic, market and demographic forces over the last decade alone have contributed to the increase in sex discrimination lawsuits and workplace distrust – among both employees and employers.

RATIONALE

This research study was designed to examine current views of women's bonus and promotion opportunities within the business and academic sector, and whether women are receiving bonuses and promotions that are comparable to men. Interest in this project began in mid-2004 during the Morgan Stanley trial that, at that time, was the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC's) first sexual discrimination case against a Wall Street firm, and which resulted in the EEOC's contention that the company systematically denied women promotions and raises. The trial featured testimony from over 25 employees who represented the experiences of 340 women employed by Morgan Stanley since 1995. Highlights from this trial included one plaintiff's testimony that women had to work longer hours to prove themselves and that men with resumes similar to hers routinely were promoted over her, including some she had trained (Kelly and DeBaise 2004).

Wal-Mart Stores, the world's largest retailer, is another employer under intense scrutiny for unfair policies including discrimination against women. Although Wal-Mart has tried to revitalize its corporate image in the eyes of customers and investors through increased marketing efforts, a more proactive corporate affairs department, and a restructured investor relations group (Troy 2006), a protest from department managers in a Florida-based facility prompted 200 employees to walk out in protest against unfair policies involving low salary, overtime work without compensation, and sex discrimination (Gogoi and Pallavi 2006). These legal actions are provocative in light of Wal-Mart's changes to its compensation structure in 2005. As explained by the company's chief diversity officer, Charlyn Jerrells Porter, "...the sex and race of those promoted closely reflect the percentages of those who apply, and this is not a quota system. Only the most qualified are to be promoted" (Morris 2005, p. 68). In addition to this policy change, Wal-Mart also requires that new hires with the same experience receive the same starting pay, regardless of what their pay was in the past.

The Morgan Stanley case was settled out of court with a \$54 million settlement. On February 6, 2007, the Ninth Circuit court affirmed class certification in the Wal-Mart sex discrimination case, the largest civil rights class action (with over 1.5 million plaintiffs) ever certified against a private employer. Other prominent cases within the last few years have included Boeing, which paid over \$70 million to settle a class-action lawsuit based on pay equity and the timeliness of promotions (as compared with male employees' promotion time) and Costco, which faces a promotional opportunity class action suit.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research uncovered in this paper intended to determine how three select groups of business professionals view issues associated with pay equity and promotional opportunities for professionally employed females. Research participants were selected from two professional associations, one of which is comprised of various communications experts who work within the broad field of medical education (biomedical communications departments of college and university-based medical centers; medical librarians; medical education instructional designers; and sole proprietors of independent telemedicine services). The second association is a healthcare-related group whose membership is comprised of college and university-based healthcare professors and administrators. Most members of this second group also actively work as consultants in management, marketing, public health administration, and clinical settings (as nurses, physicians, and therapists). The third group was comprised of graduate

students who were enrolled in the same course within the MBA program of a university in the northeastern region of the U.S.

The two association samples received an electronically mailed cover letter and attached survey, and the third group of graduate students received hard copies of the same materials. The researchers sought to receive answers to the following questions:

In your personal experience as a **non-management employee**, do you believe that women have had bonus and promotional opportunities that are comparable to those offered to men? If so, why? If not, why not?

In your personal experience as a **manager of others**, do you believe that women have had bonus and promotional opportunities that are comparable to those offered to men? If so, why? If not, why not?

What **advice** would you offer to an entry-level, female professional regarding her career strategies?

The electronic version was sent to approximately 250 people from the two association groups in early and mid-June of 2007, and 15 people responded. The graduate student population elicited 12 respondents. The researchers believe that the timing of data collection inhibited a larger return from the association members, and recommendations for broadening this number will be explained later in this paper.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographics

Twenty-six of the 27 respondents also responded to a request for basic demographic data. Among the 15 association respondents, 14 were of Caucasian-European ancestry, with an average age of 53 years (only two were younger than 50 years), and an average maximum salary slightly over \$100,000. All but two listed their highest position as one that involved management, with one of the two exceptions an Associate Professor. Six of the 15 members of this group are males. This population could be characterized as Caucasian, mature, upper-middle class managers associated with the healthcare field.

In terms of the 12 respondents among the graduate student population, 11 reported themselves as Caucasian and one reported herself as a Latina. Both the average age and the average maximum salary in this group varied widely. The average age was 36 years (with six of the 12 respondents in their early 20s). However, one was 30 years of age, two were in their 40s, two were in their 50s, and the oldest respondent was 75. The average maximum salary was \$54,000, almost half of what was reported by the association groups. The highest managerial position attained within this group was a director who also earned the highest salary of \$120,000. This population could be characterized as Caucasian females, age and income diverse, lower to middle class managers seeking advanced business degrees.

Qualitative Responses

The survey contained only three open-ended questions, and the following is a summary of the responses from the 27 participants.

Question #1: In your personal experience as a non-management employee, do you believe that women have had bonus and promotional opportunities that are comparable to those offered to men? If so, why? If not, why not?

Thirteen of the 27 respondents (approximately half of the sample) answered “yes” to this question; however, two of these indicated that opportunities applied only to promotions and not bonuses, due to their specific organizations in which bonuses are not given to non-management employees. One of these female respondents remarked that “women have had promotional opportunities in our department, but few have succeeded in their promoted positions...not because of incompetence but the inflexibility and short-sightedness of these individuals.” Another 51 year old female Director and Associate Dean claimed that while she received bonuses and recognition, she “never felt treated in a manner equitable to the recognition given to men” and added “while I have heard complaints of female colleagues in this regard, I don’t know all of the facts to make a determination on the validity of their claims.” A 64 year old female Associate Dean held a similar view with the following: “I was provided professional development opportunities that led to advancement, but the salary increases or bonuses didn’t come easily.” Interestingly, one respondent, a 60 year old male physician who works for the federal government, stated that, in his environment, “if women do not get comparable treatment to men, they can and do complain with serious consequences to management if their claims are proved valid.”

Respondents who answered “no” to this item spoke about the lack of female role models: “the numbers of women in power positions who could mentor [others] are smaller, and these ‘mentor women’ are also often trying to juggle families and the responsibilities of their power positions. Time is the limiting factor.” Another felt that the healthcare field in particular pays lower than other industries and “no matter how much we may think the division is closer, males are still seen as the main provider, regardless of their performance or qualifications.” Yet another respondent claimed that even with paternity leave, men have the option of staying at work or going home, and that most women bear the family responsibilities while men remain more stable, work-wise and for advancements.

Five respondents spoke of the need for “standing firm” and negotiating for their opportunities. One female 51 year old Assistant Administrator of Nursing Services told this self-described “story:” “In the mid-1970s, I took a position as an emergency room nurse that had been earlier filled by a man. I found out that his hourly wage was higher than mine, despite the fact that he had no more experience than I did. When I questioned our Human Resources folks about this, they responded that he was able to handle the stronger work requirements of the job. I reminded them that I’d be doing the exact same things that he did and that I was equally capable. They revised my salary to fit his immediately.” In terms of compensation differentials, one 57 year old female government employee who is earning a six-figure salary felt that over time, opportunities have improved but, as she stated, “...in some areas the opportunities have gotten better but it’s still not equal.” Another 42 year old Latina manager stated that in her last two jobs, she did not receive a promotion and “I left and looked for better jobs.”

Question #2: In your personal experience as a manager of others, do you believe that women have had bonus and promotional opportunities that are comparable to those offered to men? If so, why? If not, why not?

From the managerial perspective (versus the employee perspective), responses to this item were more greatly dispersed. Although 14 participants answered “yes,” (slightly more than half of the sample), six answered “no,” six indicated the item was not applicable to their situations, and one was “unsure.” Among those who answered in the affirmative, these statements emerged:

“At no time did a supervisor discourage me from giving recognition to a female and recognition in terms of bonuses, promotions and salary increases were equitable across gender.”

“As the owner of my own business, I have had opportunities that are not available to men...certain state grants give preference to minorities and women. I’m not sure if this is still the case, but I have been the recipient of a project that gave preference to women.”

"I know of no situation that involved unequal pay for equal performance. If I had discovered such a situation, I would have rectified it at once."

"I made it my business to move up. I don't believe that women should get a hand-out. It should be based on how well you do your job."

"The world is your oyster and sex shouldn't make a difference. Character is one's most important quality."

Those who answered "no" did so with the following: "As a manager, I have not had the mentorship that other female colleagues have had. The women I have known who are willing to mentor are limited by time. As a golfer, it has only been in the past 10-15 years that professional women have learned that business and mentoring take place during the 3-4 hours on the course." Other negative responses included these remarks:

"Women have had promotional opportunities here, and the successful ones know who they are and what unique strengths they bring to the department. While I recognize the strengths of these individuals, upper management does not."

"I feel that there are multiple deciding factors depending on the profession. Men's abilities are given more weight in certain professions seen as 'unsuitable' for women. We are still in a very gender biased society."

While one respondent said that "all my staff except one are female, and I value the work ethics and dedication of female workers over males," he added, "females have more responsibility at home and need flexibility of working hours" and "on the other hand, females have less opportunity of promotion, partly due to system bias, partly because they need to (or choose to) divide their time between work and family."

The one respondent whose response was deemed "uncertain" answered as follows: "In my experience as a manager of others, the primary reason women did not have the same promotional opportunities as men was due to their greater priority on flex time often tied to family or caregiver responsibilities and commitments."

Question #3: What advice would you offer to an entry-level, female professional regarding her career strategies?

This question was intended to elicit the various activities, traits, and behaviors that women use or do not use to achieve parity with men in the workplace. Not surprisingly, it produced a thoughtful and comprehensive array of replies that fell under the following topics.

Acquire knowledge of one's chosen profession as well as the law. "Learn about the EEO complaint process and use it if there is discrimination in hiring, advancement or other personnel action affecting one's career." "Do your homework and learn to delegate." "Use legal means to challenge business practices that appear to be discriminatory." "Education, education, education – can I say get your education? One will have more leverage for career strategies than a non-educated person." "Earn as many relevant qualifications as you can." "If she perceives inequities, she needs to speak up about them or seek employment elsewhere." "Get a good education. A female, if not better than a male, will not be seen as their peer in our school system." "Stay on top of the latest data in your field and don't hesitate to learn areas outside of your field of expertise."

Seek out mentors/networking contacts. "Networking is critical and does take time, so select your networking opportunities strategically. Seek a mentor without being or appearing to be too needy or

indecisive.” “Belong to a professional women’s group. Networking with other professionals is a great way to find out about new opportunities and advancement.” “Attend relevant conferences and professional meetings to network.” “You must network, network, network and not fall into the trap of putting other women down. I’ve seen that quite a bit in my previous jobs.”

Be aware of the need for work-life balance. “Beware of falling into the pitfalls that men have fallen into historically, such as careerism at the cost of personal and family life.” One respondent concentrated on this topic with these statements: “Women need to prioritize and balance their family and career goals early on. If career success is to be her priority she cannot always count on an employer’s having family friendly policies of flextime or telecommuting. Successful men and women alike commonly work in excess of 60 hours per week...successful women, more so than men, are likely to delay having families and are more likely than their male counterpart to feel added stress as a consequence of less social and familial support on the home front. Regardless of her priority she will need to understand that its pursuit will come at a cost and involve both sacrifice and compromise.”

Other forms of advice included the need to consider autonomy (“open your own business and be your own boss”); performing at one’s best (“There is nothing better in terms of career advancement than giving the job all that you can. Performance gets recognized eventually” and “Work hard and demonstrate your talent”); taking calculated risks; preparing to be an effective negotiator; and showing confidence/determination (“If she perceives inequities, she needs to speak up about them” and “Stand up for what you believe in, and don’t compromise your values and ethical principles”).

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As mentioned earlier, this study produced 27 respondents. These researchers believe that the primary reason for this low number for the association groups was the time of year during which the surveys were sent to them – in the beginning of the summer when many businesspeople and most academic administrators are traveling or vacationing. In retrospect, a telephone-based structure, albeit a laborious process, is a more structured and personal one that may have proven more effective than the electronic approach. Although the hard-copy survey worked well with the graduate student segment and elicited rich feedback, the researchers believe that regardless of the use of either telephone or paper-based media, the human or interactive presence of a researcher is essential to qualitative data collection and, in particular, thoughtful and more in-depth responses from participants.

While the information collected from these small groups cannot be generalized across the spectrum of all U.S. women engaged in professional careers, and it does not thoroughly represent the regional, occupational and functional disciplines that are occupied by female professionals, it reinforced topics that continue to sustain interest and resolution from both the academic and business communities. For example, studies show that mentors and role models can have a significant effect on women’s advancement and high-profile visibility (Mattis 2001; Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger and Meaney 2008), confidence levels (Torrissi-Mokwa 2006), and psychosocial support (Roemer 2002). In addition, work-life balance issues most likely will increase as more and more women continue to earn higher educational levels and contribute to their organizations’ intellectual capital (Florida and Goodnight 2005; Gilbert 2007; Neil 2007).

In spite of the advancements that women have made over the last several decades, women and men still possess different amounts of accumulated labor market experience, and some disparity may be due to different occupational and industry distributions (Anonymous 2003). Disparities appear to be most acute within the technical and scientific occupations collectively known as the science, engineering, technology and mathematics (STEM) workforce. According to one research study, since 2000 and at the highest

level of training (PhD), "...women earned 46.3 percent of the PhDs in the biological sciences, 28 percent of the mathematics and statistics degrees, 26 percent in physical sciences, 21 percent in computer science, and 18 percent in engineering" (Rosser and Taylor 2008, p. 21). The authors of this study uncovered two of the same conclusions that these authors did in that family obligations (work-life balance) and a lack of networking and mentoring inhibit and often terminate women's presence in the STEM workforce. Within the information technology sector, salaries continue to remain unequal. In Computerworld's 2007 annual salary survey, "male IT professionals continue to out-earn their female counterparts. At the highest level of IT, male CIOs and vice-presidents made on average \$179,026 in total compensation, while women in the same jobs took in nearly \$6,000 less, at \$173,052. The pay differences between middle managers and technical workers are similarly unequal" (Hoffman 2007, p. 54). Executive recruiters who were queried about these numbers noted that salary gaps among IT positions have narrowed; however, they also expressed concern about the retention of talented females and the difficulties they encounter with promotions.

It is important to note that several participants in this study applied their advice to young, entry-level professionals who are *both* males and females, which raises the question of whether future research will reveal that career advice is universal for both sexes. Other dimensions that may or may not be revealed in future studies include the changes in attitudes (legally and socially) and culture across the country. Regardless of these and other themes that were not explored in this paper, they should be examined by others to determine how to maximize the productivity and potential of this large and growing segment of the workforce.

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