

# Up, Out or Different?

## The Career Dilemma for UK Women

An in depth study into women in UK business, the pinch points of their career and the skills and support needed to achieve progression.

### **Executive Summary**

with foreword by Helena Morrissey, CBE



Inspiring Women. Improving Business

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# Foreword

Helena Morrissey, CBE

CEO, Newton Investment & Founder of 30% Club

In the 18 months since Lord Davies' report and the two years since the launch of the 30% Club, I've witnessed something of an epiphany in British businesses over the topic of women on boards. It's now widely recognised that encouraging and enabling women to progress at every level of a company is good not just for those women but for businesses themselves. While we still need to work hard to achieve real balance, the pace of change is significant, and importantly, of course, it's been achieved without resorting to the short term and illusory fix of a quota. I'm strongly of the view that if change is to be meaningful, businesses must own and lead the efforts – that way is the only way to achieve sustainable, long term positive changes in corporate culture, more opportunities for women and better results for all.

It's important that this commitment to change comes from the organisations themselves but also that women have the chance to have their say in what this change should look like. This is about making companies a better place to work for everyone, and asking women how they think this can happen is a good place to start.

Everyday Talking Talent work with women across ages, levels and industries, to tackle the barriers to their career progression. By undertaking this survey they sought to benchmark the themes they are seeing throughout their coaching overall. The results offer an insight into the present situation for women in the workplace, as they see it, and their thoughts on future solutions and it gives us a pathway for change that is overwhelmingly unanimous; women from their twenties to seventies, at different levels and in different industries are in agreement on what they believe are the challenges and solutions.

In receiving over 2,500 responses, the research offers a robust understanding of what the needs of these women are, and therefore a high potential value for the UK businesses willing to invest in them. If businesses can be as clear in their actions in these areas for change as the women surveyed are in choosing them, real progress can continue to be made.

# Up, Out or Different?

## The Career Dilemma for UK Women

### Background

The female talent pipeline within UK business has been the subject of much recent scrutiny, especially since the launch of the Lord Davies Report in February 2011. Where we mostly see gender parity at graduate level, women's career progression currently narrows to a virtual standstill in the upper echelons. Although non-executive appointments have seen a marked improvement, the current level of 6.6%<sup>1</sup> executive board positions filled by women marks slow progress from 5.5% in 2010. This study provides further understanding into the narrowing of the talent pipeline.

### Research Details

Talking Talent received responses from over 2,500 UK women answering questions on their key

career "pinch points", the specific barriers that have challenged their career progression and the skills / support they feel they need to help overcome them. The research was undertaken as an online survey in June and July 2012, across 17 industries with age categories between 20s-70s.

### Results Overview

The results offer a consolidated opinion on the key pinch points of a woman's career, with two clear leading issues of career crossroads and maternity transition. The maternity transition featuring so strongly is to be expected but its prominence is more impactful when you consider that 55% of participants do not have any children. More surprising is that over 50% of the women surveyed

are considering what to do next in their career; they are at a career crossroads. The career crossroad is the number one pinch point and focus felt across all the age ranges and business levels. This is not an exclusive club of long standing employees simply looking for a change but rather a much broader collective continually assessing their career path and establishing what their own or other organisations can offer them.

This summary explores the research findings in more detail. It seeks to better understand what's driving a substantial part of the female workforce to have such powerful career re-evaluations and offers insight as to what UK business can be doing to better retain and progress its female talent.

### Top Three Career Pinch Points

Career crossroads (50%)

Maternity transition (45%)

Significant business change (35%)

### Top Three Skills for Career Progression

Self belief / confidence (55%)

Networking (54%)

Building profile / brand (40%)

### Top Three Issues Impeding Progression

Inflexible / long daily working hours (40%)

Rigid career options (40%)

Line manager behaviour (35%)

### Top Three Career Supports

Management support (54%)

Personal coaching / development (48%)

Flexible working (46%)

<sup>1</sup> 6.6% exec board directors in FTSE100 (Boardwatch, September 2012 <http://www.boardsforum.co.uk/boardwatch.html>)

# The Top Pinch Points

## Focus on Career Crossroads & Maternity

### Career Crossroads

- Women surveyed felt that the next career decision they made would be critical to the shape of their future career path. Over 50% found themselves deciding whether to progress up, out or pursue a different career altogether.
- The consistency of this message is absolute. The lowest recognition of this barrier was 48% at partner / board level rising to 54% for senior managers.
- Similarly age did not offer variation to this opinion with an identical number of women (52%) highlighting career crossroads in their 20s, 30s & 40s. Only in the 50s (46%) did numbers begin to fall.
- That career crossroads are recognised in the research by younger sections of the workforce demonstrates that not every challenge or barrier needs to have been directly experienced for its (future) impact to be recognised, evaluated and considered.
- The crossroad appears not to be a one off event but a deeper trend of constant re-evaluation as to the quality of career choice, path and pacing being offered and the organisational support underpinning it. That evaluation is taking place in the very early stages of a woman's career and on-going.

When looking to understand what's driving such strong outcomes the results are clear that a lack of flexibility in the approach to careers and working patterns is the lead issue followed by challenges around managerial support and behaviour. For many these challenges become crystallised around the time of maternity.

### Maternity Transition

- 45% of all women surveyed thought the maternity transition was a critical pinch point - the second most important across the entire population surveyed.
- For those who have been through the maternity transition the message from the research was very clear; it was the most challenging point in their career and the most significant barrier to career progression. 68% of working parents identified it as the lead pinch point.
- Interestingly, for women in their 20s and 30s without children it still featured prominently as the 3rd highest pinch point.

This last point is vital for organisations as it means that not only do they need to support the transition itself but also the preparation for it. Generation Y are looking and planning now for what they want from their life and career in the future.

"I'm not convinced my career is being shaped to meet my own ambitions and needs. It feels like a very standard one fits all type approach."

"I don't want to start a family now, but might wish to in the next 5 years. Not sure how this will fit with wanting to become Senior Associate and then Partner. More flexible working and remote working would be good."

"I feel - since my maternity leave - I have 'stalled' at a certain level where I have seen others sail past - it's disheartening especially when I work hard and my last 3 end of year reviews I have achieved outstanding."

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# Issues Impeding Career Progress - A More Flexible Future?

- As already mentioned the research shows that rigid career structures and inflexible / long working hours stand firm as obstacles in the career pathway of the women surveyed. A remarkable 88% of all respondents flagged rigid career options and / or inflexible working as an influence and barrier to their career progression.
- The challenge is felt at all ages and although it peaks for women in their 30s (71% highlight rigid career options; 79% inflexible / long working hours), a majority of those in their 20s also feel these are barriers to success. They remain barriers well into women's 40s when additional parenting milestones, such as starting / changing school or significant exams, add strongly to the desire for flexibility and choice.
- Segmenting the data further, the impact is most felt by working parents, for whom inflexible or long working hours (57%) comes out as the

main issue, just ahead of rigid career options. The priority of these two issues (they remain the top two) is reversed for non-working parents who also find line manager behaviour an almost equally strong challenge.

So the need for greater flexibility in the approach to the pacing, timing and nature of a woman's careers seems to grow ever stronger; run ever deeper into UK organisations. This research reinforces the need to address their concerns. Which companies

will take the leap of faith to make a difference, to show themselves as true supporters of flexible career plans? This is about far more than policy and practice; it's about a true integration of policy with the reality of what it means to everyone (managers and employees alike) day in, day out. Right now the rigidity of career path and lack of flexibility is translating into an in or out decision and as a result business is failing to offer choices to women which engender loyalty and offer valued career progression.

"I have managed to secure flexible / reduced working hours but I feel that being part time has impeded my career progression. I feel that if you work part-time it is sometimes assumed that you don't have the same level of ambition or expect the same level of reward as a full-time employee."

"Currently there are too many policy driven excuses instead of going the extra mile to create gold standard, tailored, individual career progression plans."

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# Developing the Right Skills for Progression

What is striking in the findings are the skills that women are seeking to enable significant career progression and overcome the barriers discussed. The more functional requirements of the role are largely deprioritised and there seems little doubt that these can be fulfilled. Instead there was a recognition and appetite for softer behavioural skills, which they saw as key to progression.

- Self-belief / confidence (56%) was the highest ranked requirement for all ages; even as women reached partner and senior manager it remained a priority.
- Networking was the second highest skill sought (54%) across all levels of employee, reducing only at partner level.
- Building profile and brand (38%) gains prominence as seniority grows, as does the desire for greater presence / gravitas.

These softer skills of self-development and promotion are clearly recognised as essential for progression but seem relatively unsupported by business or perhaps not prioritised by women to date. In seeking support to address these challenges the research outlines greater management support (53%) and coaching/ development (48%) as the most important tools to break down barriers to progression. In the short to medium term it is perhaps in these areas that the greatest strides can be made to improve the behavioural confidence and approach for women. The vast majority of coaching interventions will always be maximised by programmes which work closely with both manager and employee and the research reinforces how important and powerful it is to work with both parties if significant change is to be achieved.

"Career progression is not a focus of directors for anything but that which directly impacts on Funds and Fund performance."

"The kind of skills I am seeking can't be typically found through organisational training and my manager struggles to support any other development."

# Managers Can Make the Difference

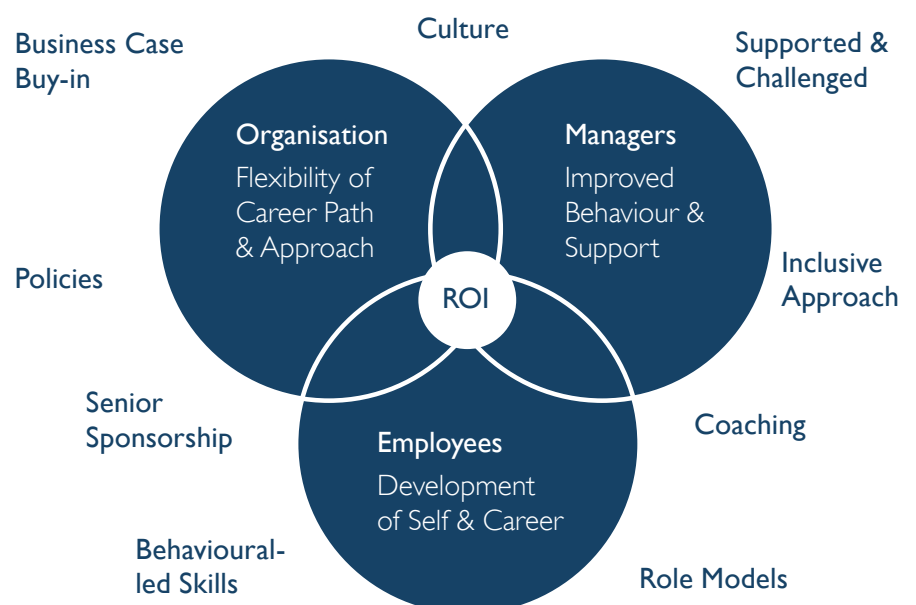
Both as a barrier to progression and conversely as a key support to career success, managerial behaviour and support features prominently throughout the research.

- Over half (54%) of all women, especially the more junior levels of team member and entry level manager, want greater managerial support.
- It was considered the no.1 factor which could help reduce barriers to career progression.
- The priority for this support as you approached a board level position is replaced by a greater desire for role models and senior sponsorship, reflecting the different support needs of women at this level.
- Although the requirement for managerial support may reduce slightly as roles become more senior, the impact of line manager behaviour on career progression is consistently identified (35% of all respondents) throughout organisational levels.

It's important to state that managers aren't or shouldn't be operating in isolation. They need to be supported by the organisation in finding ways to implement procedure and policy (headcount differentiating between full & part-time working for example) in a manner that still achieves the commercial goal but recognises the ambitions and needs of the female employee. The unconscious, or sometimes conscious bias against part-time workers is an area which is particularly highlighted by feedback within the research. There is also a need to develop managerial skill sets beyond that category to incorporate full time working parents and to address the bespoke development requirements of the female employee.

"Managers aren't thinking creatively about resources and how they can best be applied to market and client needs. Always wanting to put people in pre-existing boxes."

## Sustainable progress requires collective engagement



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# Sustainable Career Paths + Gender Diversity = Bottom Line Growth

The study shows that women are as focused as ever on their careers, and that is translating into careful consideration around what the next move is and where they will best achieve their aspirations. It is clear that the lack of flexibility and the rigidity of career paths in many organisations impacts female career momentum and decision making.

Organisations need to make sure there is the support in place to enable managers to make flexible, part-time and alternative career paths work. While good policies are often in place, they are not always so easy to translate into reality, particularly in places where long working hours seem a core role requirement. Managers, rightly are focused on the commercial viability of working in a different way and experimenting with alternative work patterns often feels like a risk. They need to be supported and developed to be able to have open conversations around career paths and aspirations, so that they can find alternative ways of supporting the different personal circumstances and needs of both men and women alike. The results of this research highlight how this is never more important than when facing the maternity transition. It is a critical time when both the employee and the manager need guidance as to how a career path can be maintained and flourish at a pace that is appropriate for all parties.

Given that the research highlights the need for employees to receive more support from their managers it would seem that there are challenges around how to educate managers to do this. Whether this is general lack of softer management skills or is specific to managing women and their needs is another question. For more senior individuals, it is less around support and more about the behaviours of the manager; perhaps senior women feel they are treated differently. The consistency of this feedback seems to suggest there are some systemic challenges as to how managers are supporting female employees in their careers and development.

The final theme of the research focuses on the role that women want to play in their own personal development. It shows that women want to grow at a core level where they can really shift their behaviour and step up to the challenges of being a woman in business. The areas that were highlighted in this study as important to women of all ages and levels are self-belief / confidence, networking, building profile and brand. These are topics that are not frequently discussed in business, unless there is an issue, yet they have unilaterally been identified as key areas for development. These areas focus on self-awareness, self-reflection and mind-set change in order to really shift

behaviours. This kind of work is best done via a coaching approach and the research shows that it is a recognised and sought after tool for women in their careers. However coaching is often reserved for more senior individuals and it begs the question as to how younger, emerging talent can gain the benefits of this level of development early enough to overcome some of the career challenges they face.

The research creates a strong picture of the shifts that need to take place at an organisational, manager and individual level in order to maximise overall performance. Each of those stakeholders needs to understand its role, be clear on the challenges and receive the appropriate support to enable them to make a difference. If all are working together, more sustainable career paths and patterns for women will be achieved and more women will progress faster. The net result of that is a more efficient organisation delivering higher levels of return to its shareholders.



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