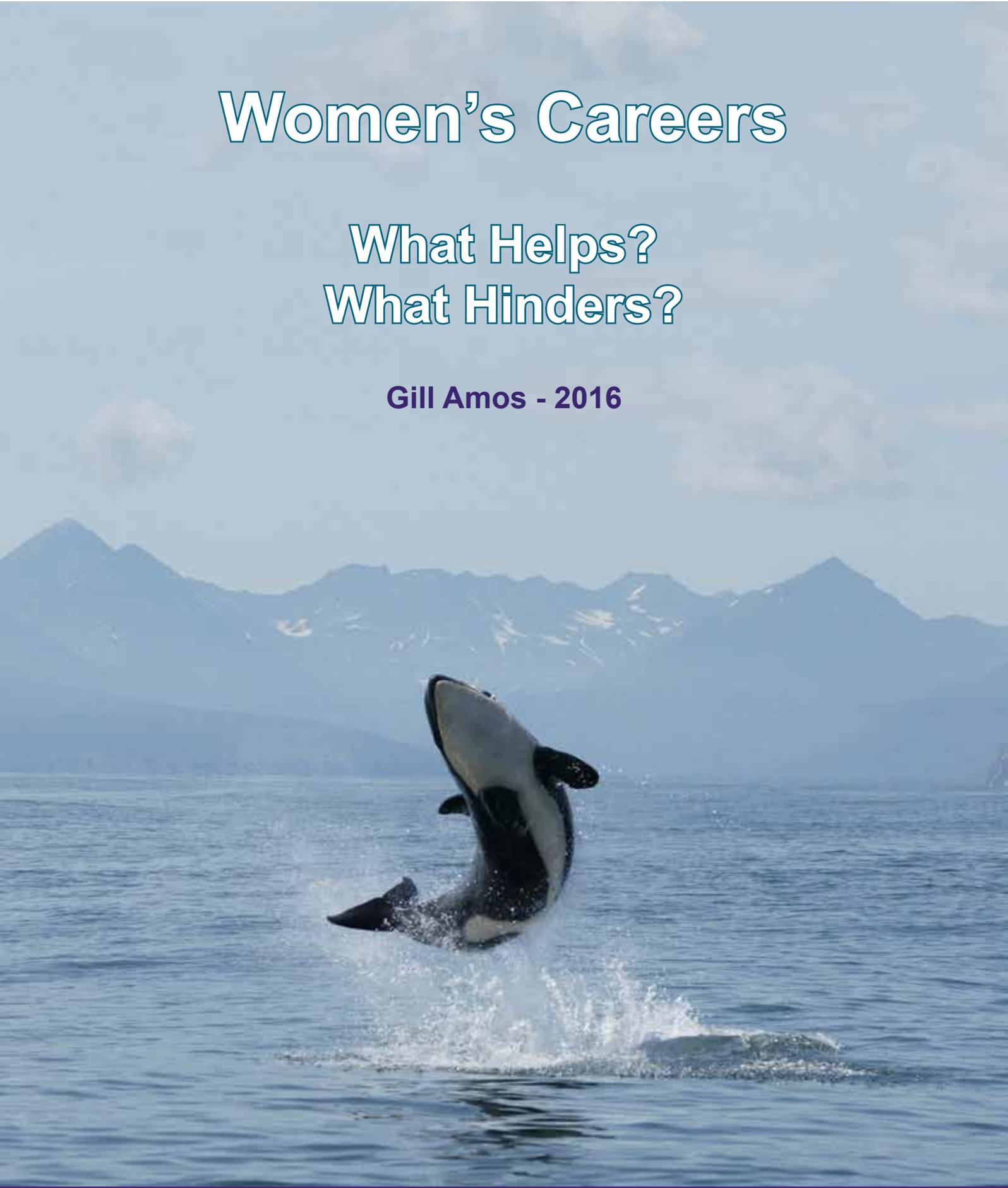


Women's Careers

What Helps? What Hinders?

Gill Amos - 2016



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Executive Summary

In the last decade there has been much discussion around recruiting more women on to boards of directors; and there has been an increase in representation, although mainly as non-executive directors. However, there is a need to look more closely at the pipeline as board directors are not cooked up in a saucepan for immediate service. We need to examine what helps and what hinders women's careers, and look at the issues in the round rather than concentrating on those people who have made it to director level.

We interviewed 21 women, working in professional and managerial roles, employed by large, small, micro and medium-sized organisations and some self-employed. We wanted to discover what has helped and hindered them during the course of their careers and what influenced their career decisions.

Our respondents work in a range of sectors including: academia, retail, IT, the Civil Service, engineering, third sector, media, law, health and energy. Most of the women interviewed had worked across several sectors during the course of their career and the ages ranged from 28 to 65.

What did we discover?

During the course of the analysis it became evident that those factors which help or hinder women's careers could be split into extrinsic factors and intrinsic factors. It also became evident is that the factors that helped were different from the factors that hindered.



What helps women's careers?

Extrinsic

- Being nimble and able to take advantage of early career experiences and opportunities, in order to propel their career forward and gain a range of experience
- Informal career support from friends, colleagues and family
- Networking, using formal and informal networks both for career support and business development
- Formal coaching, mentoring and development programmes
- A good manager, who supported career development and offered autonomy and recognition
- Serendipity and/or the ability to spot opportunities and seize them
- Supportive partners who supported the women's career with both practical and moral support
- Side-stepping and temporary down-stepping to achieve long term goals
- The ability to use career shock or disruption to good effect
- Personal brand management
- Location of work and home

Intrinsic

- Drive and determination
- Resilience and tenacity
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Ability to learn
- Willingness to take career risks
- Confidence and valuing self and your own abilities

What hinders?

Extrinsic

- Children, childcare and career breaks
- Male behaviour and 'good bloke' syndrome
- Lack of diversity in the mix, which means fewer positive role models and lack of consideration of the issues affecting women at work
- Poor managers, of both genders
- Economy and finances, for those running small businesses

Intrinsic

- Lack of self-confidence and self-esteem

Reasons for career decisions

The reasons given for making significant career decisions showed that some of the influencing factors changed during the course of the lives and careers of working women.

- Finances
- Location - enabling easier travel and a shorter working day
- Flexibility of working hours - both for caring reasons and to pursue outside interests
- Personal development - through the work performed
- Following one's heart and being true to self
- Interest
- Structure, culture and values of the organisation
- Confidence in one's ability to succeed the role

What can be done to improve women's prospects by both women and by organisations?

By Individuals

Know Yourself

- Your values
- Your skills and natural strengths
- What you are looking for
- How to sell or promote your capability and experience effectively
- How to negotiate effectively

Build

- Your career supporters both formal and informal
- Your network inside and outside the organisation and remember to 'pay it forward'
- And develop your personal brand face to face and on line

Develop

- In your early career take advantage of the ability to move up and around easily
- Your next steps by setting broad goals and reviewing them, keep a log of what you have done and seek development opportunities
- Your drive and career resilience, your strengths and your ability to negotiate

Consider

- Supporting and mentoring others coming up behind you
- Be prepared to challenge your own beliefs and assumptions
- Extending the career ladder to others

By organisations

Ensure, engage and encourage

- Ensure there are clear role models - for men, in respect of how to behave regarding gender diversity, and for women to aspire to
- Ensure you share stories about how diversity benefits the organisation
- Ensure all senior leaders are accountable for diversity issues
- Engage men and women in discussions about what you do
- Encourage formal and informal networking and a women's career support network
- Encourage people to check their assumptions and biases

Monitor and review

- Monitor responses to recruitment adverts
- Monitor and review the imagery used in promotional material for recruitment, what is the balance between men and women?
- Review to see if there is an age norm bias for certain jobs which may disadvantage those who have taken career breaks
- Review to see if there a bias towards a linear career trajectory which may favour men over women
- Do women offer a more balanced view of their capabilities which may mean they undersell themselves at times?

Offer

- Learning opportunities, mentoring and coaching to support career and skill development for women and men
- Unconscious bias training for all
- Flexible working for all where possible (men and women)
- Career management tools and programmes early on in people's careers and for new starters, and monitor their progress

In summary

Whilst it is acknowledged that much progress has been made there is still some way to go. Women are still subjected to unconscious and conscious bias and expected to conform to the linear (or male) career model and timings.

However, there are so many options to support women in work to stay and progress, which would benefit organisations, individuals and the national economy. It is an economic and social imperative that we use our female talent more effectively. Men can play a key role in this, as it is not solely a women's issue and it should, more realistically, be seen as a business, economic and social issue which men can impact for good. Most men would not want to see their daughters disadvantaged in their career, either in terms of prospects or pay, so it is fitting that men play their part in addressing issues of diversity.

Women too can help others to grow and develop their careers and identify what they can do to seek out career supporters and development opportunities, to 'lean in' to their careers. Importantly, all women can ensure that they do not perpetuate unconscious bias or discriminatory assumptions.



Introduction

'Countries with more gender equality have better economic growth. Companies with more women leaders perform better. Peace agreements that include women are more durable. Parliaments with more women enact more legislation on key social issues such as health, education, anti-discrimination and child support. The evidence is clear: equality for women means progress for all.'

Secretary- General of the UN. Ban Ki-Moon

Under-representation of women in the workforce is often presented as an equality issue, but it is more than that, and has consequences for individual businesses, the UK economy and society as a whole.

Broader than equality: “Follow the money”

This is a broader issue than that of fundamental equality of representation; having more female influence at senior level can deliver tangible benefits for business and organisations. According to the respected consultancy McKinsey¹ businesses, across all sectors, with women on their boards significantly, and persistently, outperform those without, by 41% in terms of return on equity and 56% in terms of operational results.

Thompson Reuters² conducted a study which found that companies with more than 30% of women leaders on the board of directors, compared with those with fewer than 10%, performed better in times of economic volatility. Despite this, the CIPD report Gender Diversity in the Boardroom³, shows that the proportion of female employees decreases with seniority in 67% of organisations. At a national level, the Women's Business Council⁴ has identified that raising the level of women's employment, to the same as men's, could lift GDP by 10% by 2030; and it is estimated that a further £40.8bn is lost to the economy each year through the gender pay gap for full-time workers.

Given that girls continue to outperform boys at GCSE and A-level; that 2013/14 figures show that over 56% of all graduates are female; and 56.3% of those graduating with a first class degree are female⁵, it can be argued that, as a country, we are not making the most of the potential of our female population, nor rewarding them an equitable fashion.

'If we fail to unlock the potential of women in the labour market, we're not only failing those individuals, we're failing our whole economy.'

The Rt. Hon. David Cameron, MP, BBC News, 9th February 2012

Progress: Is being made, but slowly

Women make up 47% of the UK workforce⁶. Currently, the employment rate for women is 68.5% and has been steadily rising since 1971⁷, however, this progress has yet to be fully reflected in the most senior roles.

The Female FTSE Board Report⁸ shows there is progress towards a target of 25% female representation on boards (23.5% at time of publication in 2015); although 90% of these are in non-executive positions and there are, still, very few female CEOs (just five in the FTSE 100!). As the 2015 report from the Women's Business Council reiterates this is a slow rate of progress and the pace needs to quicken.

So given the benefits, why are women under-represented?

There are frequent claims made about organisations struggling to bridge the skills gap and highlighting the challenges of finding suitably talented people to fill key positions. At the same time, there many under-employed and very well qualified women seeking appropriate work.

One reason for this could be that when recruiting, organisations often focus on people who have had a traditional, linear career - based on the traditional twentieth century career model, which is male orientated. It is also possible that leadership competencies are based on incumbent job holders in senior roles, which may skew recruitment requirements towards typically male behaviours, thereby putting women at a disadvantage in the selection process.

Changes to the way that women work can afford enhanced choices and benefits for men too, as detailed by the HeforShe campaign and Emma Watson's talk to the United Nations⁹. In seeking to understand what women can do to fulfill their potential, it is important to discover how they view their careers and use the advantage of hindsight to determine those factors that really helped or hindered their progress.

Sheryl Sandberg¹⁰ identified what women can do to 'Lean In' to their careers; but research has shown that it will take more than women 'leaning in' to make the changes that will facilitate women becoming more fully engaged and better used in the workforce. Whilst not every woman, or even every man, wants to be a director for a FTSE100 company, most do want satisfying careers, without being disadvantaged by their gender.

One obvious difference between the career paths of men and women is that women's careers are often less linear than those of men. This is because women's careers are more likely to be interrupted, to involve more side-stepping or lateral movement, for a variety of reasons, including caring, studying, or undertaking other unpaid occupations.

'Male career paths are well known for their linearity: men traditionally take three to five years of job experience before getting an MBA around the age of 30, are offered a major leadership position at 35, acquire international experience before being made Senior VP at 40/45 and move into the C-suite at around the age of 45/50. Each step is up, and this becomes the pattern for all. Two US researchers, Luce and Hewlett, studied the career trajectories of a large number of women and noted that female executives were more likely to follow paths filled with 'horizontal' career interruptions. Reasons vary and include motherhood, a husband's career, family commitments to children or aging parents, or personal preferences. Women consider such temporary exits from their career a natural thing. The big hurdle in this case (reintegration to the organisation) has nothing to do with skills and pertains to women's deviation from the 'standard' career path designed by and for men. Perverse labeling (conscious or sub-conscious) sets in as well: women find themselves characterized as unable to be counted on, lacking professional commitment, or presenting insufficient experience given their age.'

What's Keeping Women From the Corporate Heights? By Ludo Van der Heyden (11)

After these factors, reintegrating into an organisation, in a job that suits their talent, can be very difficult and gives rise to the perception of women being less committed to work. These assumptions are made, both consciously and unconsciously, by men and sometimes, other women. Where someone has followed a 'non-traditional' or 'non-linear' career path they are frequently seen as being out of step in terms of career trajectory and the age norm for certain roles.

If, as a country, we do genuinely have a growing skills and talent gap, then perhaps we need to move away from assumptions that women are not ambitious or do not seek opportunities to contribute. We should, instead, consider that they have wide-ranging experience, plus valuable skills and abilities critical to organisational success and the country as a whole.

If we accept this premise, what practical steps could be taken to ensure future progress towards realising the considerable benefits of addressing gender inequality at work?

The research

This research seeks to address the gap in understanding between somewhat abstract views of the benefits of women's contribution in the world of work and what "should" be done; by investigating what women have actually experienced and done to further their careers and understanding what has helped or hindered them.

The research has been based on interviews with a wide range of women across diverse professional roles and employment types.

Who did we talk to?

Previous research has discussed the issue with women already in director's roles and aspirational roles within large organisations¹². Little research, if any, has addressed the many women who have left organisations for self-employment or who work in small and medium-sized enterprises, a sector employing 15.2 million people in the UK¹³. In this study we include self-employed women, and those employed in the SME sector as well as those in larger organisations.

Where did we find them?

We conducted a total of 21 interviews, subjects range in age from 28 to 65, and came from all sectors; in addition, one was retired and one between jobs. It is notable that many of them had experienced different types of employment, e.g. self-employment as well as corporate employment and also many had worked across a variety of sectors. Their work experience ranged from former executive director to broadcaster and presenter.

Interviewees were identified by asking for volunteers at a women's career development day, by direct invitation or through women's networks. All took part on a personal basis. Eleven of the interviewees have children, ranging from school age to non-resident grown-ups, and three have elder care responsibilities.

The interviews were semi-structured and, in many cases, once started the interviewees talked freely about their careers. All these questions were covered, if not as they talked about their career, then they were asked as stand-alone questions.

How would you describe your career path to date?

What have been the enablers?

What have been the obstructions?

Have you had any formal support?

What informal networks have you used to support you in your career?

When making a decision about your career, what do you take into account? Probe approach to risk and confidence in ability.

Balance of work within the home?/domestic support and organisation?

What tips/lessons would you give your daughter, niece or other young woman starting her career?

How did they describe their careers?

Most interviewees found this an interesting topic as, like most people, they are more likely to think about the 'here and now' and the 'what next', rather than reflecting on the pattern of their career.

Responses varied from: 'ziggy zaggy, always in an upwards direction, very fun' to 'come full circle', in that the interviewee had returned to the industry where she worked in her early career years, and was drawing upon all her other experience from accounting, retail and training in her current role.

Responses frequently included the words: lucky, serendipity, evolved, opportunistic and unplanned. However, it was became clear that where people had given these responses they had, in fact, either chosen a route or taken advantage of an opportunity which had come their way and then worked with that opening/opportunity to suit themselves, their career and lifestyle.



'It has been described as 'serendipity' as I always seemed to be in the right place at the right time'. - Christine

'career, haphazard, not planned'. - Carole



'I had three careers. I took opportunities as they came up neither time did I actively search, just applied as jobs came up'. - Claire

'varied and evolved'. - Melanie



'opportunistic and pragmatic, but within it quite focused, once I had taken the opportunity I progressed'. - Gillian



'come full circle', after a false start in accountancy she joined Liberty's graduate training scheme which covered all aspects of the business, and was also where she discovered she had a skill in training others, which led her to become a self-employed trainer. All these early experiences, accounting, retail, presenting and training, have been pulled together in her current career as owner of a fashion outlet in a market town. - Kathy

Most interviewees found this an interesting topic as, like most people, they are more likely to think about the 'here and now'. These comments reflect the diversity of roles the women had undertaken, and the career journeys which brought them to their current situation. Most were in careers which had changed from those they started out in, e.g. from teacher training to regional Director for Business in the Community via organisational development and an HRD role; or, from designer to senior manager in an engineering organisation; and, from retail manager to freelance HR consultant; teaching in an FE college to senior civil servant. None of the women described having clear career goals when they started their careers.

The Outcomes

What Has Helped?

Following the career interviews it was evident that many of the interviewees found it a useful experience to take part in the discussion, as it provided an opportunity to reflect and to identify what had been important to them.

Post-interview analysis highlighted constructive interventions, activities or interactions, which fell broadly into clearly observable extrinsic or intrinsic categories, and the impact these constructive factors had compared to “negative” events.

Extrinsic Enablers

Early career: Experiences and opportunities

Unprompted references to early career experiences emphasise that these were regarded as highly formative and provided a firm foundation and springboard for later career steps. Sometimes this was due to the nature of an initial career choice, such as for those who started in the Civil Service; in other cases, it was due to the variety of experiences that they gained during the first ten years of work



‘I started in the Civil Service, which provided ‘variety and a clear cut career path; also, in the Civil Service, once you have the training you get given a lot of responsibility - for people and budgets, which was very appealing’. - Gillian



‘I was in my twenties when I had rapid promotions and I did not realise that this would not carry on’. - Trixy



Some interviewees were able to build on their experience from early employment, for instance part-time work in retail or hospitality whilst a student, where early responsibility was to their advantage in the formative years of their career. Additionally, they moved quickly at this early stage of their career, and were receptive and agile enough to take advantage of opportunities as and when they arose; individual's perceived progression and experience gained at this stage as important:

Early responsibility in a managerial role in the hospitality industry, doing pub openings, having worked in pubs when a student, and then doing a post-graduate qualification.



'It was a great way to learn about suppliers and recruiting, etc., whilst learning on the job. Quick way of growing the business, which paid (me and my career) back in spades later on'. Alison's next role was in an IT company that wanted individuals with hospitality expertise to train customers to use their products. From there she moved to a small company as a training manager. Being in a small company provided exposure to a wide range of experiences and avoided over-specialisation. 'It corresponded with the wider trend of moving from mainframe computers to PCs, which was an exciting time to be in that role.' - Alison

Being spotted by a senior leader as someone with potential at this early stage was another common factor; highlighted, was the fact that this offered a perspective on building a career, rather than taking 'just another job'. One example quoted was starting out as a personal assistant, being 'spotted' by a senior manager and subsequently supported to start on a more formal career structure. For others, working in smaller organisations, being exposed to a wide variety of work and thus being able to take early responsibility, provided the experience to move forward with clear purpose, speed and direction in their career.



Who went to an interview for a role as a personal assistant at a distribution centre, where the senior manager suggested she would become bored with the role and put her forward for the retail trainee management scheme that launched her career.

'Sainsburys trained you to be a leader; thorough training and education in certain areas, to take decisions, to plan, to organise people, how to understand the customer and to have an eye for detail and to want perfection. This sticks with you' - Ann

Informal career support

Much has been written and debated about the subject of formal career support, however, some of the most influential people, in career terms, can be friends and family; they can make a significant (and enduring) difference at influential ages and stages, that shape aspiration. The interviewees all mentioned the support they received from informal sources including family, partners, friends and former colleagues. Several women referred to the example their parents had set, around 'working hard and doing your best' and, also, how they treated those they worked with.

Many women commented that those of a similar age to their parents often provided useful advice and support, which may well have been given and received with more objectivity and credibility than from closer family members! Other people found that they benefitted from the advice and insight of other women in their network of contacts when they had a particular career situation to consider:



'I have two or three 'go to' people I can talk to and discuss career options, one will support, challenge and question; another one is very supportive and builds self-belief. Both are people who are honest, straightforward and I can trust their judgement.' - *HR Manager*

Melanie found that maintaining contact with her former (female) managers in a very male dominated organisation had helped, as they supported and mentored her when she needed it, drawing on their relevant experience of the environment. Former colleagues were mentioned by several interviewees as a useful source of support, as they knew the interviewee and could contextualise their advice based on that longer-term relationship.



Speaking of a former colleague:

'good for career support, there just to talk and to look in the mirror for me and I find that quite useful'. - *Carole*

Other areas of informal support came from local businesses and friends:



'I opened a business in the town where I lived and had informal help from members of the Olney Chamber of Trade'. - *Kathy*



'Friends, absolutely key for emotional and social support, have kept me grounded and been a comfort can be difficult to talk to current colleagues (about career)'. - *Christine*

Networking

Whilst acknowledged as key skill, with hindsight, many respondents stated that they had not recognised the importance of networking early enough in their careers, and that they should have paid more attention to this skill. This could, of course, be a result of the recognition and attention that has been given to networking in recent years.

Some of the interviewees attended formal networking events, whilst others used their network of contacts and former colleagues. The networks were used for support and business development and sometimes a fusion of both. They were found to be particularly helpful at points of career transition.



'I was helped by members of the Organisation Design Forum in my search to find a consulting job in the US'. " I have done a lot of networking e.g. City Women's network, OD network, Organisation Design Forum and Board of Trade Washington, DC and it has been very effective'. - Naomi

In some larger organisations women's networks have been formally established to support the career development of women.

One of the interviewees, working in an engineering organisation, set up a formal women's network in her workplace, as she found that as a senior female manager, she felt isolated. Since its establishment, it has grown to a network of over a hundred and is receiving organisational funding. It is now aiming to provide effective role models and support for other women coming through the organisation and determine what relevant support the network and the organisation can provide. As a result she was invited to speak to the Executive Group about the network and its function. One interesting development was that a number of male managers attended meetings to build their understanding of issues specific to women's careers.



'What is particularly challenging in this business is that there are not a lot of women to converse with'. - Melanie

'using colleagues who I worked with in other teams, sometimes just to chat'. - Julie



'talking to other self-employed women who do similar work to me but not the same.....' - Gillian

Kerry, who is developing a career working in the media has used and developed her network to gain experience and work with women in sports media in particular.

- Kerry



Formal coaching, mentoring and development programmes

More than half of the women interviewed had used formal career support in the form of coaching, mentoring or sponsoring. For some, this was about taking advantage of career transition coaching, offered due to redundancy or formal support during transition to a leadership role.

Other examples included using a business coach to provide support with the development of a business. Development programmes provided by an employer were also used. Whilst recognised as positive experiences, a common theme was the lack of consistent availability of such support, which would have made it even more valuable. The ad hoc nature of such support and development shows the value of individuals proactively taking ownership of their career plan and seeking out career supporters for advice, rather than relying on provision by others.

For one individual, the costs of completing her professional qualifications was negotiated as part of her remuneration package, and it served both parties well, as the organisation was not able to afford a pay rise.



'all development I have had I have initiated myself', had used coaches and sought out internal and external development programmes to attend. Her approach demonstrates the need to ensure that people take ownership of their own development and career and actively search for opportunities.' - *Naomi*

Only one person had been on a Career Development Workshop



'a time to pause and reflect. ...I had lost who I was and there were things I wanted to do I re-evaluated my priorities' - *Christine*

It is clear that formal development opportunities were more readily available for those working in larger organisations. In some instances, where interviewees were self-employed or worked in an SME, they had self-funded support to develop both their business and personal growth.



The importance of a good manager

Having a good manager was significant at key points for many of the interviewees' careers and good managers had been both male and female.

'A good manager' was defined in a number of ways and also depended on the context of a specific career stage. Particular defining characteristics mentioned included: being given autonomy, and above all, managers who recognised talent and took an organisational rather than individual view of talent development, discussing career development and enabling progress to a suitable role;



'managers who discussed careers and career progression as well as business'. - Alison

Also cited were managers who were enabling, who facilitated introductions and ensured recognition was given where it was due



'gave me confidence to tackle those things I wouldn't tackle before'. - Julie

Melanie discussed managers she had worked with, helping her with her career:

'female managers who pulled me up behind them' and 'a manager who was prepared to have a career talk with me and persuaded me to stay with the organisation'. - Melanie



What is evident is that, in the context of career development, "good managers" display the ability to develop people and build capability and confidence; as well as, the ability to discuss career development openly and constructively in the interests of both the individual and the organisation (but critically, beyond the area for which they were responsible).



Serendipity and/or spotting opportunities

When serendipity was mentioned there appeared to be other more causal factors at play: “luck” has been described as what happens when preparation meets opportunity. So events which women describe as serendipitous may be seen as such, in some aspects, but may also be ascribed to an ability to spot opportunities and exploit their knowledge, skill and experience to advantage.

From the discussions it was not always clear which had more influence on outcomes; it often seemed to be a hybrid combined with the confidence to develop the situation in an appropriate way.



Serendipity in action: Julie had written an article about her volunteering at the Paralympics for the in-house magazine, which the CEO had particularly liked. He stopped her in the corridor to talk about the charity she was involved in and then saw the person who was running the change team walking past. The CEO was aware that this person was looking for someone to fill the communication role and so introduced Julie as someone who would be suitable.

‘I was brave enough to share what I was doing and wrote the article. The meeting was destiny or fate. That bit was not due to saying I want that job.’
- Julie

A recognition that all experiences add value and play a part in creating the bigger picture, in building knowledge and capability was evident, even where the interviewee’s career did not follow a traditional linear path.



‘It’s about having building blocks. It (my career) looks disjointed but there are links between. Life will throw up a lot of opportunities which are there for the taking’. - Christine

‘My career can look disjointed, it did all add up position experiences as useful to all businesses (rather than just the one you are in)..... be open minded to looking at other opportunities’. - Alison



One of the interviewees, Ann, felt career progression was more a matter of how you make the most of your opportunities. She quoted multiple instances where pragmatism and proactivity led to success, including those where she had spotted an opening and applied for the role, or taken the opportunity on offer, and moved to work in a senior role on leading edge projects. These then put her in a better position to take advantage of the next opportunity.

‘It was sometimes luck, but you make your own luck’. ‘Also, my first secondment was a role giving me exposure, it was probably the rocket fuel (for my retail career). I met people who went on to be Regional Directors’.

- Ann



Sarah, a solicitor, spotted an opportunity to move into an area of law (civil and employment), that really interested her, early on in her career and then moved to specialise in employment law. That first step enabled the next move, laid the foundations for the future, leading to her current role which uses her expertise and ability to be ‘on top of her game’.

Supportive partners

Support from their partner had been beneficial to the careers of those interviewees who had them. The support came in many guises: from being the full-time Director of Domestic Operations and primary child care provider, allowing the woman to work freely; prioritising the children’s needs and education over their own career; to sharing the school/nursery runs; and working together in business and engaging his partner in a new business venture as he could see she added clear and distinct value. All in addition to being there for moral support and providing a balanced view of the world of work.



‘without him (partner and full time Director of Domestic Operations), I would not have as much self-confidence and wouldn’t have been able to devote as much time and energy to work, as he holds things together here. He has enabled me to be single-minded and dedicated’. - *Carole*



‘when my second child was born my husband was also being made redundant and we made the decision for him to be the stay at home parent and then we would see more of our children, so one would graft at work and one at home.’ - *Melanie*



‘it has been a big enabler’. - *Christine*

Side stepping and temporary down stepping to reach a goal

Almost all the women in this study had “side-stepped” or “down-stepped” at some point to facilitate a change in career, lifestyle or location.

With some this was due to international relocation; one had to step down initially in order to get back into the UK job market; and another had to become a personal trainer in order to enter the U.S.A. and then networked extensively to move into her professional field. Others had side-stepped as the result of a career change choice, whilst for others it was in response to external events e.g. becoming a book keeper until the economy picked up.

One of the most frequently cited side-steps was the decision to go freelance in order to facilitate flexibility in working. For some this flexibility was to accommodate childcare responsibilities that could not be accommodated by the employing organisation, or to overcome the high costs of quality childcare. Most of these side-steps or down-steps accommodated the life and/or career change that was required at the time and enabled the interviewee to have the flexibility, career change or ‘lifebelt’ required at the time.



All cited becoming self-employed in order to have flexibility surrounding child rearing. - Zara, Nicky and Christine C



left her role as a partner in a law firm when her request to work formally was blocked. Having seen an article about virtual law firms she applied to several and selected the one whose values matched hers most closely. This move has provided the balance of flexibility, colleague support and challenging work and enabled her to extend her role. - Sarah



Shock or disruption

Several of the women interviewed took the view that a shock or disruption to career plans could also represent an opportunity, both to rethink and possibly change direction, or sometimes opening new and unexpected doors.



'surprises sometimes force you to do things differently and move on'. - Naomi

'A fine line between hindrance and opportunity. I have been really lucky as redundancies have turned into opportunities. Just worked out really well. Don't necessarily worry if things go wrong'. - Alison



Personal brand

The capacity to be self-aware about what you do and say, how you present yourself, was seen by some as a tangible factor in career progress. This was about presenting oneself authentically, in all respects, and being conscious of how one was perceived, which was influenced by dress and appearance, the accuracy of CVs and written work amongst other things.



'I was only the sixth female store manager and I had to be better than everyone else and had to compete and be known for delivery and my results. I had to wear suits in one colour as the dress code policy was pretty formal. I was conscious about what I was wearing in a predominantly male environment, so I had a local dressmaker make me some skirt suits'. - Ann

'I was known for being calm and capable.' - Gillian



Location

Two people mentioned that location had been an enabler that allowed them to work in their preferred roles without long commutes adding to their working day. This gave them flexibility and energy for balancing work and home life and to fulfill their roles effectively.

Intrinsic Enablers

Drive and determination was the factor most evident and examples ranged from completing a Master's degree when children were teenagers, completing a doctorate whilst working full-time, to fighting back after the financial crisis had a major adverse effect on the business and took a severe toll on her financial situation. Other examples were connected with having a goal 'I decided what I wanted to do and moved in that direction'

With one it was about reaching a certain career goal during her early career:



'with focus on the goal of doing more and looking for the right niche, it was about being on top of my game in my early career'. - Sarah

With one it was about persevering even when events conspired against plans and objectives:



I am bloody-minded and will prove people wrong if they tell me I can't'. - Vic

It became evident was that the drive to move in the chosen direction was strong. With some, who had not had the benefit of more flexible working available in their early careers, the drive to continue with their career and work needed to be strong to overcome the complexities and challenges posed by a young family and demanding occupation.

For Zara, it was a matter of continuing to work against the odds, when she had a young child, affecting her ability to keep afloat even when the economic downturn threatened both business and livelihood; her response involved finding a new way to continue her career even though it included a change of direction.



'I never give up'. - Zara

With many interviewees, their drive and determination became apparent in the early days for their career. The real value of that personal quality was brought to the fore later, when they had side-stepped or down-stepped, as a temporary measure to accommodate a phase in their working lives, (including international relocation) as part of a wider plan. With others the drive and determination had not disappeared but rather re-emerged in a different guise.



'before the girls arrived I could give 150% of my time to the business, now my drive and energy is redirected'. - Sarah

Resilience and tenacity were attributes which gained prominence. The ability to find a way through and keep working was key. Most of these women had enjoyed varied careers, including moves of sector, role and location, alongside the usual domestic responsibilities. All the interviewees had experienced setbacks, hurdles or challenges which they had faced either in their role or experienced in running a business.



'sometimes you have to dig deep.' - *Holly*

'If things go wrong you have to work through itthings will go wrong, and the world still turnsyou have to plough on and have confidence in the future' - *Alison*



This resilience and tenacity was frequently linked with **adaptability and flexibility**, which is usually the case, as the ability to be adaptable contributes to a person's resilience¹⁴.

In several cases interviewees had moved into book keeping and accountancy in order to keep working in a way that accommodated their circumstances and also allowed them to "earn and learn". Kathy worked in fundraising and tennis coaching whilst her children were young and moved to establish her own business once they were older.

Another attribute that had enabled these women during their careers was their **ability to learn** and an active approach to keeping their knowledge current.

A personal/internal enabler mentioned by some interviewees was their **willingness to take career risks** and step into areas with less clear outcomes; either by leaving a safe and stable profession, or to start a new career later in working life. This was connected to the serendipity mentioned earlier.



'I rarely think I shouldn't do that.' - *Naomi*

Confidence and valuing yourself and your abilities was cited as positively affecting career success. An understanding of what you are good at and what is important to you is critical. One interviewee identified that she had grown in confidence since having children which had helped her in taking the next step more boldly, without waiting to be the perfect applicant.

What Hinders?

It became clear during the interviews that factors which hindered were not always the opposite of those things which helped, and that there was some overlap.

Children, childcare and career breaks

Children and career breaks were mentioned as factors by more than a third of the women interviewed. The narrative included the costs and availability of childcare, the need to side-step in their career to accommodate the domestic schedule and the flexibility that was required.

In some cases, location became a more significant issue than it would have been before the arrival of children, due to the amount of time spent travelling. One mentioned that it was a constant balance:



'me sitting in this post is worth not taking them to school, I have to be able to say it, (the work I do) is worth the sacrifice'. - Holly

Where it had not been necessary to side-step due to family responsibilities, in some cases this was due to a partner having taken over either the bulk, or all, of the childcare.

In one instance, the interviewee had been deputising in a senior grade prior to her maternity leave, but whilst she was on leave the opportunity for promotion had 'miraculously disappeared'. On returning to work, in her original role, the cycle then repeated itself exactly around her second maternity leave. It was unclear whether the events reported were due to valid organisational factors, or assumptions and biases about her career preferences given her career breaks.

In some cases, women altered their career path and stepped sideways or downwards to facilitate the flexibility required around childcare; and, in some cases the costs of childcare. Where interviewees had taken these steps they found that their choices were reflected in how people perceived their approach to their career e.g. compressed hours and/or having children was perceived as being less committed to the job.



'I don't think I would have had the opportunity to be a partner in my firm if I had had the children earlier'. Whilst I was looking for a job when I was 27 I was aware that the people interviewing would be thinking about my age and that I was married and, therefore, would be having children. It was very male in the profession'. - Sarah

Male behaviour and ‘good bloke’ syndrome

Various aspects of the behaviour of male colleagues in the workplace was highlighted a number of times; these did not always reflect an understanding of the female career journey. This manifested in a variety of ways, from public comments to ‘good bloke’ syndrome, which was more connected with unconscious and possibly conscious bias.

Where male behaviour was less helpful it was across a broad spectrum of situations; from board meetings being actively unfriendly and men being overly aggressive, to making comments if a female colleague became outspoken or offered an assertive challenge. (A specific comment reported was ‘Look at her now, she has got her petticoats out’. Male colleagues making a point in a similar way do not elicit such a reaction).

One interviewee, when the HR Director for a dairy company, received feedback that men found her threatening although her behaviour was considerably less aggressive than that of male colleagues.

Other examples included an individual blocking part-time working for his business partner when she returned from her second maternity leave, making her working conditions so challenging that, ultimately, she left.

White, male and middle-aged “good bloke” syndrome was cited in an organisation comprising mainly engineers. ‘Good blokes’ were seen as men who were popular enough, did not upset the applecart and never the “tallest poppy”. They were often seen as the most promotable, even into areas where they did not possess specialist expertise. With many of them ‘the only women they know are their wives or the wives of other blokes; they don’t know how to work with women. I was constantly up against this behaviour, and it was very wearing’. Their reference point for a role would be another ‘bloke’ and, usually, another engineer.



**men have to be a
“good bloke”, women
have to be good and
look a certain way’.**

Because of this propensity the men were, as a result, less familiar with working with women and did not see themselves as sexist.

Lack of diversity in the mix

Where a lack of diversity exists, there are fewer role models for women to follow and fewer opportunities to witness effective women who, at the very least, equal ‘good blokes’ and possess the required specialist knowledge for a given role.

This limited diversity can then lead to unconscious perceptions about women in the workplace. The lack of familiarity with women occupying senior roles can mean that workgroups become accustomed to seeing men in certain roles, and are unwittingly influenced by this conditioning in future selection decisions.

Poorly performing managers

Poor managers were cited as a hindrance for a variety of reasons, often because they were unsupportive in matters of career development '*someone at grade x shouldn't have to come to me for (career) support*'.

Other unhelpful behaviours included: micromanaging and blocking an application for a role, resulting in the woman leaving the organisation; to being very autocratic and taking all the glory; or, just being an ineffective leader and manager who created a culture that was impossible to thrive in.

The poor managers discussed, by our interviewees, were of both genders.

Economy and finance : for those running small businesses

For sole traders and those running small businesses a lack of knowledge in this area was cited as having been a career hindrance. With some it was because of the recession making it difficult to find the type of work they wanted to do (consultancy); for others, it was the struggle to secure start-up funding or the working capital required when running a small business. In one case the financial crisis of 2007 caused a major disruption, leading to closure of a business.



Intrinsic Factors

Lack of self-confidence and self-esteem

This has been discussed in other research and surveys regarding women and their careers, and it was also evident in our research. It manifested in various ways, including fear of speaking up, constant doubt, feeling like an imposter, being reluctant to apply for a job unless believing oneself to be a perfect fit; and being a reluctant negotiator.

Whilst women and their lack of self-confidence has been documented and discussed, at length, in numerous reports before it does not diminish the importance or persistence of this as an issue.



'it was the biggest hindrance of my life, copied from my mother'. - Doris

In conversation, various aspects of self-doubt and missing confidence surfaced. A lecturer, in a STEM subject, revealed that she felt she had imposter syndrome and this, she felt, was evident in her reluctance to ask questions in seminars and her doubts about her own ability. Another interviewee reported that she felt under-confident about aspects of her work, and that this was only put to rest when male colleagues described how they had to research things and did not know the answer to everything in their field either.

One respondent explained that she always waited to apply for a promotion until she fitted the person specification perfectly. More recently she identified that she could shape her own destiny and apply when 75% ready, rather than when almost 100%. She highlighted that, as a result, she now believes that she is master of her own destiny, and has more options. This had been a steep step in learning, to be less conservative about her confidence and ability.

Another interviewee felt that, being a reluctant self-publicist had held her back in her career in that she thought people would just **see** how good she was, whereas men in the organisation were happy to discuss and/or publicise their achievements more readily.

The competency interview was also seen as something that did not always serve women well:



'I have not been served well by the competency interview as I always feel I have to give a balanced view'. - Trixy

One contributor felt that she settled for less when negotiating her partnership-level role as she felt grateful for being given the opportunity; as a result she had settled for less than was equitable, even though she did more work than other partners and received less remuneration.

Such examples tend to suggest that, in spite of the recent debates, confidence remains a challenge, along with the ability to negotiate a better deal both with regard to promotion and finances.

Reasons For Career Decisions

All contributors were asked what they considered when making a career decision. The most frequently cited item was finances. As most people go to work to earn money this is not surprising. Many people did qualify this by identifying that, at certain stages of their career, it had been more important than others and also that it was not the only motivator. Naturally, most people had more than one reason for making a decision and the factors had often changed over the course of their career, as priorities changed.

Finances

Many interviewees mentioned this as a key consideration, at least at some point in their careers, or in some cases, because they were the primary earner. Several women cited financial considerations as being particularly significant in the early days of their career

Other key considerations:

Location: and/or being where the travel was more straightforward. This reduced travel time and made the (working) day shorter, enhancing flexibility and enabling effective childcare arrangements. For some, it was because of their partner was based in a particular location, which then influenced their own career decisions.

Flexibility of working hours: A number cited flexibility - for some it was about caring responsibilities, while for others it enabled them to pursue outside interests. One had trained to be a singing teacher and was heavily involved in choirs; another enjoyed the flexibility of her work as it meant she could pursue her sport and work for a charity connected with it; others enjoyed a lifestyle balanced with work, family, sport and other pursuits.

Opportunity for in-role development: Winning a bigger role, with more challenging work; leading edge work; being able to influence on a broader basis, and a chance to use skills at a higher level.

Following your passion: This was often cited where people had made a significant career change, or had learnt over time that they needed to value their intuition more strongly and be guided by their values, skills and interests.

Interest: This was a significant and important factor in the decision making process (this response was cited by a planetary geologist!)

Organisational structure, culture and values: If these were congruent with those of the individual and where they found an organisational structure, within which they could operate effectively. One respondent cited corporate life as a negative;



“corporate life kills you in the end”. - Nicky

Confidence in my own ability to do the role: This was mentioned by two interviewees.



Thoughts For Discussion

What Helps: Enablers

Extrinsic

Early career experiences - which enable women to gain formative experience to the benefit of their career progression. Early on is the ideal time for input around career management and employability.

Most of the interviewees demonstrate that what you start out doing is not always where you end up. Awareness of the 'jungle gym' of current career frameworks and how it might be navigated enables young women to seek out the early career support most relevant and beneficial to them.

Mentoring those just starting out is something that women more established in their careers should really consider

This is linked to the **formal and informal career support** that enabled interviewees to discuss and consider their options for progression and development in support of their aspirations. Many received effective support from family and friends. However, this is not universally available, so access to career support through the workplace or other organisations, where they could discuss their career with peers or mentors can provide greater equality of opportunity.

There is no doubt that networking is a key career skill and this is further corroborated in this research. However, for some people the very word can be off-putting as they envisage a room full of strangers at a large event. It is important that it is positioned as building relationships, using existing networks of former and present colleagues along with other contacts and more formal networking groups to build relationships which are both supportive and enabling.

It is also about learning that **networking** is not solely progressed in large events but occurs in many different scenarios. Attitudes to the activity around 'paying it forward', rather than purely seeking immediate personal benefit, also affect the long-term effectiveness of networking.

As with any career **serendipity and spotting opportunities** were shown to have played their part for most interviewees. It is, however, important to note that when serendipity does play its part, the individual has to be courageous enough and in a position to take advantage of the opportunity. This is also linked to the ability of people to spot career opportunities and pursue them.

"Destiny is a name often given in retrospect to choices that had dramatic consequences."

J. K. Rowling

Supportive partners – those who offered practical and moral support and were prepared to step outside role stereotypes had aided the career aspirations of our interviewees. It was evident that they had acted as career supporters, sounding boards and played a very active role in domestic and childcare responsibilities. However, where this was not available, the women interviewed found other sources of support from friends and wider networks.

Good managers played their part too, as people who considered the career and wider development of their reports as an intrinsic part of their role. Often, organisations and managers avoid discussing career development with their staff, mistakenly believing that it will not serve their interests. In reality, good career conversations improve rather than limit employee engagement.

The ability to side-step or down-step as a temporary measure was widely reported, with the majority of contributors having done this at least once in their career. In all cases these steps proved to be transient, either as a means of dealing with specific circumstances or to facilitate a longer-term goal.

It was evident that side-stepping was driven by factors both extrinsic and intrinsic, and demonstrated the adaptability and flexibility of our respondents to exploit their skills and adjust their mindset. Side-stepping often resulted in a career which veered from the traditional linear model, seemingly favoured by those recruiting for senior roles or executive directors on boards.

“When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.”

Helen Keller

Intrinsic Enablers

For all the interviewees it is clear that intrinsic factors had played a key role in keeping them working and allowing them to overcome the obstacles they experienced. Some did not see obstacles, but rather hurdles to vault over, whilst for others there was a need to find a way to continue working even when it required a change of career direction. In several cases drive, determination, resilience and adaptability were critical to the continuation of work at various points in the women’s working lives.

It is important that we see these factors as part of the wider picture of women’s careers. Some of these characteristics can be developed by using goal setting exercises, scenario planning and more general career management programmes and mentoring.



What Hinders

Extrinsic

There is no doubt that the career disruption arising from motherhood is still seen, and felt, as something that hinders career aspirations. In spite of today's careers being more similar to a jungle gym than the traditional linear career path, women still feel the disruption more keenly than men, even when they are not the primary care provider.

The costs of childcare, along with the complex task of organising the cover required, both play a part in influencing career decisions, and may result in side-stepping or down-stepping, either voluntarily or otherwise. Until recently, flexibility around care has been seen as a predominantly female issue, however, it is in fact, a wider societal issue as many fathers want to be more involved with their children's care. More flexibility for all employees, where practical, would support this and enhance engagement, regardless of whether employees have children.

Certain behaviour, by some men, including abruptness to the point of rudeness and gender-related direct comments, can result in an environment which constitutes a difficult place to work for women. In addition, in certain environments, the incumbent (male) hierarchy will focus consciously or unconsciously on choosing 'good blokes' for a role when making selection decisions.

Where there are fewer women (and generally, less diversity) in the workplace, the lack of non-traditional role models needs to be addressed: practice at learning and recognising that other people can execute certain roles as, or more, effectively could benefit the organisation. Much has been written about role models for women and other groups, however, perhaps it is time to address the fact that some men may need role models in how to work with and treat women as colleagues in the workplace.

Managers in the workplace make a huge difference to the effectiveness of those who work with them and career development is a key part of their role in most organisations. The importance of clear accountabilities and development in team leadership, as well as discussing careers cannot be over-estimated, alongside training in diversity issues and unconscious bias.

Intrinsic

Women's confidence in their own ability, and their caution in applying for roles for which they do not perceive themselves as fully ready, has been highlighted in other studies. Making career support more widely available would assist women in taking a more realistic view in these situations. Such support would enable them to plan their professional development and have the confidence to apply for a role and prepare effectively for the selection process.

There is much which can be done to support women and their careers. Many large organisations have flexible working schemes and career support facilities in place to enable women to progress. Ensuring a wide variety of measures are consistently in place and available to enable continuity of work and to address career barriers will be of long-term benefit to both individuals and organisations.

Conclusions

Whilst it is acknowledged that much progress has been made there is still some way to go. Women remain subject to unconscious and conscious bias and are expected to conform to the linear (or male) career model and timings.

However, organisations have so many options that they can use to support women in the workplace to stay and progress; options which will be beneficial to the organisation, individuals and the national economy.

It is an economic and social imperative that we use this resource of female talent more effectively. Men can play a key part in this, as it is not solely a women's issue, but, should more appropriately be seen as a business, economic and social issue in which they can impact for good. Most men would not want to see their daughters or nieces disadvantaged in their career in terms of prospects or pay, so it is fitting that they play their part.

Women, too can help others to grow and develop their careers and also identify what they can do to seek out career supporters and development opportunities, so as to 'lean in' to their careers. Importantly, all women can ensure that they do not perpetuate unconscious bias or discriminatory assumptions.



The background of the slide is a photograph of two orcas (killer whales) swimming in the ocean. The orca on the left is larger and is shown from the side, with its black back and white belly clearly visible. The orca on the right is smaller and is shown from a more rear-quarter perspective. The water is a light, pale blue-grey color, and the sky is a pale, overcast white. The overall scene is calm and natural.

What can be done?

- 1. By Individuals**
- 2. By Organisations?**

By individuals

Know

- Your values
- Your strengths and skills
- What you are looking for
- How to sell or promote your capability and experience effectively
- How to negotiate effectively

Build

- Your career supporters; seek out high quality support and use coaching and mentoring
- Your network and 'pay it forward' and keep in touch with former colleagues
- Your brand: What do you want to be known for?; how do you represent your brand both face to face and on line?

Develop

- In your early career and learn as much as you can and take advantage of the ability to move up and around easily
- For your next steps: set broad goals and review regularly; keep an achievement log; seek out development opportunities
- Your attributes, skills and resilience along with your ability to negotiate well

Consider

- Supporting and mentoring other women in their early careers 'Give forward and give back'
- Challenging your own beliefs and assumptions
- Extending the career ladder to others below
- Ensuring your financial independence

By organisations

Ensure, Engage, Encourage

- Ensure clear role models for men regarding diversity and for women to aspire to
- Ensure you share stories about how diversity benefits your organisation
- Ensure all senior leaders are accountable for diversity issues
- Engage men and women in the discussions about what to do
- Encourage formal and informal networking to support women's careers
- Encourage people to check out their assumptions and beliefs

Monitor and Review

- Monitor responses to adverts for jobs, pay, promotions
- Monitor and review the imagery used on your website and promotional materials for jobs, what is the balance between men and women?
- Review to see if there is an age norm bias for certain jobs
- Review to see if there is a bias to recruiting people with linear careers as women may have had a different career trajectories
- Do women offer a more balanced view of their capability which may mean they undersell themselves at times

Offer

- Coaching and mentoring to support women and their career and skill development
- Unconscious bias training for all
- Flexible working for all employees where possible
- Career management tools and programmes early on in people's careers and for new starters and monitor their progress

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Gill works with organisational leaders to build the capability, confidence and resilience needed to transform their performance and impact. She has extensive success in enabling people with varying levels of experience and seniority to realise their career aspirations through insight and planning. Gill has worked with a range of organisations and industry sectors in the private sector with national and international companies

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