Gender Gap
Women Lag Behind Men in Attaining Leadership Roles and Financial Parity

By KATHLEEN MITCHELL

It's been decades since female Baby Boomers took to the workplace demanding equal wages for equal work. And although women have indeed come a long way, gross inequities still exist in terms of the status they have achieved in economic and leadership realms.

"There is still a stark difference between the earning potential of women and men," said Elaine Sarsynski, executive vice president for MassMutual's retirement series and CEO of MassMutual International. "Even though women make up almost 50% of the workforce today and hold almost 52% of managerial positions in professional occupations, as you start to go up the pyramid, the real issues begin. Today, there are 17 female CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, which is only 3.6%. And when you include Fortune 1000 companies, you are still looking at only 35 female CEOs."

Other statistics mirror this lack of parity. In 2010, females who worked full-time made 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research. The inequity often starts from the time they are hired, and a difference of $3,000 in starting salaries between a man and woman is significant.

"It translates into hundreds of thousands of dollars when you factor in retirement, promotions, and bonuses," said Kristine Barnett, assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and director of the WELL (Women as Empowered Learners and Leaders) campus theme program at Bay Path College in Longmeadow.

Women also haven’t fared well in the political arena. A recent United Nations report shows the U.S. ranks 75th among the world's countries in terms of the percentage of women in political office. "We are behind Indonesia, Bosnia, and the Dominican Republic," said Carla Oleska, CEO of the Women's Fund in Easthampton, adding that Sweden, South Africa, Cuba, and Iceland are in the forefront.

Meanwhile, Kate Kane, managing director of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance in Springfield, says the world of finance is also male-dominated. "I don't see many women running financial-service field operations," she told BusinessWest. "I think roadblocks still exist due to the reality of what it takes to be at the top level in any corporation or sales organization; if you want to be in a C suite, there is a certain amount of personal sacrifice that goes with it. The expectation is that you will give your life to your career."

Many women are not willing or able to do this, but those who do seek such positions face real roadblocks on the path to success. Experts say the reasons are complex and range from ongoing gender conditioning to embedded corporate patriarchal systems, along with myriad other issues, including women's denial that inequality still exists.

But the combination of these factors means that a woman's best efforts may not result in success. A recent survey conducted by Catalyst Inc. shows that, when women did all of the things they were told would
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help them get ahead and used the same tactics as men, they still advanced less rapidly and profoundly than their male counterparts and had slower increases in pay growth.

However, initiatives to help women succeed are beginning to gain force, such as Vision 2020, which has 102 delegates from across the nation who have united with the goal of advancing women's equality by the year 2020. Measures they have adopted include raising awareness, developing shared leadership, and creating opportunities for success for future generations.

"Women want to become executive leaders and have the talent, capability, and wisdom to do so, but ultimately the system forces them to make decisions that do not complement their lives; if you want to become a partner in a law firm, do you spend 70 hours a week at work and put off having children?" Oleska said, citing a host of situations women face that include dealing with aging parents, as this responsibility frequently falls on them.

"There is a lot at stake when women consider whether they will pursue a position in executive leadership. The expectations for a CEO do not allow for a healthy work/life balance, and some women don't want to be out seven nights a week," she continued. "But as we continue to build a critical mass of women executives, we will see some of these systems change."

Work in Progress?

Gender differences are inherent in every workplace, and even though some things are real and others are a matter of perception, they create problems for women trying to climb the corporate ladder.
Sarsynski believes part of the reason so few women achieve the coveted C office is because decisions in succession management are often made by male-dominated boards of directors, which, she says, tend to be biased against women. "But women-owned businesses employ 35% more people than all Fortune 500 companies combined, and 40% of all U.S. businesses are owned by women," she continued, "so the idea that women don’t make good managers just doesn’t hold up.”

Still, Barnett says standards for men and women are very different.

"Men are promoted on potential, while women are promoted only after they have demonstrated competence and results," she opined. "So men come to the workforce with a different attitude; they feel very capable and don’t have to prove themselves the way women do.”

Experts tell women who want to attain high-ranking positions to find mentors and executive sponsors who can help them advance their careers. "They also need to have clear conversations with their managers about how they can achieve additional competencies, and be very vocal about where they want to go in their careers," Sarsynski said. "It’s important for a woman to find her voice. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that women are every bit as competent as men and are often superior leaders, but they need to become more focused and communicate during critical conversations with decision makers.”

Effort and initiative are additional factors in success, and ambitious women need to become knowledgeable about every nuance of the business line they are interested in, she went on. And it’s also critical for them to take risks in groups, where their knowledge can stand out. In fact, learning effective communication skills and putting them to use during presentations and discussions is an essential component in moving up the corporate ladder.

Sarsynski says women think meritocracy exists, and they will be recognized for their efforts without having to call attention to themselves. But, she argued, this is a false perception, adding that women need to learn to promote themselves and their accomplishments in the way men have done for generations. But this isn’t easy, because touting their success runs counter to the socialization process.

"Women tend to embrace teamwork,” she noted. “They want to make sure the members of their team receive recognition, and tend to be quieter about self-promotion. They also tend to take the blame if there is a problem with a project, whereas men tend to self-promote and leverage the power of their relationships.”

Barnett agrees. “Women are socialized to be more compliant and sensitive to the feelings of others; they are taught not to boast, as it is seen as unattractive, whereas men are socialized to compete in healthy ways and be direct about what they need,” she said.

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Kristine Barnett says women are more uncomfortable than men when it comes to promoting and negotiating for themselves in the workplace.

adding that, since women don’t negotiate well for themselves, if a woman and man with the same credentials compete for the same job, the man is likely to negotiate a higher salary.

“Men are more comfortable negotiating; they are socialized to know their self-worth and believe in it, where women are socialized into minimizing their self-worth and not leading with it,” Barnett continued. “A woman will be happy just to be offered the job, while a man will say, ‘I am worth more.’ And companies know the game.”

Expectations are also tempered because women with children are realistic about the number of hours they can devote solely to work, said Oleska, noting that Oprah Winfrey is one of many high-profile women who made the decision not to have children because it would interfere with her career.

Kane agrees, and says the added responsibility can compete with success at work. “The biggest problem is that, 90% of the time, women still are the primary caretakers of children, and if they are sick or if the women have older relatives or parents who need help, that also falls on them.”

In the past, women have made attempts to change the perception of the game, but found it didn’t work well. One attempt came during the 1980s, when many women broke through what was known as the glass ceiling by emulating a man’s style. In addition to adopting more assertive behavior, their dress code was dominated by business suits with large shoulder pads that Barnett said were meant to mirror a man’s physique.

“They thought it would make them more successful,” she said. “But there was a backlash, as men realized that emulating their style didn’t change anything; they had a figurehead, not someone who was going to change the culture.”

New Ideas
Kane says women in executive positions today face myriad issues in regard to change in their workplace.

“I’m always aware of the fact that I am one of the few who has gotten to the level I have attained. There is a sense of pride, but I also think about whether I should be crusading for wholesale change,” she said, adding it can be problematic because those who change a culture risk doing away with elements that work well. “But you do want to embrace new perspectives, thought processes, and talents that could make it even better. It is an incredibly nuanced and difficult issue.”

Oleska has a small staff, and says the Women’s Fund makes it a priority to model how work and motherhood can coexist by allowing employees to work from home if their children have snow days or are sick. “We try to take the system here and make it work for women’s lives, not against them. Some companies have made wonderful strides and are family-friendly. And when that happens, ultimately, everyone benefits,” she said.

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Northwestern Mutual is putting
together a corporate-led department that will deal with issues of inclusion as well as diversity. But change doesn't happen overnight. "There is a lot of talk about flex time, but I have very few clients who have that in their workplace; the majority must report to their office, and their productivity is measured by how much time they spend there," said Kane.

Sarsynski is proud of MassMutual's approach to diversity and gender issues, and says information gleaned from a number of diverse employee-resource groups has led to better business decisions. Flex time and the ability to work at home is determined by individual managers, and the company has a physician, day-care facility, and hairdresser on site to help make things easier for employees.

Still, early conditioning prompts women who are allowed flex time or given the opportunity to work at home to feel they must explain their actions, said Barnett. "It is a sensitive issue because women do believe they have to justify their decisions."

Kane said business leaders need to consider whether their workplace and culture are inclusive enough to make women feel comfortable so they will remain in their positions. "It's the crux of the problem. If you fill positions with high-quality people because you want to solve demographic issues but don't change anything else, it won't work due to cultural norms, especially in sales, where employees must be competitive and aggressive to succeed," she explained.

MassMutual is taking the lead by launching a Women's Leadership Forum next month that will focus on retention, development, and advancement of women in leadership.

Retention is especially important, since many women make the decision to leave their jobs and start their own businesses so they lead more balanced lives. "More and more women are choosing the entrepreneurial route. If you own your own business, you can choose your hours and are not judged," Kane said, adding that managers often assess work performance in terms of hours spent at the office even though people are still tethered to their jobs via technology 24 hours a day.

Hope Prevails

One of the reasons momentum has slowed in terms of economic parity is that most people are unaware or would rather not face the fact that inequity still exists. "People think there has been progress, so they believe the issue doesn't need to be on the front burner," Barnett said, adding that many young women also adhere to this belief.

Still, she believes America is headed in the right direction. "Women who reach CEO levels have power and are changing cultures, which filters down and benefits everyone," she said. "The issues will never go away, but I would be happy to see them diminish. And I think the progress women have made is tremendous. But they will have to take responsibility to keep the momentum going, and awareness is key."

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