

The female **talent pipeline**

Whitepaper

A case of 'what a difference a year makes?'

September 2013

Introduction

One year ago we published an insight paper that explored how organisations can address the lack of women at their most senior levels, and the steps they should consider taking to build a sustainable pipeline of talent. At Talking Talent, we could already see forward-thinking businesses beginning to introduce working models and approaches aimed at evolving a culture in which female talent could seize opportunities and flourish.

Twelve months on, what developments have we witnessed? Who is taking positive action to build a pipeline of talented women, and why? How are organisations making it work – and what remain the greatest barriers? What has been the impact of Talking Talent’s coaching in progressing talent pipelines?

80%

of women feel their employer is supportive of them, but 44% say their gender has hindered their career (or will in the future).

2. The recognised 'truths'

Intervention points must come earlier: Organisations are looking to engage with women earlier in their career, when they're looking ahead and thinking about what they want, or deciding whether to throw their hat into the ring for promotion to a senior position. One of our legal clients is assessing talent loss at two years post qualification – the earliest intervention we've seen so far in the legal profession.

The traditional career path is not the only way up: Businesses are becoming more open to career journeys that progress in different directions or at a different speed from the historical norm. Success and progression for some women may not look the same as it does for men; the career trajectory is not always linear. The introduction of agile working, the redesigning of roles and the rethinking of leadership models are all starting to assist alternative career journeys at the more enlightened organisations.

Progression must be authentic: Women must feel able to progress authentically, rather than having to fit in with the 'way we do things here'. The most senior women aren't always the best role models, and many women are reluctant to adopt masculine leadership styles and traits in order to succeed. Coaching has a key role to play here.

Managers are part of the solution: Policy and procedure was already in place; the focus is now on translating that into consistently good management behaviour and approaches. Talent strategies are increasingly aimed at both supporting and challenging managers, so they are integrated into the solutions and recognise the role they have to play in making a sustainable difference to careers and culture.

Each 'moment of truth' must support long-term culture change: Organisations are examining their day-to-day processes – such as promotion and recruitment, how posts are advertised, the real criteria for promotions and how roles can be suitable for agile working – to ensure that the overarching philosophy of pipeline improvement is played out in day-to-day business.

The value of women-only coaching programmes: Businesses are recognising the value of creating a 'space' in which women can explore the specific issues they are facing through a female-centric lens, and create strategies for succeeding in a largely male environment.

The need for better data: They are working to understand the pinch points at which women are dropping out of the company – and where figures vary from department to department and across an organisation – as well as trends on performance and engagement scores and how at each grade they vary by gender.

The importance of an international, organisation-wide approach: Companies have realised that for global mobility to be possible they must address the issue across multiple locations, so they're asking to incorporate webinars and telephone coaching into their programmes.

“Our leadership programme enables us to offer best in class coaching to our key female employees around the globe, strengthening networks and building a sustainable pipeline of talent for us.”

**D&I Manager,
Leading Retail
Bank**

36%

of women have experienced workplace prejudice.

3. Who and why?

Broadly speaking we see clients fall into two camps. Some genuinely 'get it' and understand the commercial benefits of greater diversity at senior levels. These organisations may well have a target for female representation at board and senior management levels, and have integrated diversity and female progression into their organisational strategy. They are striving to become a true employer of choice for women.

For others the redress may be more reactive, having seen a falling-off in numbers of high potential women and realising they are losing great talent (and clients) to their competitors. The intention here is just as strong, but initial business engagement can sometimes be harder to achieve.

The 'why invest' debate should really be dead and buried, but it's clear that for many organisations the business case remains unproven. However, the published statistics clearly show that a diverse and healthy leadership makes a business more competitive and delivers better business results: companies with three or more women in top management functions deliver 10% better return on equity, according to McKinsey, while Grant Thornton has found that companies with more women in top positions achieve 16% higher return on sales and 26% higher return on invested capital.

The skills, outlook and approach that women bring to business can differ to those brought by men for the greater good of an organisation. In the banking sector, for example, having more women at senior levels is proving vital for managing risk decisions and reducing blind spots. In the FMCG industry it brings greater creativity through more varied ways of thinking and a better understanding of the customer base, a large proportion of whom are of course female.

Investing in the female talent pipeline has an impact on the bottom line: in the first 18 months of working with Talking Talent, EY estimated it saved £16m in attrition costs from the talent it retained.

“All of our women's leadership programmes include three-way coaching calls with managers, which often highlight why coaching is needed in the first place! One manager recently admitted he didn't see why his employee needed coaching as he didn't think they had a problem with women. This was without consideration of whether or not she wanted to do the course.”

CASE STUDY: LEADING FMCG BUSINESS

A dip in female representation at senior levels denoted a significant loss of talent and diversity for this business. Work to improve this had three main aims:

- access to a strong, wide talent pool and better performance, team dynamics and decision-making
- a better understanding of consumers, suppliers and other stakeholders, through reflecting their diversity more closely, and
- improved external reputation with consumers, the media and potential employees.

The business implemented activities including unconscious bias training, maternity coaching, improved policies and benefits, and stronger career planning.

Partnering with Talking Talent in 2013, it put in place a global women-only leadership programme which involved:

- three way coaching calls that included the delegate's line manager to ensure action would continue after the programme
- a four-day launch event covering topics such as beliefs and confidence, authentic leadership and presence and gravitas, and
- regular group or one-to-one coaching sessions over four months, with sessions themed around career planning, political savvy and strategic networking.

The programme has been a huge success and has now been rolled out further across the business with new cohorts in the UK and Asia. Feedback has been outstanding, and the first coachees have recently been promoted.

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4. The key challenge

Managing perception continues to be a ‘fly in the ointment’, particularly when it comes to women-only coaching programmes. Some organisations are still struggling to understand at all levels the commercial value of diversity – there is confusion between ‘positive discrimination’ and ‘positive action’ to address what is a skewed playing field. The participants themselves embrace the activity, but their colleagues don’t always understand.

Why we’re doing this’ needs to be clearly articulated upfront – not only to the women themselves, so they know what to expect and can enter the process with the right frame of mind to get the most from it, but also their colleagues, managers and leaders.

The questions on the opposite page reflect those our clients tell us they hear most. Each can be pre-empted with clear and positive communication around the programme.

CASE STUDY: FTSE 100 RETAIL BANK

Females are well represented at junior and middle management levels in this organisation, but not at the more senior levels. As a result, the bank developed a programme to help create robust succession pipelines, specifically aimed at women who are ready for the next move within 3-12 months. This includes stretch sideways as well as upwards moves.

Participants on the programme are identified through the bank’s talent management processes, working in partnership with business areas and HR recommendations.

Designed around the transition from management to leadership, the programme focuses on how to:

- break down current barriers – real or otherwise identify practical and creative solutions to
- overcoming the barriers
- develop a leader mind-set build self-esteem, confidence and resilience

The bank is clear on what needs to happen to make a real impact; the measures of success and subsequent evaluation formed part of the design at the onset of the programme. These are monitored and tracked by the Diversity and Inclusion team.

“We often get women who feel uncomfortable about taking part in the programme; they don’t want to be seen as being singled out for special treatment. It’s not until they take part that they realise how important it is, and what a difference a women-only programme can make. They often give us some of the best feedback!”

5. Questions?

“Why is the organisation investing in this?”

What’s usually behind the objection? Often, a lack of understanding of the real bottom-line benefits.

The response: There’s a powerful commercial imperative (see the statistics earlier in this paper!). According to 2013 data from the Hay Group, companies with engaged employees enjoy revenue growth 2.5 times higher than peers with average levels of engagement. But 25% of women at executive committee level leave a company due to disengagement with the culture, compared to 12% men.

We want to be different – so we’re making sure we benefit fully from the energy and ability of our talented people by offering engaging, fulfilling careers and helping them progress.

“Why are women being singled out for special treatment? This is not inclusive!”

What’s usually behind the objection? A belief that there is no real problem here, so the intervention is simply ‘tokenism’ – and will give the chosen few an unfair advantage.

The response: It’s a part of the overall work the organisation is doing to value and maximise the contribution of all of its people. Getting the right people doing the right things increases performance and profitability, but talented women are slipping through the net: according to the 30% Club a man starting his career in a UK corporate is four and a half times more likely to reach executive committee level than a female counterpart. Our culture is currently not inclusive, so we’re doing this to level the playing field. We’re also addressing the issues in an inclusive way: the programme engages and directly involves managers and senior stakeholders throughout.

“Why is this programme gender specific? Everyone would find these topics useful!”

What’s usually behind the objection? Lack of awareness of a programme’s content, and the specific way it will be approached. Also, it’s natural to feel peeved when others are given an opportunity that we’d like to have!

The response: The programme is gender specific because of the uniqueness of some of the challenges facing women and how they approach career progression.. The content of Talking Talent’s coaching programmes is based on its 2012 and 2014 research and experience of coaching over 10,000 women, through which it has established the skills and behaviours women most want to build – including political savvy, strategic networking, presence, personal brand, gravitas, authentic leadership style, self-belief and confidence. These are skills many people would like to develop, but this programme is tailored to allow women to discuss and address the specific challenges they face, and make plans for navigating their career path authentically in environments which become more male dominated as seniority increases.

6. Why coaching works

Since launching our progression coaching programmes we've seen organisations achieve outstanding results in female retention and progression. Working alongside our working parents coaching, progression coaching is enabling organisations to make a real difference to the quality of their female talent pipeline. The core reasons for its success include:

Progression coaching is a true coaching programme, not a formulaic 'onesize-fits-all' training course. It isn't about telling women "here's how you influence people – now go and do it". The best results are coming from a deeply personal approach based on what they want from their career, and what drives them.

Both one-to-one and group coaching are incorporated. The group coaching is helping delegates to build strong ongoing networks within high potential populations, and allowing them to connect with their peers, manager and also sponsors.

Role models are starting to emerge from the programmes. Women can look up the pipeline and see others they would like to emulate: women who are true to themselves rather than assuming 'the behaviours you need to display to succeed'.

It's a modular approach, rather than a one-off session – with monthly face-to-face meetings spread across six months, followed by a one-day session to reconnect the individuals as a network, monitor progress with action plans and continue to promote the wider resources available.

Managers are glued into the process, with three way calls and coaching sessions that allow them to share their own feedback and discuss how to deal with specific scenarios they are facing.

Senior stakeholders set the example for the rest of the business to follow. The level of senior stakeholder involvement and the messages they give as part of the programme make a real difference to the energy in the room, what the women take from the programme, and how sustainable the change is.

The programme is a bold statement of intent around nurturing female talent and the value a business places on that population, reinforced by senior leadership participation. It's a message that has an impact across the organisation, not just on those attending.

"The development programmes we ran have created a wonderful platform for our high talent women to develop and progress. We're really excited about how this type of investment in our high potential people makes a real difference to our overall talent pipeline performance."

7. Impact and value

Organisations are seeing some very tangible progression, promotion and retention results, as they improve performance by fully unlocking the potential, creativity, competence and productivity of their talented women.

One global Fortune 500 bank, for instance, had identified retaining female talent as critical to increasing the number of women in senior positions. We helped them create a development programme at VP level, designed to increase support for talented women and equip them with the tools needed to move into leadership roles. The programme involves a launch event with senior sponsors and managers, mentoring, four one-day coaching modules covering topics such as personal brand, political savvy and career planning, and a close event at which delegates present what they've learned to managers.

Of the 127 women who have attended the programme in the four years it has been running, 95% are still with the company, while 40% have since been promoted, rising to 75% for the earliest cohorts.

Post-programme feedback from delegates is also extremely positive. Women love being able to network with female peers, talk in a safe environment about issues they feel might be taboo or career limiting in a mixed group, and having their challenges normalised – discovering 'it's not just me'.

Also valuable is the rich systemic feedback businesses are getting from delegates, managers and coaches. These are the wider observations on what it's really like to be a woman within the organisation, and recommendations on what it should do to improve female progression levels.

"I felt the leadership you had to show to be valued here was standing on a stage, beating on your chest saying 'tally ho, off we go, follow me' and that's not my style...I can now have confidence in what I'm doing and why it's valued by the business."

8. Conclusion

As our recent research has shown, one in four women believes their gender has hindered career progression³. There is a significant need for attitudes and culture in the workplace to change – but this takes time and so organisations are recognising the need to support and work with specific populations in order to retain and progress talent. Initiatives like progression coaching are increasingly forming a key part of an overall talent strategy to strengthen the pipeline, delivering retention and promotion statistics that are above and beyond the organisational norm.

The businesses that are truly supporting their women are already becoming employers of choice for current and future employees and it is great to see momentum building in so many areas over the past 12 months. This support is directly proportional to the attraction, retention and progression of female talent and our delight at the progress for so many organisations is tempered by the concern for all those who have yet to start the journey. It's not too late, of course, but each year that passes the gap widens and the impact increases. Those left behind will surely pay a heavy price.

FIRST HAND: WHAT DELEGATES HAVE TOLD US.

“I had a chance to think about my leadership style, my values, and what type of leader I want to be.”

“I've got renewed energy to refocus my priorities, build on my strengths and let go of some negative idiosyncrasies and hang-ups.”

“It gave me time to focus on myself, and the tools to see things from a different perspective. I can now shape the



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