

OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE:

HOW WOMEN AND MEN SIZE UP STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS —
AND WHY LEADERS SHOULD CARE

By Jo Miller and Selena Rezvani



Stretch opportunities are all the rage in the workplace. But as popular as they are, it's unclear why some people decide to accept a stretch assignment or role – and others step aside. It's also unclear why women haven't benefited from stretches as much as men. This report shares our original research on how both genders decide if they are ready for a stretch, and how they make that decision. We also explore how employers can create a workplace that supports employees who step out of their comfort zones. For individuals - and women in particular - we offer advice for getting the most out of these career-making opportunities.

IBM CEO Ginni Rometty didn't get where she is today by playing it safe. "I learned to always take on things I'd never done before," she once said in an interview. For Rometty, "growth and comfort do not coexist."

Stretch opportunities that pull people out of their comfort zone provide the kind of professional growth Rometty is talking about. But until now, it's been unclear whether access to such stretches is the same for both women and men.

It's an important point. Women are 15% less likely than men to be promoted¹ and 18% less likely to land that critical first promotion into management.² Men also have a better chance of receiving challenging stretch assignments.³ Women of color are even less likely to have access to these opportunities. No wonder a chasm remains between the many women who work in lower and middle management and the few who make it to higher leadership levels.⁴

Existing research sheds light on the importance of stretch opportunities: they're uniquely career-making. According to research from McKinsey & Company, people who get advice from managers about how to advance and who land stretch assignments are more likely to receive raises.⁵ Similar research from Korn Ferry names stretch or rotational assignments as the most valuable experiences for career development, ahead of action learning, mentoring, relationships, 360° assessments, exposure to more senior leaders and formal classroom training.⁶ A separate survey of 823 international executives from a global executive search firm found that 71% of senior leaders identified stretch assignments as the biggest help in unleashing their potential, ahead of any other factor.⁷

Given how important stretches are, we wanted to understand how women and men perceive their own readiness for these assignments and for any new role or promotion that involves a high-stakes leap forward in driving results, developing skills, and building confidence. We also wanted to understand the factors that entice an individual to leave their comfort zone and say yes to an opportunity to grow.

We conducted original research to dig deeper into the issue. That research serves as the basis for this report, which examines the enablers, challenges, and roadblocks that come with stretching, for both women and men. We conclude with recommendations that organizations, leaders and individuals can use to take advantage of these career-transforming, business-enhancing opportunities.

**Stretch opportunities
are uniquely
career-making.**

OUR KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Men and women are equally interested in being promoted into director or vice president positions and ultimately advancing into senior vice president or C-suite roles.
- However, the largest portion of women don't feel their employers make it easy to gauge if they are ready for a promotion, while the largest portion of men think their employers help them know whether they are prepared to advance.
- Women are less engaged in and passionate about their jobs than men, another possible explanation for why fewer women take on stretch opportunities. A strong correlation exists between employees who feel engaged and passionate about their work and those who perceive that their employer makes it easy to assess their readiness to advance.
- In order to apply for a job, both women and men feel that they need to meet, on average, 75% of the qualifications for the role - a surprising difference from accepted thinking about gender attitudes toward the qualifications people feel they need to try for a new position.
- Women may hold back from taking stretches because when assessing how ready they are for a new job, they are less likely than men to overestimate or "round up" their skills, and more likely to underestimate or "round down" what they know or can do.
- For both men and women, the top criteria for deciding whether to take a stretch assignment are having the influence to create a positive outcome, and getting an assignment that lines up with their career goals. Both genders say office politics is the biggest practical challenge to taking a stretch assignment, with lack of time a close second.
- Money matters. Men are 3.5 times more likely than women to cite pay as an important factor in evaluating the appeal of a new assignment, job or level.

WHAT IS A STRETCH?

A true stretch opportunity requires someone to move outside their comfort zone, acquire new skills, and potentially create new connections that will help their career.⁸ These opportunities take two forms: stretch roles and stretch assignments.

A **stretch role** is a challenging, new, permanent position that requires an employee to expand the scope of his or her responsibilities, learn new skills or ways of thinking, or apply existing skills in a more complex setting. In a stretch role, an

individual can make a more substantial impact than in their previous position. Not every stretch role is a promotion—some lateral moves can provide enough room for growth to feel risky—and not every promotion is a stretch.



A **stretch assignment** helps an employee gain new experience within their current position and prepares them for future roles. Stretch assignments offer visibility and exposure, and allow learners to shape how they are known. For example, by obtaining a new area of expertise or specialty knowledge, professionals can build a new

identity and associations for themselves within an organization. Stretch assignments can last a matter of days, or extend for months or through multiple phases. Some are part-time projects performed in addition to an existing workload. Others require temporarily stepping away from regular duties to devote attention to the assignment full time.

“I ask myself, ‘Am I ready for change? Am I ready to be uncomfortable? Am I ready to make a mistake and learn from it?’”

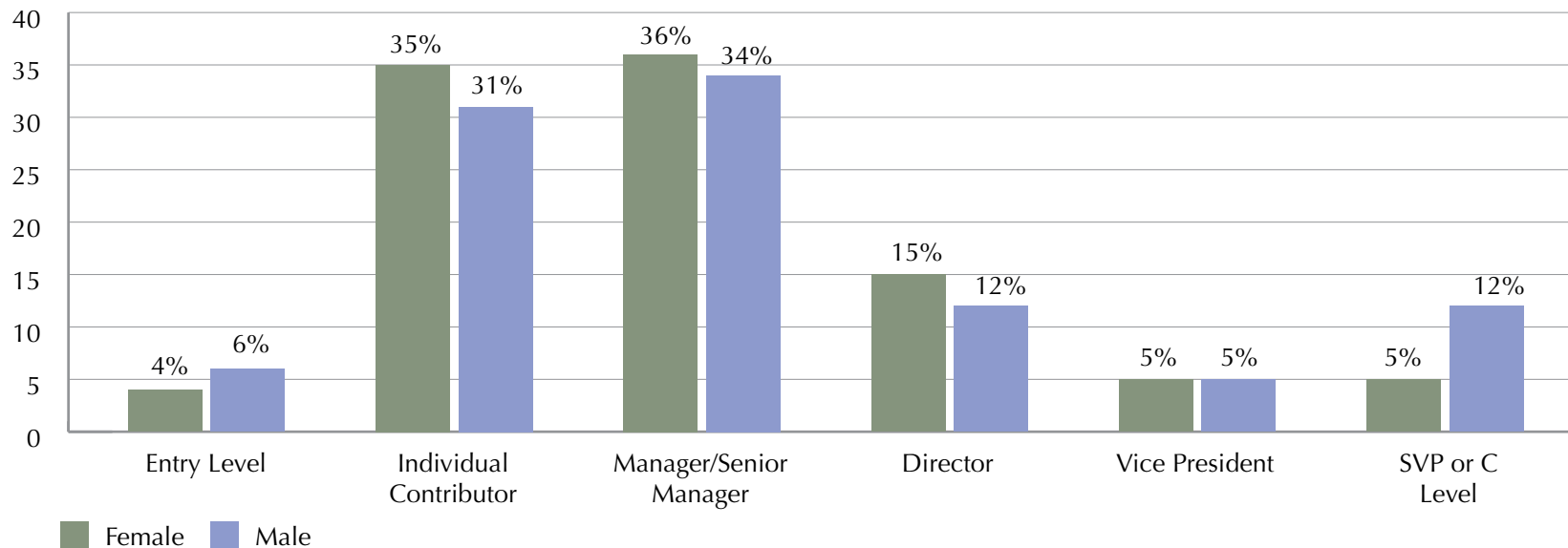
— A female individual contributor at an insurance company

OUR SURVEY FINDINGS

SURVEY SAMPLE

To understand more about attitudes about stretch opportunities, we surveyed 1,549 U.S.-based professionals between December 2017 and March 2018. The majority of both female and male respondents are individual contributors or managers (see Fig. 1) working in a broad range of industries, including consumer products, financial services, health care, and technology, among others. (See a longer explanation of survey methodology in the appendix).

Fig. 1 - Current career level

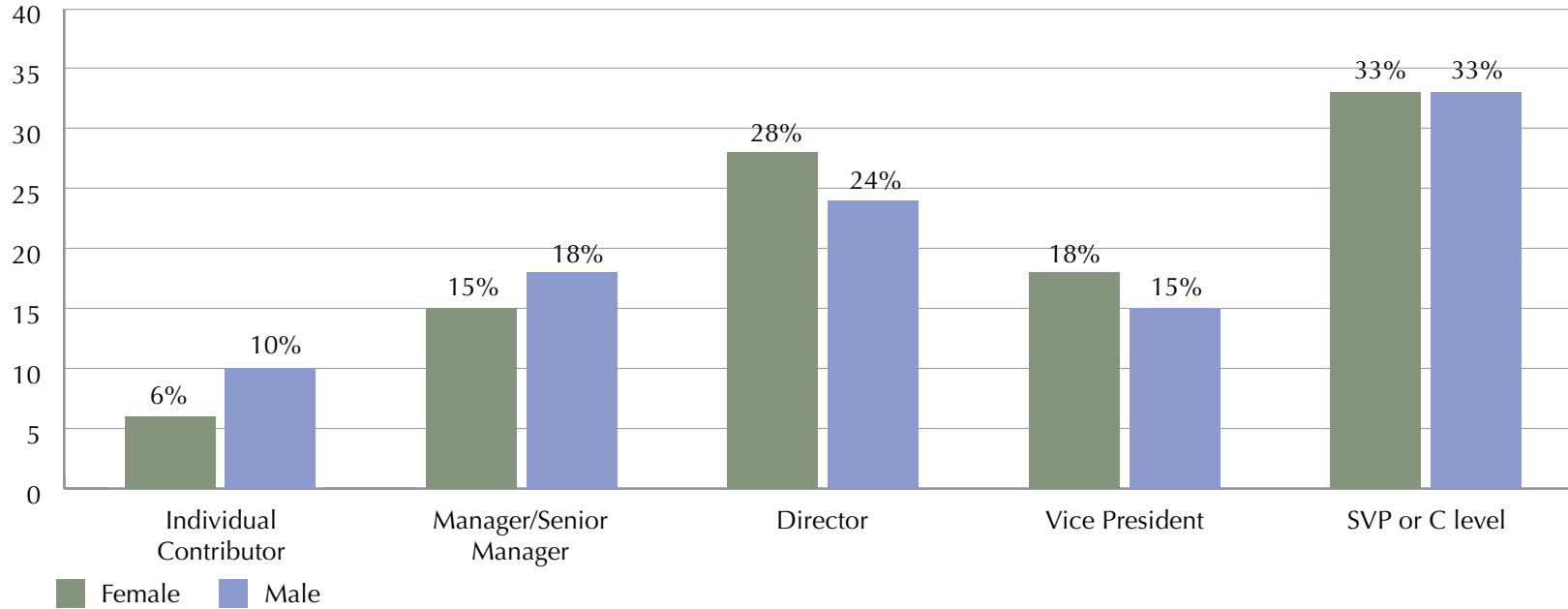


Our research found no evidence of an ambition gap. Unlike other research that has shown women lag behind men in leadership ambition,⁹ the

women and men we surveyed have relatively similar aspirations to move into director and vice president-level roles (see Fig. 2). Both genders have

equal desire to ultimately land upper-management positions as senior vice presidents or in the C suite.

Fig. 2 - Ultimate desired career level



HOW MEN AND WOMEN EXPERIENCE WORK

Despite having similar career ambitions, women and men experience work differently. Women are less engaged in and passionate about their jobs than their male counterparts (see Fig. 3). In addition, the largest portion (45%) disagrees with the statement, “My company makes it easy for me to gauge my readiness to advance internally.” By contrast, the largest portion of men (40%) agrees

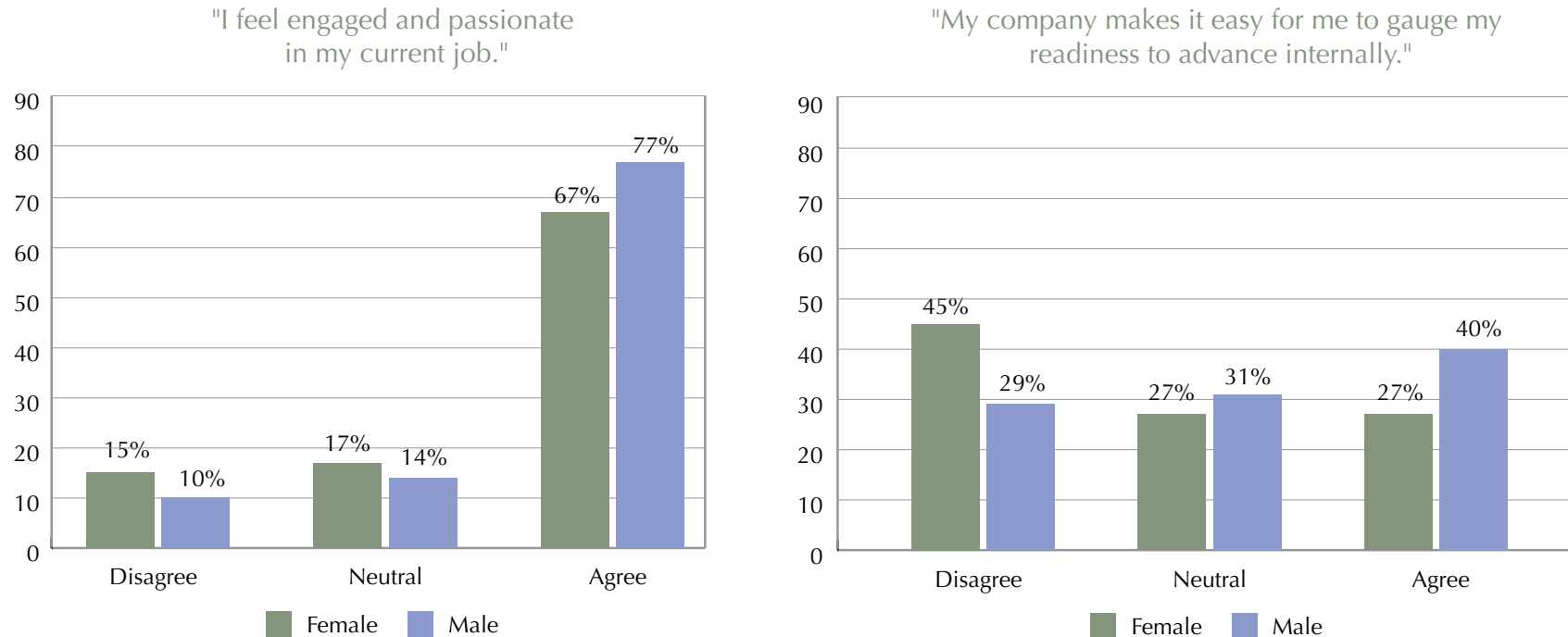
with that statement, and the smallest portion (29%) disagree. It’s clear from the research that these two perceptions are related. A significant potential link exists between whether a professional perceives that their company has clear criteria for advancement and their own level of passion and engagement for the job. We hypothesize that companies that create a clear path for women

to advance are more likely to have women employees who, day in and day out, feel engaged and passionate about what they do. When stretch opportunities are unclear, unadvertised, and unevenly offered, it makes women hesitate even more to pursue them.

BE LEADERS



Fig. 3 - Engagement levels and clarity of criteria for advancement



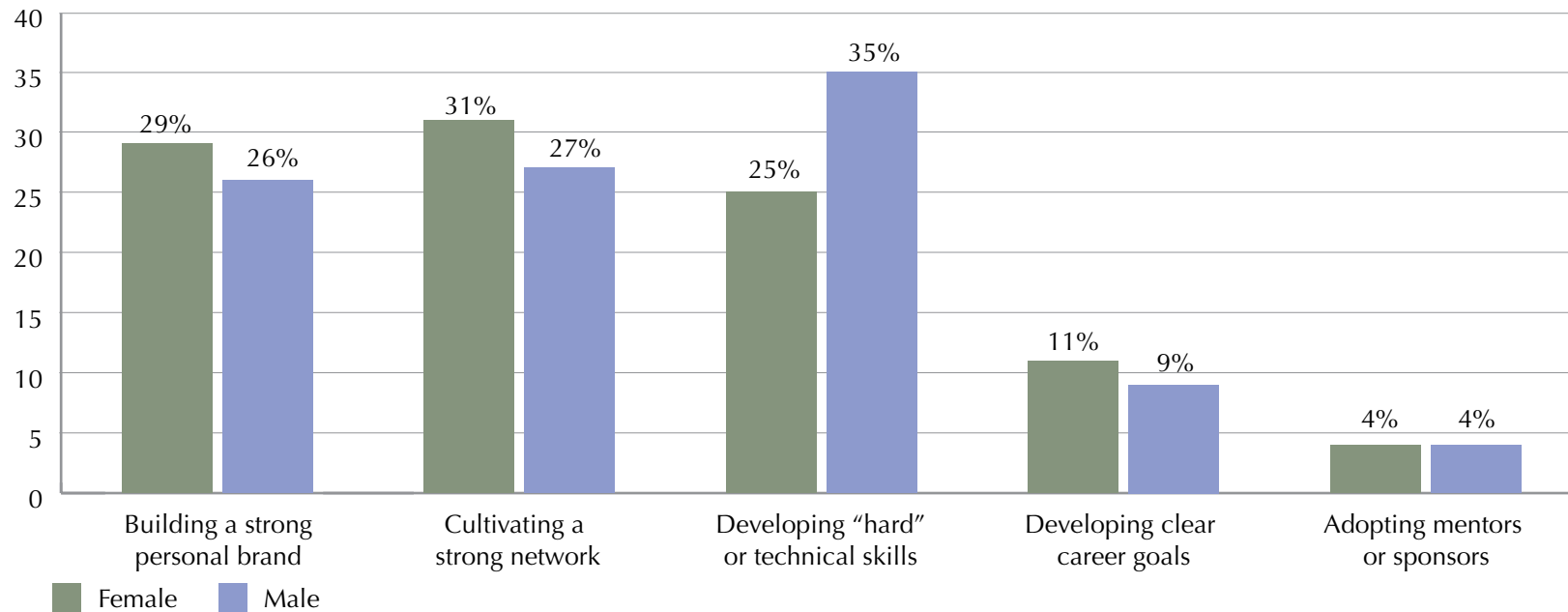
When it comes to developing their careers, both men and women invest considerable time building a personal brand and cultivating a strong network (see Fig. 4). However, while women invest the most time networking (31%), men prioritize developing “hard” or technical skills (35%), such as picking up business knowledge or technical skills. The time that men invest in ensuring they have enough experience in practical skills highlights a dynamic identified by Susan

Colantuono, CEO of Leading Women. In her TEDx talk on empowering women to take leadership roles, Colantuono calls it “the missing 33%” of women’s career success equation.¹⁰ Even though a solid grasp of business, strategic and financial functions comprises a crucial third of the essential skills that leaders need to make it to the top, women focus on it less because very few are ever explicitly told they should.

“I’m ready. I am trying to build trust in leadership to take a risk on me. I am also trying to understand what opportunities are available.”

— A female manager at a consumer goods manufacturer

Fig. 4 - Activity in which I currently invest the most time and effort



SIZING UP STRETCH ROLES

Stretch roles differ from stretch assignments because they have no time limit. A stretch role is a complete transition to a challenging new job, often outside the individual's comfort zone. Part of sizing up whether an individual should accept such a challenge is assessing one's aptitude and readiness for the position. We found that men and women feel exactly the same about the qualifications they need, results that contrast other widely shared statistics on the subject. In our survey, both men and women say they would need an average 75% of required qualifications to apply for a role.

That finding is a substantial departure from the data on the topic in *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg's

book on empowering women in the workplace. In it, Sandberg quotes an internal Hewlett-Packard report that shows women only apply for open jobs if they think they meet 100 percent of the listed criteria, while men apply when they think they meet 60 percent of the requirements.¹¹

While men and women agree on how qualified they need to be to apply for a stretch role, their assessment of their own ability level differs considerably (see Fig. 5). When asked whether they overestimate or "round up" their skills when considering a stretch role or underestimate or "round down" skills, we found that women (73%) are more likely than men (60%) to disagree that they round up. Put another way, some women feel that they need to arrive great when considering

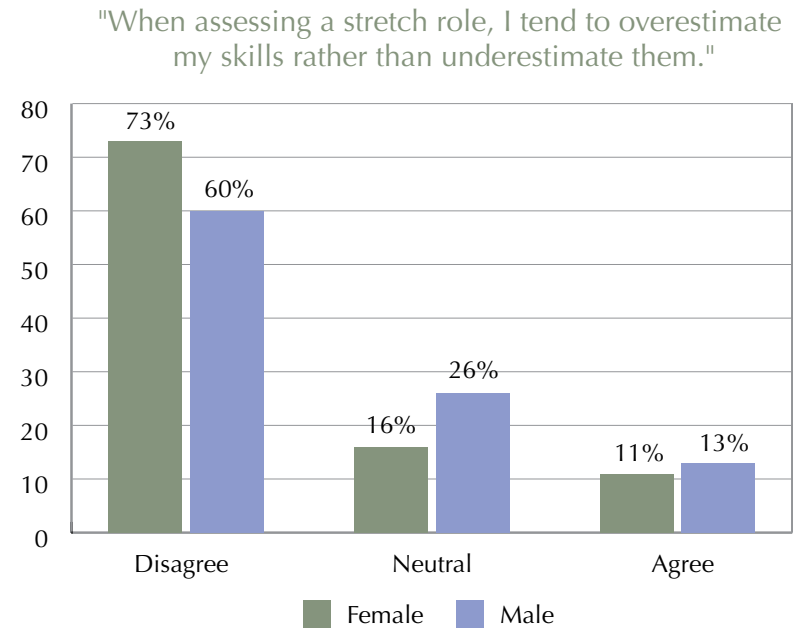
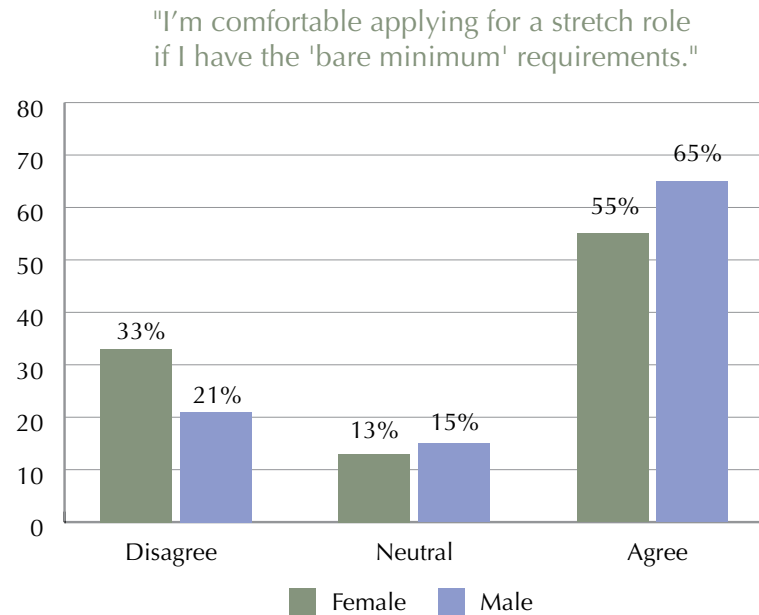
a big opportunity. Our findings support broader research¹² that shows that women are more likely than men to underestimate their abilities. That's important because if an applicant underestimates her skills, she may be less likely to apply, whereas if her peer rounds up or inflates his skills, he may be more likely to throw his hat into the ring.

"I'm less worried about the tasks than if there is a group of people willing to challenge themselves and learn together."

— A male manager in heavy manufacturing



Fig. 5 - How I self-appraise readiness for a stretch role



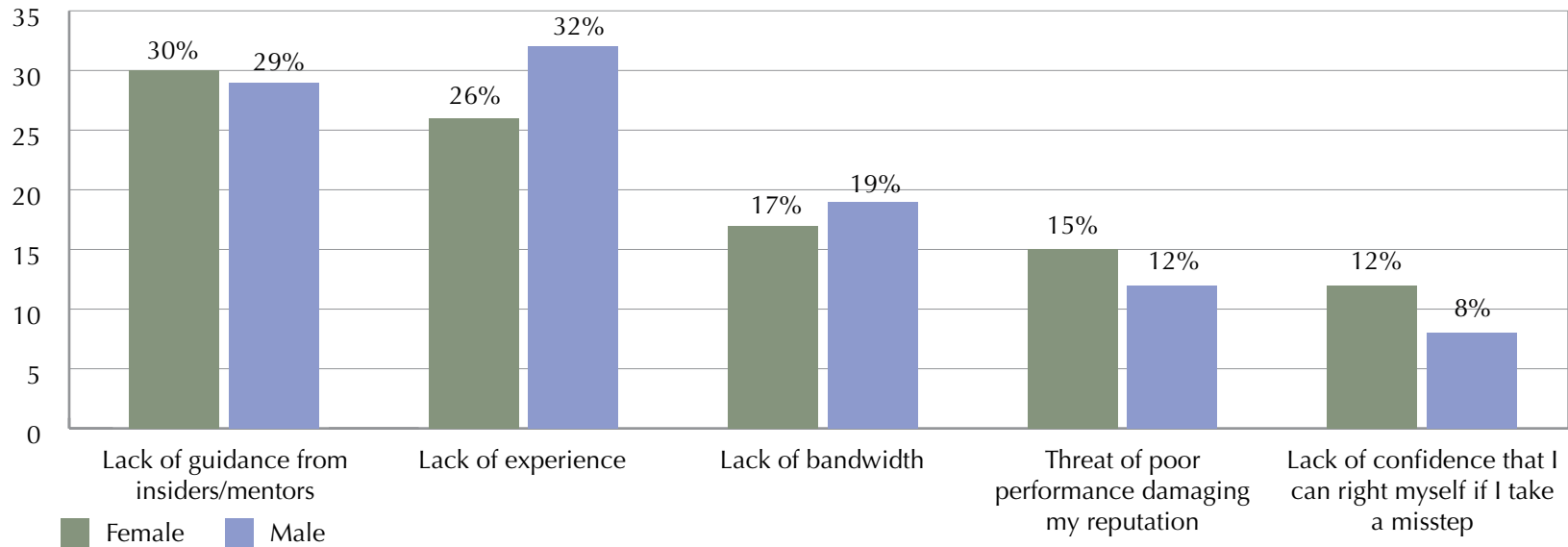
A number of workplace dynamics may contribute to the difference in how men and women perceive their abilities. For one, women receive less specific, actionable feedback in performance reviews.¹³ Also, although women ask for informal feedback as often as men, they say they receive it less often.¹⁴ When women promote their own accomplishments, they are seen as more competent, but also as circumventing social

norms, which can lead them to miss out on promotions for appearing socially inept. Women who fear this type of backlash are less vocal in claiming credit for their work.¹⁵

Men and women point to similar roadblocks that stop them from taking higher-level roles, with little statistical significance between genders where there are differences. For both, the most common

concern is lack of guidance from knowledgeable insiders or mentors (see Fig. 6). In addition, lack of experience is perceived as a larger roadblock to advancing to a higher level role than it is to taking on job-related stretch assignments. The difference is not entirely surprising considering that roles are often associated with delineated job descriptions while stretch opportunities are often unadvertised, with less clear requirements or criteria.

Fig. 6 - Biggest roadblock to my potential fit for a higher level role



THE VALUE OF STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS

The temporary opportunities that stretch assignments represent can help individuals gain new skills or experiences in their current role and prepare them for future roles. Examples of stretch assignments include:

- Representing a division in a corporate reorganization or realignment
- Delivering a presentation to a VIP client
- Structuring and communicating a rollout for a key change
- Leading the transition of a manual process to a technology platform
- Convening or serving on a task force created to solve a difficult problem

- Relaunching an internal initiative that previously failed
- Running a data analysis to scrutinize costs and inefficiencies
- Turning around a failing product

Stretch assignments can be assigned or be self-initiated. They can be offered as a learning exercise, or serve as an audition for a higher-level, permanent role. While the specifics of an opportunity may vary, companies that are serious about preparing their workforce for the future routinely use stretch assignments toward that goal. For example, GE uses short-term, rotational stretch assignments as a key component of a program to

fast-track its highest potential future leaders. Cisco created a stretch-assignment marketplace where employees can post or search for projects that could enhance their careers.¹⁶

“Thinking about the opportunity has to make me feel uncomfortable.”

— A male manager in the technology industry



BENEFITS OF STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS

FOR COMPANIES

Serve as a trial run. Employers can observe how well an employee works with a new group or problem without having to commit to a longer-term arrangement until after the test period.

Cost less than other types of training. Stretch assignments can be deployed without incurring expenses associated with classroom training or e-learning, which are adopted more frequently but cost more and aren't necessarily as effective.¹⁷

Help with cross-training. Stretch assignments spread knowledge and expertise. In one study, sales leaders who cross-trained generated 10% to 15% higher revenue and had higher engagement scores than those who did not.¹⁸

Promote agile ways of working. Organizations with structured stretch programs can work faster, deploying talent as needed to address urgent business opportunities, problems or crises.

Organizations with structured stretch programs can work faster, deploying talent as required to address urgent business needs.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Offer a chance to gain skills. Individuals can learn more about a group, part of the organization, issue or leader, allowing them to gain new skills, and new insights such as how informal power structures work or what constitutes organizational norms.

Provide opportunities for networking. Cross-functional assignments are a perfect catalyst for an individual to build relationships with a wider set of internal stakeholders, including peer-level collaborators, experts, and senior-level leaders.

Increase visibility. Stretch assignments help an employee make their skills, value, and work ethic known beyond their immediate work group. This kind of exposure is an important driver of career satisfaction¹⁹ and advancement, especially for women.²⁰

Acclimate them to managing risk. Stretch assignments help employees get comfortable dealing with uncertainties such as tackling a challenging business problem, reacting to changing market conditions, or making decisions based on partial information.

Stretch assignments help an employee make their skills, value, and work ethic known beyond their immediate work group.

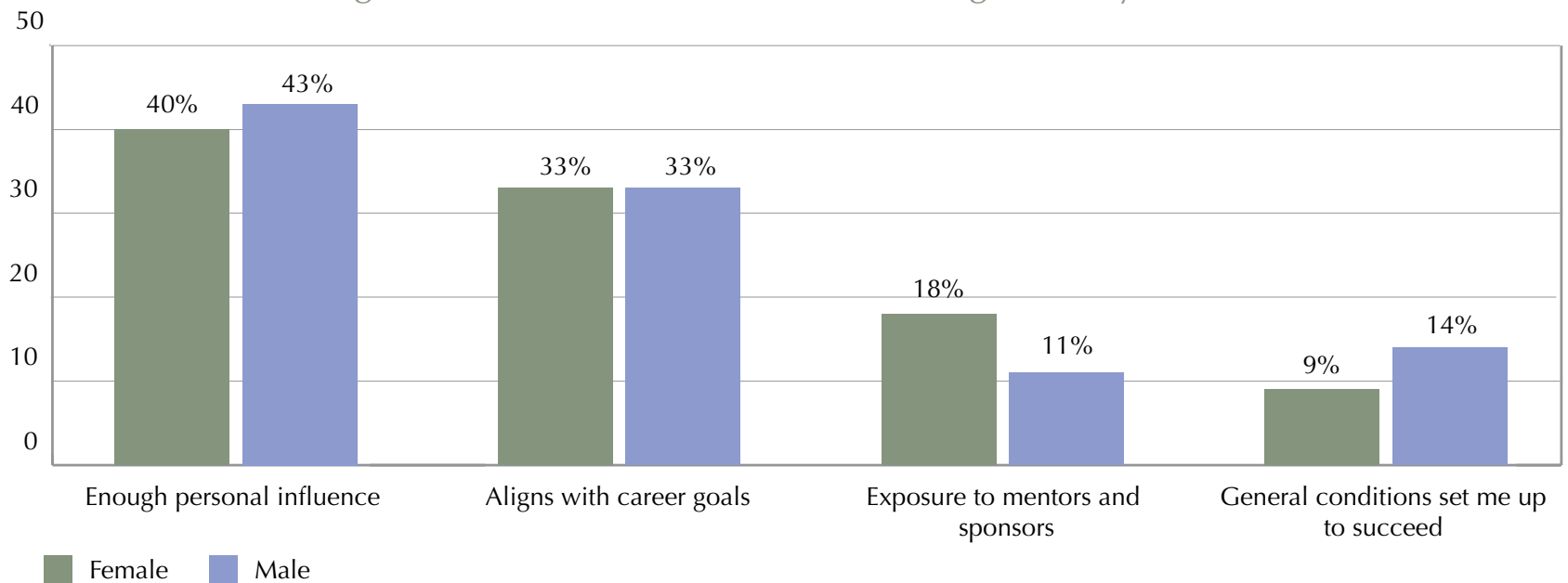
WHAT MAKES STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS “YESABLE”?

Criteria for saying “Yes” to a stretch assignment reveal many similarities for women and men. The top choice for both is personal influence, their ability to affect a positive outcome, although men (43%) slightly outpace women (40%) in responses (see Fig. 7). “My readiness for the next assignment depends on making sure I have a blank check to

make tough decisions,” one female respondent said. The second most popular criteria is whether an assignment matches an individual’s career goals, which one-third of respondents chose. However, men and women have differing views on the need for a stretch assignment to expose them to mentors and sponsors, with 18% of women

agreeing it was an important criteria compared to 11% of men. The difference may be an indication of the previously discussed “missing 33%,” where more women than men are encouraged to focus on activities such as mentoring instead of hard skills.

Fig. 7 - Criteria that makes a stretch assignment “yesable”

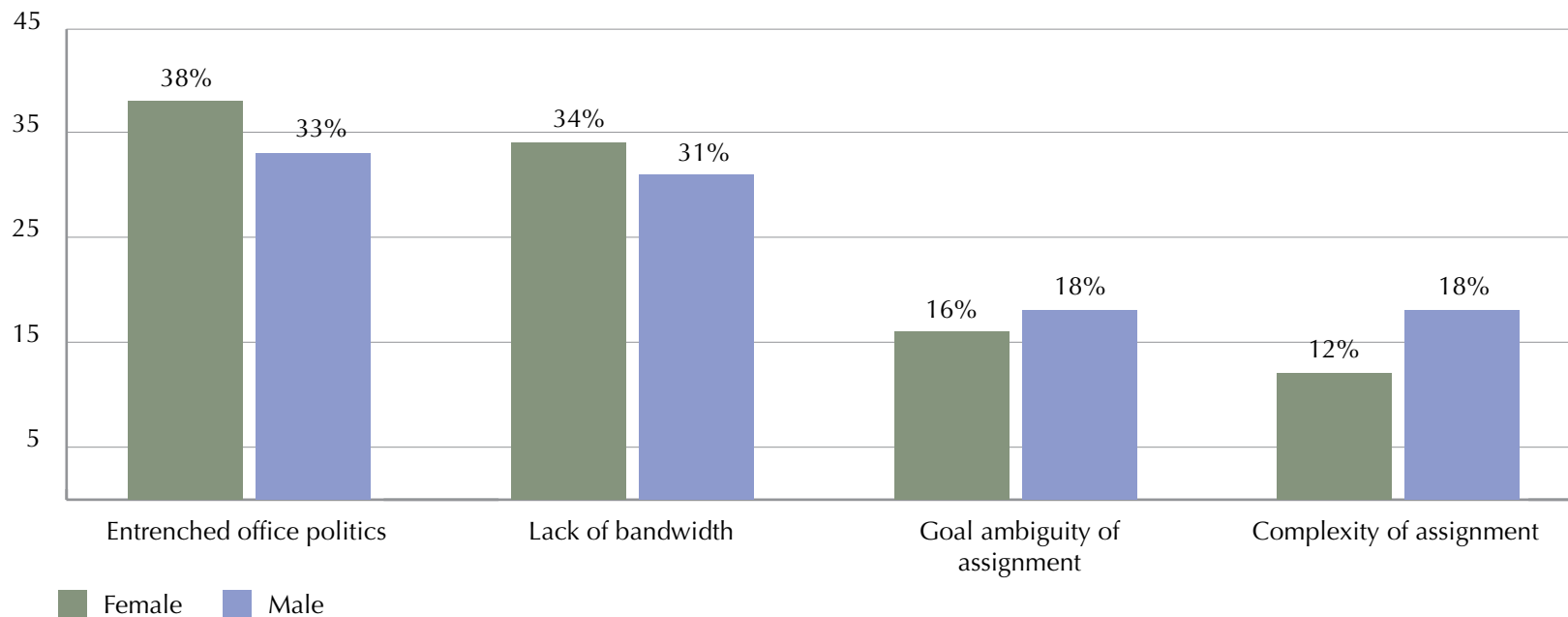


Men and women identify similar challenges and roadblocks to taking stretch assignments, and even when gender-based differences in responses appear, they are not statistically significant. For both, office politics is the biggest obstacle to accepting a stretch (see Fig. 8). Office politics came up repeatedly in respondents' answers to an open-ended survey question on the topic. One

respondent paints a picture of "politics increasing at the higher levels of an organization," while another individual reports needing to calculate their "likelihood to be selected given the politics." Yet another respondent questions "if they will fit the political expectations" within a given stretch assignment.

Aside from office politics, both men and women see time - specifically the bandwidth necessary to take on more work - as a practical consideration to taking on a stretch assignment. Ambiguous goals and the complexity of prospective opportunities are seen as less weighty considerations.

Fig. 8 - Largest practical challenge to taking a stretch assignment

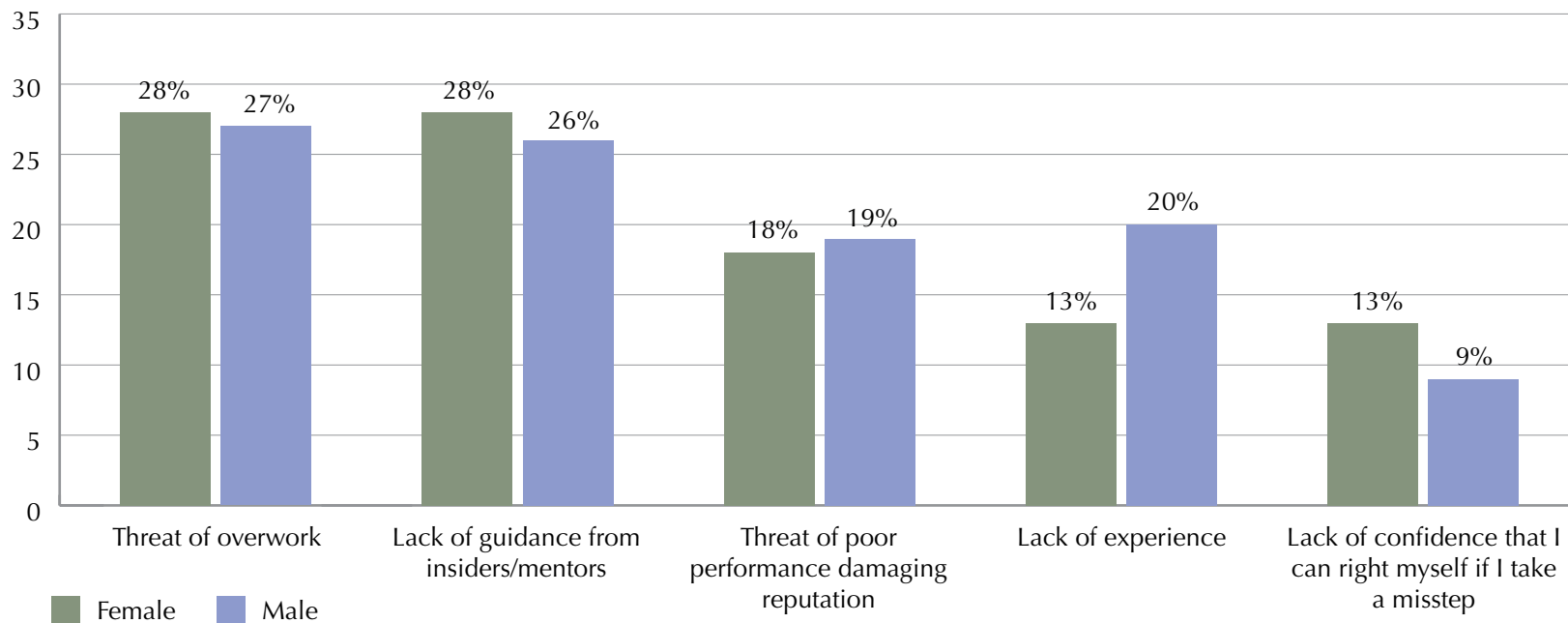


Given how challenging office politics are perceived to be, it's no wonder both men and women put stock in having knowledgeable guides and mentors to help them decode underlying rules of the game, navigate hidden power structures or provide other important context. It also comes as

no surprise that "threat of overwork" ranks highly as well for those considering red flags to taking on a stretch assignment (see Fig. 9). Separate research has shown that more than half of U.S. employees feel overworked or overwhelmed at least some of the time,²¹ for some employees stretching beyond

the work of their day job may feel like doing the impossible. As a result, it is easy to see why "threat of overwork" ranks highly to those considering red flags for a stretch assignment.

Fig. 9 - Red flags in assessing my potential fit for a stretch assignment



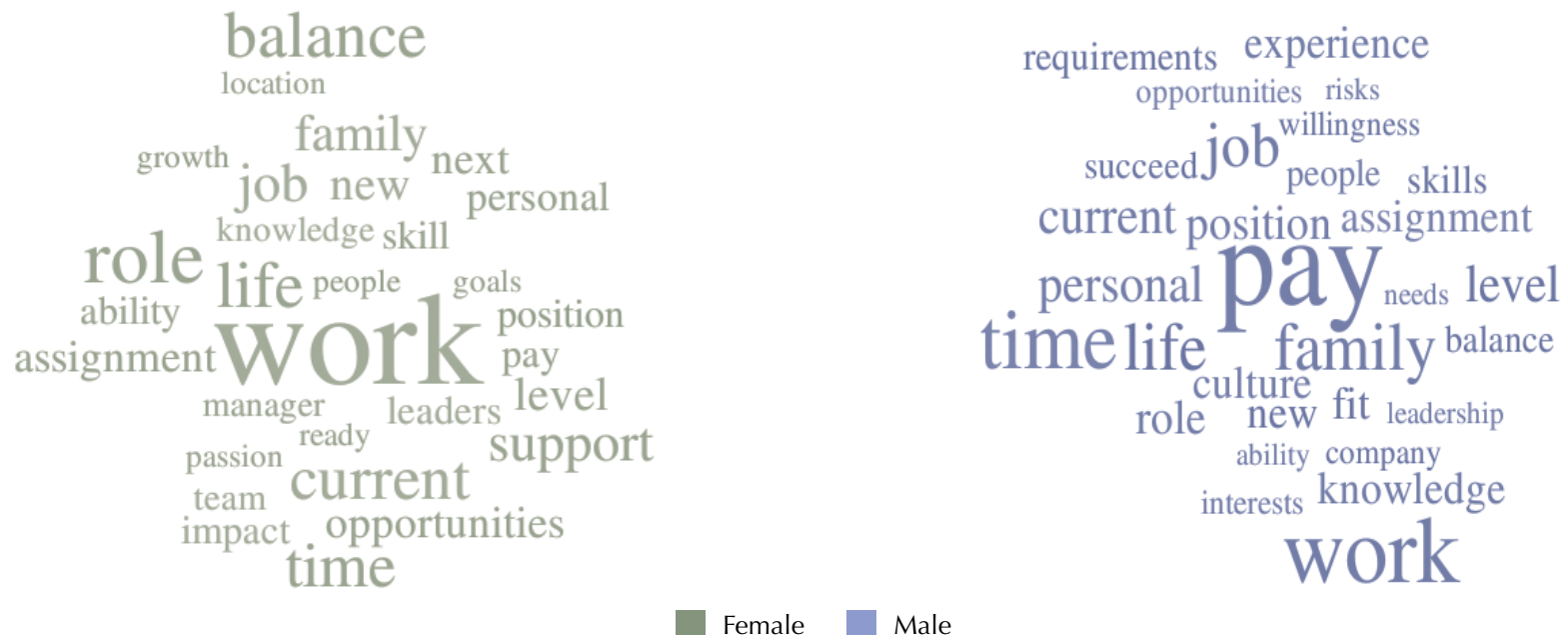
WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Men and women use the same criteria to evaluate potential stretch opportunities, with one significant exception. When considering whether a stretch role or assignment is “yesable,” both men and women agree that it’s important to have a raw passion for an opportunity, or as one respondent called it, the “want it” factor. Many agree on other factors that make a stretch opportunity appealing, including the coworkers they would

be teamed with, and whether sponsors, mentors, and leaders believe they are a good fit for the role or assignment. They also use the same personal constraints to evaluate a stretch, including the hours they would be required to work and whether an opportunity would impinge on their family and work-life balance.

Similarities end, however, when it comes to evaluating what a stretch opportunity or role would pay. In the only open-ended question in the survey, assessing other factors for taking on a stretch role or assignment, strikingly, men are 3.5 times as likely as women to cite “pay” as a keyword (see Fig. 10). The difference suggests that among men, there’s a stronger expectation of reciprocity in the form of increased compensation.

Fig. 10 - Other factors for taking on a stretch role or assignment



HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN HELP EMPLOYEES STRETCH

Corporate leaders and talent managers who want fully engaged employees have to try a new approach. Becoming more purposeful about offering stretch roles and assignments is one way to harness employees' full talents. We recommend the following to institute or improve stretch opportunities as a way to capture that something extra from employees:

Promote Pygmalion effect leadership.

Research shows that when managers expect more from employees it leads to better performance.²² Additionally, being vouched for by a higher up can help up-and-comers begin to think of themselves as leaders.²³ One way to make organizations more open to stretches is to promote a culture where leaders presume that female employees are capable, and in particular, to round up the skills they think women possess. Leaders should communicate their confidence in individuals considering stretch assignments, an experience that men already have.

Enable a growth mindset. Stretch opportunities' value often comes not from hard outcomes but from giving someone the chance to learn.

It's in an organization's best interest to cultivate a culture that allows for learning and growth. That can be difficult because failure is often part of learning. Organizations that lack a growth mindset tend to believe employees either do or don't have a specific skill. They value the work of a select few "stars," and as a result, other employees are generally less committed and worry more about failing.²⁴ By contrast, at growth-mindset organizations employees are more committed because they are more likely to believe their organizations support risk taking, innovation, and creativity. At growth mindset organizations, mistakes are more likely to be viewed as learning opportunities.²⁵

Start a system to flag stretch assignments.

If an organization doesn't have a plan for offering stretches or overseeing the results, they can be seen as political, biased, or promoting favoritism. To counter that, an organization can take a more systematic approach to stretches. Create a program to flag the chief people officer at key intervals, every 12 months for example, to indicate whether an employee can be offered

WHAT ELSE MATTERS WHEN DETERMINING READINESS?

When we asked survey respondents how they decided if they were ready for a next-level job or assignment, some key themes emerged. Here are some questions they ask to determine their readiness and decide if a potential stretch is a good fit:

Management support. Are there clear expectations? Is there support from senior leaders? Will I have the resources and authority to succeed?

Work-life balance. How does this impact my work-life balance? Will the time commitment fit with my family responsibilities? Is it worth the amount of time it will take to be successful?

New challenges. How challenging will the assignment be and what I can learn from it? Is it personally challenging or "more of the same"? Will it require me to think or use my skill set in new ways?

Purpose and passion. Does it align with my personal mission? Is it something that truly sparks my passion? How will it make a difference in the world?

What's next? Does it align with my career aspirations? Is this going to take me where I ultimately want to go or is the detour worth it? How might the role open the doors to other opportunities in the future?

Other common concerns include the new team's culture, and whether it functions without a lot of office politics; the potential to make a positive contribution to the organization; and if someone can backfill their previous role.

a stretch assignment. Creating such a process could stop stretches from going only to individuals who are good self-promoters and give a boost to individuals who tend to “round down” their assessment of their own readiness for a stretch. Both of those actions could result more high-potential women getting opportunities that put them in front of leadership.

Bank and post opportunities and offers. Stretch opportunities can be perceived as closely held and guarded, particularly when they are truly plum assignments. To make stretches transparent and searchable, so more individuals have the chance to benefit from them, encourage managers to post open roles and stretch assignments on the company’s intranet, Slack channel or another enterprise-wide forum. Include a description, qualifications, and clear expectations for the assignment or role.

Standardize opportunities. In many organizations, stretch assignments aren’t standardized, which may make it harder to assess one’s readiness. Making stretch opportunities more uniform and setting up individuals who pursue them to succeed requires creating guidelines or protocols. Before a stretch opportunity starts, for example, designate times that an employee will check in with a stretch mentor, such as when they are 10%, 25% or 50%

into an assignment. Hold a final checkpoint or debrief once an assignment is finished to assess how the employee performed and what they learned, and to determine how skills gleaned from the work could be transferred to the person’s regular job.

Reward stretches (with something other than money). Because men are more likely than women to consider pay when considering a stretch opportunity, managers should define compensation transparently for all employees. This approach guards against “job creep” being dressed up as a stretch assignment, where the incumbent simply does more work. Leaders can take the commitment to stretch opportunities a step further by publicly rewarding individuals who accept a stretch. At Cisco, for example, employees who demonstrate a willingness and ability to stretch are eligible for the company’s *Expand Your Boundaries* award.²⁶

Reduce roadblocks that stop individuals from accepting stretches. Organizations can use stretches to make their leadership pipeline more diverse, but doing that may require providing individuals interested in stretches with additional support. Specifically, encourage employees - especially women who may feel less engaged in or passionate about their current work - to identify

passion projects or roles that match their career goals and simultaneously meet critical business needs. Alert them when a stretch assignment comes along with the resources, authority and influence they feel they need to be successful and to manage any additional workload. While an employee is working on a stretch assignment, reduce obstacles that could hinder their success. For example, give them access to influential supporters and mentors who can champion their decisions and help them navigate office politics.

If an organization doesn’t have a plan for offering stretches or overseeing the results, they can be seen as political, biased, or promoting favoritism.

HOW EMPLOYEES CAN GET THE MOST OUT OF STRETCH OPPORTUNITIES

Towering evidence confirms the power of stretch opportunities to transform careers. Want to uncover a bigger, bolder vision for your own career? Take an assignment or role that can't be accomplished with existing expertise, one that compels you to develop new technical, business or leadership skills:

Don't be afraid to take a risk. Stretch assignments and stretch roles come with tradeoffs. It can be risky to commit to high-stakes, highly visible work that adds to your workload. But consider the upside: the chance to develop new skills, discover new strengths, build influential networks, and make a meaningful contribution to your organization. Stretch opportunities are proven shortcuts to advancement. Don't underestimate their career-making potential.

Define your direction. The ideal stretch fuels your passions, plays to your strengths, and helps you make an impact. Reflect on your career goals, and scan your organization's landscape for gaps, problems, and business opportunities that would be a good match for new challenges you'd like to take on. Once you have ideas, find evidence to support why they would be helpful. Propose them to your management in a way that helps them see what's needed and why you're excited about the part you could play.

Calibrate how ready you are. If your organization makes it difficult to assess when someone is ready to advance, or if you just want to gauge your own readiness more accurately, seek out clear, frequent feedback—both formal and informal—that is tied to business outcomes. If you're a woman, aim to round up rather than round down your qualifications when deciding if you've got enough to go after a certain role or assignment.

Make informed decisions and negotiate for what you need to be successful. Before taking on a new stretch, get as many details as possible about the opportunity, including on compensation, recognition and career options that a stretch might lead to. Before agreeing to or starting a new role or assignment, negotiate the authority, resources and support you think you'll need to be successful. Line up mentors and influential allies to help you navigate office politics. Don't be afraid to ask, "If I do an excellent job on this project, what can I expect as a result?"

Go after a project no one wants. Sure, everyone wants the stretch assignment associated with the shiny, cutting-edge trend or cool new client. But what about the assignment that makes people uncomfortable or nervous? The person who raises their hand for riskier stretches shows unique confidence in their abilities and commitment to their organization. Although management may

have lower expectations for these assignments, such opportunities can be proving grounds for problem-solvers, change agents, and fledgling leaders.

Embrace a beginner's mindset. Often, when we leave the comfort and safety of a role in which we've become an expert we are quick to judge the gaps in our knowledge of a new role or field, stymying what we can learn. Rather than avoiding the vulnerability of being a novice, lean in to your newcomer status. Bring raw enthusiasm, be openly inquisitive, probe for the issue behind the issue, and become a student of the problem you're solving.

The ideal stretch opportunity fuels your passions, plays to your strengths, and helps you make an impact.

Translate the experience. Stretch assignments can be stepping stones to your next career milestone, so it helps to be clear on what you have gained from an assignment. Be able to articulate three actions you can take in your current role based on what you learned while you were “on assignment.” Such actions could be possible because you developed new technical skills, guided a group through a complex change, or strengthened a historically problematic relationship.

CONCLUSION

Highly visible projects and mission-critical roles can help an individual advance further and faster, but women attract fewer of these types of hot jobs, according to research from Catalyst.²⁷ Our own work with professional women shows that stretch opportunities are an underrated, under-discussed, and under-utilized career advancement strategy. If implemented more often, stretch assignments and stretch roles can propel more women into higher leadership roles.

With the U.S. unemployment rate dipping to its lowest point since the *Mad Men* era,²⁸ organizations are scrambling to compete for qualified professionals to fill open positions.²⁹ Given the circumstances, employers must look inside their own ranks to engage, develop and promote talent from within. Stretch opportunities are one way to do that.

Creating stretch practices that are appealing and

Over deliver. If you are selected for a special assignment, it means someone vouched for you and put their reputation on the line to advocate for you. This person and your organization are invested in your success and will be watching how you perform. Rather than aiming to merely satisfy a project goal or stakeholder, find a way to deliver something memorable or extraordinary.

fair yields payoffs for organizations and employees. A transparent, well-run, equitable stretch program can prepare employees for advancement. It also can build perspective, inviting employees to consider new points of view by effectively stepping into someone else’s shoes. Academics tend to agree that perspective taking can improve creativity,³⁰ reduce perceived favoritism within teams,³¹ and improve conflict management.³²

Beyond that, stretch assignments have the potential to help organizations disseminate knowledge more broadly. They can also help build cognitive diversity, steering teams away from thinking about things in the same way to consider more sides of an issue.

If the workplace is being disrupted by sweeping, large-scale trends, employees must have the opportunity to continually redefine and hone their skills. One way employers can offer that is through stretch assignments that provide intrapreneurial short-term “gig economy” type work with minimal

Spotlight what you accomplish. Even the most brilliantly executed stretch assignment won’t mean much if no one knows about it. In your pre-deal negotiation, request that your stretch assignment be marketed internally. For example, ask that it serve as a best practice story and be shared on appropriate company channels, whether that’s via an internal newsletter, social networks or even in a brown bag information session.

risk and disruption, all within the organization’s dominion. Employees, especially millennials, want to “job-craft” their roles. Offering an internal gig economy – or stretch marketplace – delivers big.

For women to have an equal chance as men at career-making stretches, employers must formalize stretch programs and processes, increase their estimates of employees’ capabilities, and deploy talent strategically and evenly. We think employers that offer women more coveted opportunities will cement their own competitive advantage in an increasingly unsparing marketplace.

Employees want to “job-craft” their roles. Offering an internal gig economy – or stretch marketplace – delivers big.



APPENDIX

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The report is based on survey of 1,549 U.S.-based professionals who completed an online survey between December 2017 and March 2018. Respondents answered mixed-method questions about their experiences taking on stretch opportunities and higher-level roles. They work in a broad range of industries with no

single industry representing more than 3% of the sample, including consumer products, financial services, health care, and technology, among others. Responses have a margin of error of +/-5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. All gender differences discussed are statistically significant, with a p-value of less than .005.

Analysis of employee experiences uses aggregated findings from the top-two and bottom-two boxes of the response scale. Specifically, the percentages of “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” responses to survey statements are combined, as are “Disagree” and “Strongly Agree” responses.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Be Leaderly CEO Jo Miller helps women around the world advance into positions of leadership and influence, especially in technology, finance, energy and other male-dominated industries. Through keynotes, workshops, and webinars, she shares the steps women can take to succeed. Jo speaks at leadership conferences, professional associations, and corporate women’s networks at companies such as Amazon, eBay

and Microsoft. She delivers more than 70 presentations a year to audiences of up to 1,200 women. She has spoken in Europe, North America, Asia Pacific, and the Middle East. Her columns appear in [Forbes.com](#), [The Muse](#), and [Business 380 Magazine](#). Her new book, *Are You the Best Kept Secret in Your Organization?* will be published in 2018.



Selena Rezvani is Be Leaderly’s VP of consulting and research and a recognized speaker on women and leadership. Selena uses workplace culture assessments to help corporate clients be more inclusive and welcoming to women. Her research campaigns and studies on women in the C suite, [millennials](#), [managers](#) and [negotiating habits](#) have been covered by media around the world. She has written two books on

women and leadership – [Pushback: How Smart Women Ask—and Stand Up—for What They Want](#) (Jossey-Bass, 2012) and [The Next Generation of Women Leaders](#) (Praeger, 2009). Selena has been featured in the *LA Times*, Oprah.com, Todayshow.com, and Forbes.com, and wrote an award-winning *Washington Post* column, and currently writes for *Forbes*.

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ABOUT BE LEADERLY

Be Leaderly is dedicated to helping emerging women leaders advance into management and leadership positions. Clients include Amazon, Bank of America, Boeing, eBay, GM, Department of Homeland Security, MetLife, Microsoft, Siemens, Society of Women Engineers, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Verizon and more than 400 additional organizations in the commercial, academic, nonprofit and government sectors.

[Be Leaderly](#) helps organizations develop a pipeline of qualified and engaged emerging women leaders. The firm's corporate programs help women employees gain clarity on how their talents can contribute to the organization's success and the tools necessary to take ownership of their career advancement. Be Leaderly principals [Jo Miller](#) and [Selena Rezvani](#) offer diversity and inclusion [consulting](#) and [research](#) as well as [workshops](#), [webinars](#) and keynote presentations.

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