

BUSINESS 380

Women need to 'stretch' for success

Survey: Career-making opportunities harder for women to find

By Carrie Campbell, correspondent

There are far fewer women than men in higher management positions, and the reason could be related to their opportunities for so-called stretch assignments at work.

"Out of the Comfort Zone: How Women and Men Size Up Stretch Assignments — and Why Leaders Should Care," a study released today by Cedar Rapids-based consulting, research and leadership training business Be Leaderly, found that men and women are equally interested in director or vice president positions and ultimately advancing into senior vice president or C-suite roles.

However, women are offered fewer stretch opportunities and/or may hold back from taking them because they tend to underestimate their own skill sets.

The results are based on a survey of more than 1,500 U.S.-based professionals working in a broad range of fields, including financial services, health care and technology.

A stretch opportunity refers to a new role or assignment that requires an employee to move out of her or his comfort zone. It can provide value to the company by filling special needs and identifying future leaders, and helps employees build new skills and confidence and network with co-workers outside their regular team.

Be Leaderly founder and CEO Jo Miller, the study's co-author — with Selena Rezvani, Be Leaderly vice president of consulting and research — and a monthly guest columnist for The Gazette's Sunday business section, was most surprised by the fact that men and women both believe that, to apply for a job, they need to meet 75 percent of the quali-

cations for the role. Previously accepted thinking was that women felt they needed to meet 100 percent of the criteria and men only 60 percent.

The new study "kind of debunked that," Miller said.

Although women seek it as often as men, women believe they receive less informal feedback and less specific, actionable feedback in performance reviews. This makes it harder for women to gauge their readiness to advance internally and take on new roles.

And when stretch opportunities are unclear, unadvertised and unevenly offered, women hesitate even more to pursue them, the respondents said.

There also is a lack of sponsorship of women, which plays a crucial role when it comes to filling the leadership pipeline. Eighteen percent of female respondents cited a lack of exposure to mentors and/or

sponsors in the Be Leaderly survey, compared with 11 percent of male respondents stating that as a concern.

Sponsors are different from mentors — sponsors are senior leaders who use their political and interpersonal capital to help advance employees. As many women are undersponsored, they typically have less access to that crucial on-the-job learning of the higher management skills such as strategic and financial functions that are necessary to reaching top-level management positions.

But there are a number of things companies can do to make stretch opportunities more equitable, Miller said.

"Companies should foster a work culture where values like learning and innovation and taking risks aren't just lip service," Miller said.

For example, leaders can share positive stories about missteps, as failure often is part of learning.

Companies also could post stretch assignments in an open, transparent and easily

accessible way, such as on the company's intranet or other enterprise-wide forums.

Among other highlights of the survey:

- For both women and men, 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 said office politics is the biggest obstacle to taking a stretch assignment, with lack of time a close second.

Miller advised employees "to seek out or even create for yourself stretch assignments that embrace your passions and play to your strengths and also positively impact your company's success.

"Also, don't be afraid to say no to an opportunity that's not the right fit for you," Miller said. Instead, see if you could sponsor a co-worker who would be right for that role.

To read the survey, go to <https://beleaderly.com/stretch-assignments/>.



Jo Miller
Be Leaderly



Selena Rezvani
Be Leaderly