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A glass ceiling by any other name.... Barriers still exist to keep women below C-level



Paul Brent

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A recent article in the Harvard Business Review argues that barriers still exist in the working world to prevent women from advancing to better-paid, more responsible positions and ultimately those sought-after C-suite jobs. But rather than a glass ceiling, the article's authors state that women must navigate a maze of "subtle, discriminatory forces that still reside in organizations."

So if the "glass ceiling" is a myth, what can companies do today to allow one-half of the work force to successfully navigate the labyrinth that they have (unwittingly) created?

"Rather than maybe 20 years ago having a group of men around the boardroom not wanting to have people different from them [around], now we have to ask, 'Do we have the systems in place to support a mother who wants to move through the office?'" said Lisa Mattam, a Toronto employment consultant who specializes on diversity in the workplace.

Less a myth than an endangered species, the diversity consultant believes the glass ceiling "probably" still exists, "but on a very individual basis" rather than as a widespread reality. "Before it was just an unwillingness to have women in the workplace," Mattam said. "The big thing now is do they have the processes in place to support them, as we would with anybody who is high potential?"

Smart employers will spend the time to learn what motivates workers and tailor their benefit plans, rewards and perks accordingly. "Organizations need to understand why somebody goes to work every day," she stressed. "Perhaps the subtle changes you start making are not reevaluating the executive teams but rather, 'When I reward this woman, am I rewarding her with more work or am I am rewarding her with an extra three days off to spend with her family?'"

The failure of employers to stream women up through the ranks was highlighted recently in a study which found just 31 women hold the highest-paid executive jobs in Canada's 100 biggest publicly traded companies, a decline from 37 the

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year before. Of those 535 C-suite jobs, just 5.8 percent were held by women, and that number actually fell from 6.9 percent the prior year, according to executive search firm Rosenzweig & Co. "This drop is disheartening and makes you wonder if anything is really going to change over the next 10 years, or even longer," said Jay Rosenzweig, the firm's managing partner. "The reasons for the drop are many and varied, but no matter how you slice this data, women are simply not being promoted to the top jobs in corporate Canada at the pace they should be," he said. Traditionally, employers' rewards and incentives have been established to motivate male employees who until recently were predominant in the office. While the male-female ratio may have shifted to parity, the systems in place have not adapted. A compensation and reward system designed for "work first" male employees in mind typically does not recognize the wider range of motivations of female workers.

"What organizations can do is really look at their individual high-potential leaders and say, 'What do you need to be successful? Do you need training, do you want us to look at how we reward you, do you want us to look at our benefits structure or look at how we do work-life balance for you?'" argued Mattam. The opportunity to work at home, for example, would not be considered a benefit for Mattam, who does not have children.

"Organizations need to re-evaluate the processes that they have that support women and all diversity and they need to look at every individual as an individual," she said. For an employer to say, "'Now that we have instituted meals to go, everybody is going to be happy' is just a fallacy," she said.

A recent success story Mattam likes to cite involves Johnson & Johnson's pharmaceutical division. Female-friendly initiatives include a women's leadership networking group designed to support and advance women as well as on-site amenities such as dry cleaning, fitness facility and meals to go. "A variety of organizations see that their retention is increased by putting in these programs," said Mattam.

Networking groups for women may be company-specific or professional-based, such as the female mentoring networks for senior and junior lawyers established by Kirby Chown, who is Ontario regional managing partner of powerhouse law firm McCarthy Tétrault. "If there are not strong women leaders in an organization, it is tough for emerging women leaders to find people to go to for advice, support and navigation in their career."

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