



## Women in a Global Workforce

By: Sharmila Rudrappa

"I think, overall, culture favors male white Caucasians."  
"We need more women moving up in the organization."  
"To have more women at the top might change how we perceive things."  
"Women have a glass ceiling beyond which they cannot go up."  
"Being a woman is a disadvantage because the culture is male-dominated."

*Responses from women respondents to the joint study conducted by Dell and Diversity Best Practices.*

### 1. Introduction

In *Destined for Equality: The Inevitable Rise of Women's Status* (Harvard University Press, 1998) Robert Max Jackson claims that women's positions in the U.S have improved over the last 150 years. The growth of modernity, rational individualism, and meritocracy are ultimately responsible for the increasing equality between men and women. "Full equality is women's destiny," he writes, "because gender inequality is inherently inconsistent with modern economic and political organization." Yet, contradicting such optimism, we find that women earn 79.7cents for every dollar made by a man (*Economic Policy Institute*), African American women make 63 cents for the dollar, and Hispanic women earn 54 cents (*Legal Momentum*). In the year 2002 only 5.2% of the top earning positions in Fortune 500 companies were held by women. Women in the United States comprise only 13.6% of all board seats, and five executive positions in Fortune 500 companies. They hold only 7.1% of CFO and 1.6% of the CEO positions in these 500 largest companies. Yet, American women comprise nearly half the nation's workforce, and college graduates. In addition, they spend \$3.7 trillion annually on consumer goods and services, which amounts to a figure larger than the Japanese economy (WOW! Facts, 2002).

How do we account for these disparities between men and women, if women's destiny is to be full equality? Let me provide more facts and figures to further reinforce this point.

A recent article in Harvard Business Review (March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005) noted that a survey of the class of 1981 at Stanford University showed that 57% of the women graduates left the workforce; a survey of three graduating classes at Harvard Business School showed that only 38% of the women graduates ended up in full time careers; and another study showed that one in three white women with MBA degrees is not working full-time,

compared to one in twenty men. Perhaps, the article noted, we have a new brain drain, with highly educated women opting out of the workforce to stay at home.

When we look around us we see evidence of women's advancement—women are allowed to vote, and run for office. They can serve in the army. No academic fields close their doors to women, and women are graduating from universities in equal numbers as men. Yet, in spite of this growing equality, we see the persistence of inequality between the sexes in the workforce both in terms of earnings, and in terms of their experiences. How do we make sense of this disparity? What are women's roles in the workforce? How do we gauge their experiences?

To get to this issue of gender inequity we need to understand the reasons that compel women to work, and the reasons they quit so that we can attain the following goal: The creation of a just and more equitable work for women of all racial backgrounds so that we can—

- a) Improve the productivity of the workplace through assisting every employee reach their fullest potential; and
- b) Use the burgeoning talent pool that is available out there in the world today.

Diversity in the workplace is the key to the competitive advantage of firms, and to this end, it is imperative that the growth of every employee within the firm is facilitated.

To this end, i.e., understand women's subjectivities in the workforce, Dell commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a study among women managers in multinational companies around the world. The findings of this study were discussed in a Global Summit on Women in the Workforce, March 8 & 9, 2005, co-organized by Dell and Diversity Best Practices. While questions of gender equity affect workplaces from across North America to Asia, this joint summit offered solutions to think globally and act locally in reaching women's destiny, and that is, full equality. Attendees to the Global Summit were Diversity Officers and Human Resource executives from companies such as Intel, Toyota, Cisco, L'Oreal, Mattel, Starbucks, Catalyst, Calvert, Cummins, Chevron Texaco Corporation, Lucent, Eastman Kodak, Unilever, and Texas Instruments, to name a few corporations.

The results of the Harris Interactive research, commissioned by Dell, are not surprising at some level. It comes as no great shock that the push factors of ostensibly "gender neutral" work place structuring, and the pull factors of family responsibilities compel women to exit the workforce. Yet, what is unexpected are the reasons that women say that make them stay, or leave the workforce. These survey results give us compelling insights on how to make the work place more amenable to women of all racial backgrounds, thus facilitating our abilities to create a just and equitable work environment. This white paper summarizes the findings of this study to illuminate on women's experiences in the work place, so that women can perform to the best of their abilities, thus contributing to the competitive advantages for our firms.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The greatest growth opportunities that companies like Dell face is outside the United States, and the greatest human resources challenge has been the gender factor in the workplace. Dell has a strong commitment to understanding, and addressing the challenges women face in the workplace today. As companies grow rapidly around the world, they strive to provide their workforce with development programs that can be implemented in their specific regions. While strategies need to be implemented globally, the cultural realities of regions around the world vary widely. Hence, the challenge is to think globally, and act locally in developing gender egalitarian work forces.

Dell had three objectives in commissioning Harris Interactive to conduct this research on women in the workplace:

1. To study women managers in multinational corporations around the world;
2. To understand women's roles in different cultures around the world; and
3. To come up with solutions for multinational corporations to address the changing role of women in different cultures, so that positive outcomes can be reached in recruitment, advancements, and retention of women in the workforce

## 3. Methodology and Survey Design

The sample for the study comprised two sources:

1. Sample provided by Dell and other summit participating companies (Summit Respondent Sample)
  - Companies participating in the Summit were invited by Diversity Best Practices to provide a list of their women managers who were amenable to participating in the research study.
  - A total of seven multinational corporations provided these lists
  - Harris Interactive received the email addresses of female managers with a minimum of one direct report by country/ region.
  - A random sample of up to two hundred potential respondents was pulled from each company list, and email invitations to participate in the survey were sent out by Harris Interactive.
2. Harris Interactive Online Database (HPOL Sample)
  - A random sample of women employed at large companies across the world was pulled from Harris' multinational member panel of survey panelists
  - Each participant from this sample was a woman who worked for a multinational company, and had at least one direct report.

### 3.1. Sample Characteristics

#### 3.1.1. Employment Characteristics

The sample covered over thirty five countries, with 248 respondents of various job descriptions, and companies of various sizes. Two-thirds of the respondents were from outside the U.S. Eighty-five of the respondents were American, fifty two from Europe, forty six from Asia Pacific, twenty nine from Latin America, twenty from the rest of North America, and sixteen from other countries.

Ninety nine percent of the respondents were employed full-time. A quarter of the respondents were senior executives, and the remainder were managers or supervisors. Fifty percent were senior or middle managers. Twenty three percent were directors or senior managers, reporting to the vice president of the company. Six percent were vice presidents, reporting directly to the head of the company, and two percent were heads of the company at which they worked.

Most of the respondents were in human resources (12%), marketing (12%), operations (12%), and finance (10%). Others were in sales, general management, and other fields such as account management, business development, information technology, consulting, and public relations, to name a few. Seventy seven percent of the respondents managed one to twenty employees. The remainder managed twenty one or more. Just over three fourths of the respondents (76%) had men managers.

### **3.1.2. Demographic Characteristics**

The age breakdown of the respondents was as follows: eighteen to twenty nine years (8%), in their thirties (41%), in the forties (41%), and women above the age of fifty years (10%). The majority of the respondents, sixty two percent, were the primary wage earners in their households. Fifty eight percent of the respondents were married, and twenty-one percent were single. Fifty five percent of the women had **no** children under the age of eighteen living at home with them. Either these women had no children, or their children were above eighteen years of age and did not live at home with them. Eighteen percent had one child below the age of eighteen still at home with them. Twenty-two percent had two children, and four percent had three children. Fifty seven percent of the women's mothers worked outside the homes. The respondents were also very well educated; a majority (58%) had a Masters' degree or more. Thirty six percent had some college education, whereas six percent had a high school education, or less. Eighty three percent had been in the workforce for ten to fifteen years (59% e for fifteen years or more; 24% between ten and fifteen years), and fourteen percent have worked between five to ten years.

## **4. Research Findings**

The basic challenges around the globe, regardless of cultural differences, for recruiting, retaining, and advancing women were relatively consistent. The common key findings across cultures are the following:

### **1. The importance of life stages:**

Life stages, that is, the presence of children in the home, responsibilities for aging parents, etc. had a far greater impact on women around the world, regardless of

region. They exited the workforce for personal and family reasons. Universally, the women felt that the high value they placed on personal and family responsibilities were obstacles to their advancement.

**2. The importance of supportive managers:**

In all cases, supportive managers, rather than mentors, were far more crucial for retention and advancement of women. Hence, managers trumped mentors, because they could provide their women employees with flexible hours, part-time, or job share options.

**3. Recruiting talent:**

In addition, the reasons women joined the company were completely different from the reasons they stayed on. The top five reasons they accepted positions within companies were the following:

- a) Seventy six percent looked for good compensations and benefit packages
- b) Strong market positions for the company mattered (58%)
- c) Opportunities for challenging work was significant for attracting women workers (51%)
- d) Opportunities for women to advance in that particular company was important for the respondents (44%)
- e) Additionally, they felt that they needed to identify with company values (42%).

Compensation, benefits, and the company's reputation were very important for women in North America, Europe, and Asia Pacific, yet differences were apparent. European women focused more on the marketing position, and training opportunities afforded them by the company. Asian women rated as important to them the global presence of the company (26% versus 10% for North Americans and 12% of Europeans), and the workplace's sensitivity to cultural differences (24% for Asian Pacific women, when compared to the 3% for North Americans, and 10% for European women).

**4. Retaining and advancing women workers:**

Retention factors differ from factors that attract talent; the top five reasons in retention and advancing women, according to the respondents, were the following:

- a) Supportive managers (63%)
- b) Supportive networks outside the workplace to help meet personal obligations at home (54%)
- c) Flexible work hours, part-time, job-share, or the abilities to work from home (50%)
- d) Commitment to diversity and culture (42%), and
- e) Access to challenging assignments (40%).

The other list of top reasons women identified listed were as follows: access to influential decision makers (31%), having clearly defined requirements for advancement (30%), having clearly defined career paths (28%), training on skills related to job performance (27%), regular performance reviews and ongoing feedback on work (21%), availability of job rotation assignments (19%), women supporting women in career advancements (17%), and understanding organizational

culture (17%). All of these reasons listed here are exactly the functions that **supportive managers** perform for their supervisees.

However, differences were observed; Asian Pacific women said that family/ domestic help to take care of their personal responsibilities was the most crucial factor in their retention and advancement (74% of the Asian women responded to this as the top reason for retention). Hence, Asian Pacific women look for family, or hired domestic help to meet personal/ family obligations. In comparison, flexible hours were rated more highly by other women (73% this was the top reason for retention by North Americans; 63% by Europeans, and 59% by Latin Americans).

## 5. Obstacles to Advancement and Retention

However, there were obstacles to advancement. The five reasons were:

- a) The chief one was women's obligations to family. Hence, Asians looked for extended family, and hired help to fulfill their familial obligations, and other women sought flexible hours so that they could take care of their personal responsibilities.
- b) However, the respondents also noted that women's commitment to family can be perceived negatively, and affect their advancement in the workplace; companies hold the perception that women are not committed to their careers.
- c) In addition, perceptions of women's capabilities hinder their advancement.
- d) The fourth reason, was stereotyping of women
- e) Fifth, women felt that because they were unwilling to relocate for business, their chances to advance in work are smaller.

It is important to know that reasons b, c, and d all have to do with gender perception; companies could intervene strongly, through training, to break negative perceptions of women.

The next list of reasons women listed were the lack of men and women advisors to guide them in work; the lack of advancement opportunities within the company in general; and lack of management opportunities for women.

## 6. Reasons for leaving the workforce

The top three reasons all had to do with life stages. Listed below:

- a) Personal/ family obligations (79%)
- b) Excessive work hours that hindered their abilities to meet familial obligations (73%)
- c) Personal choice to stay home to be a wife, or mother (67%)
- d) Inadequate salary compensations (46%)
- e) Forced choice to stay at home to be wife/ mother (38%)

American women, by far, listed excessive work hours as the reason for leaving (81%, versus 63% and 71% for Asian and European women; 55% of the Latin American women found work hours excessive).

## 7. Perceptions on Position, Culture, and Career

Globally, there were common themes around women’s perceptions regarding their position at work, and their work culture. Just under two-thirds of them believed that they did not have the same opportunities as their male co-workers (Asians were more favorable on the equal opportunities at the work place than women from other regions). Half of them believed that it would take six or more years to be better positioned in the work place. Over half of them perceived that their work culture was an extension of the corporate headquarters, and did not reflect local culture; however, Asian women felt their cultures were reflected to a greater extent in their work places than did European or North American women. Globally, women felt they received support from other men and women. Asian women were more likely to receive career advice from others.

In all regions women felt it was important for them to have a career; all the Asian women who participated in the survey—100%— felt careers were important for women. European women were least likely to make career sacrifices to improve personal life (55%, in comparison to 81% of the North American women, and 70% of the Asian women).

Asian women were more likely to accept a global assignment (83%, versus 59% and 58% for North Americans and Europeans respectively). Asian women’s willingness to relocate for work reasons raised a lot of discussion in the summit. Statistics show that 53% of these women were married, and 40% had children under the ages of 18 years. However, this is not a surprising finding, given that these women all work for multinational companies. Hence, relocation often means that they will be relocated to Western countries. Especially if they have school going children, they are amenable to moving because the children have opportunities to access western education systems, and eventually, higher education in colleges and universities in the West. Contrarily, European and North American women who accept global assignments are moved to countries with perhaps lower standards of living. Especially if they have children, they are extremely unwilling to do so. Hence, the life stage in an Asian woman would actually make her more amenable to accepting a global assignment, in comparison to other women. In their eyes, by accepting global assignments, they are meeting their family obligations by improving their children’s life chances.

Men who accept global assignments, and relocate have supports provided through the company to address the “trailing wife and children” issue. However, many companies are not as yet equipped to deal with the “trailing husband” phenomenon.

The discussions in the Summit proposed that anyone taking an expatriates assignment should go through a pre-assessment to make sure their issues are covered. In addition, expatriation is best done early on in the person’s career. Many companies are opting for phone and video conferencing options as ways to provide women with cross-region responsibilities and at the same time avoid the need for mobility.

## 8. Networking groups

The research findings indicated that women do not use networks. Even though 31% of the women said that their companies sponsored a women's network (42% said their companies had no women's networks, and 27% were not sure), only 53% of them took part in these networks. A large number of women felt these networks were not as important for themselves personally, for their companies, for their work lives, or their careers.

## 5. Discussion

Diversity is not just about acknowledging difference, but should be measured by whether employees feel valued, respected, and that they have made a difference. It is important to practice diversity in every HR process. Moreover, we need to make sure that women are in P&L jobs and not just line jobs, like HR, Finance, etc.

Our study shows that the women respondents found supportive managers far more important than mentors. Our conclusions from this finding should not be that mentors are unimportant, because **mentors play a crucial role** in our working lives, and personal lives. They know us, inside out, in a way that managers cannot and should not know us. Moreover, mentoring has positive outcomes not just on the mentee, but on the mentor as well.

However, the fact of the matter is that an employee spends far more time interacting with her manager than her mentor. In the summit, much of the focus in discussion was on **supportive managers**, since most of the respondents in the research indicated that this was most important to them, more than mentors.

### Supportive Managers

#### 1. What tasks do supportive managers do?

Supportive managers have to **respect** their employees, and be respected in return. They need to be results driven, setting stretch goals, and provide consistent and constructive feedback. They need to express a genuine interest in the individual under their supervision, and in their organization. They need to try **empower** individual workers, and not micro-manage work processes. They should be able to delegate, and let go. Being good listeners helps to manage in the work place, so that they can begin to understand individual employees, and figure out how to motivate them on an individual basis. Managers should also act and be perceived as integral people with high ethical standards. They need **some ability to be inspirational**, have a sense of humor, be **an advocate** for their supervisees, and most important—be a **risk taker**.

#### 2. What are the qualities that managers need to have?

Managers need to have intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic qualities are empathy, passion and drive, and the desire to have a smooth work place. In addition, they need to have a real desire to help others learn through their own experiences. Extrinsic factors that help managers develop the qualities needed are financial compensation and benefits. In addition, their contribution to gender equity, diversity, and good people skills need to be acknowledged publicly. They should be given recognition, and held accountable for the respect/ disrespect they show to their employees.

### **3. Can effective management be taught, and if so, how?**

Effective management can be taught, but it has to be learned to be effective. The person has to be receptive to the training. The key elements to teaching management are through role modeling, access to information on how to manage, reinforcement of positive aspects through recognition of successes. To teach effectively, we need to know the different levels of culture—the individual manager’s culture, the corporate culture, and the employee’s cultures as well. In addition, we need to work with the personalities of the individual managers, instead of working against it. In addition, managers need to have accountability. It is hard to undo the bad behaviors that have been learned over time; hence some of these processes might take time.

### **4. What does an organization need to do to make “supportive” managers the norm in the organization?**

Organizations need to align their values to rewards. They need to reward the behavior they say is important. Senior management must set the example. These values of appreciating difference should be embraced by the top, but it should also be a foundation on which to build. The point to remember is that while respect for diversity and gender is important, we simultaneously need to remember that we are in the business of growth for the company. However, growth and diversity need not be polar opposites. Corporate culture needs to be such that there is a creation of values; that is, values that respect individual difference, and work with people in their uniqueness so that they can blossom into their full potential. Helping individuals meet their potential yields results not just for the individual concerned, but for the growth of the company as well.

## **6. Conclusion**

Occupations in which men have historically predominated, such as technical jobs and management, are said to have an occupational masculinity. That is, the identities, behaviors, experiences, relationships, practices, appearances, and language in these jobs are related more to men than to women (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Conversely, occupations in which women have predominated, such as teaching and nursing, are said to have occupational femininity where qualities such as empathy, caring, and nurturing predominate. Together, occupational masculinities and femininities shape occupational gender. There is nothing necessarily natural about these gendered behaviors, but are socially learnt behaviors that are reinforced in various aspects of our lives. As we see more and more women enter into the workforce, we realize that work cultures need to be

changed to accommodate their needs. Such re-structuring of corporate culture does not necessarily mean a cut in productivity, but it only entails a different way of doing business so that individuals are valued for what they bring to the table. Such incorporation not only makes employees feel valued, respected, and that they have made a difference, but also, it adds to the competitive advantage of the workplace.

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