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WOMEN IN THE PIPELINE: NEXT PRACTICE ACTIONS

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A wide-ranging, multi-country research study explored how companies integrate gender diversity into their talent practices. This author, whose firm conducted the study, found that companies with a genuine commitment to making diversity a core competency challenge the underlying thinking that women need to change and assimilate in order to succeed in corporate cultures. In this article, she discusses what we can learn from those who have robust, diverse pipelines

Despite an array of programs and initiatives to address the lack of women in senior ranks, there are concerns about just how effective those programs are. The numbers make it hard to deny this reality. The solution may require leading from a different place, to bring to the fore new thinking, a different set of dialogues and a new range of actions.

Given all the current focus on gender diversity, there is still a strong sense that companies do not quite know how to move from programmatic diversity to systemic diversity. They are unable to achieve the breakthrough or shift in mindsets needed to create inclusive meritocracies.

Driven by the view that transformative thinking is needed for more real results in the representation of women in executive roles, we conducted a study^[1] to examine gender as a component of talent management – looking at the initiatives that are working well, the sticking points and emerging strategies for change.

The most interesting thing about the study is the appearance of a major shift — from an assimilation model of diversity interventions to one that capitalizes on the value that gender inclusion brings to business performance.

Further, those companies with more women in their pipelines right through to senior levels have integrated gender diversity more fully into their talent management systems. They are more disciplined with their commercial emphasis, their accountability mechanisms, their governance processes, their selection for higher-level appointments, their leadership development and sponsorship.

Independent thinking, rather than acting as followers on diversity initiatives, sets these leading companies apart. They are innovative and use systems change methods, and are anything but complacent. Looking to next practice, even the most successful say they have “a long way to go.” The hard work is yet to be done. Talent management has to work ahead of the curve.

The major themes and insights offered here highlight the key learning points drawn from experienced practitioners who have responsibility for talent capital within their organizations. Explored are the extent to which companies integrate gender diversity into their talent practices and what we can learn from those who have more robust and diverse pipelines. Five areas of next practice are presented.

NEXT PRACTICE: EMBEDDING MULTIPLE STRATEGIES

Just how strongly talent and diversity management is contributing to the delivery of business strategy is an area of considerable attention today. Companies with high-performance cultures are unequivocal in contending that diversity is a business issue with the value in higher productivity and penetration of their relevant markets.

Thomson Reuters, a global organization with customers and employees spanning a multitude of countries, cultures and professions, views diversity as a valuable business asset. According to Dimitra Manis, Global Head of Talent, “diversity is strongly linked to our business strategy. Identifying new sources of organic growth requires innovation, which ultimately is achieved through diverse thinking...to get there we need greater diversity in our candidate slates, to be more bold in our hiring decisions and to take chances on candidates we haven’t previously considered for critical roles.”

Although companies are taking a more strategic view of talent management, what they regard to be lacking is a seamless, integrated set of practices to build capability. Gaps between design and execution create consequences, particularly in the number of women in frontline feeder roles.

Those companies in this study that have a greater representation of mid-level and senior women differentiated themselves by:

Strategic intent: Gender equality is a stated priority, managed – from the board through to the line – with the same discipline and sustained implementation applied to important business goals. Diversity is an explicit component of strategy.

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Corporate ownership: Talent is seen as a corporate resource rather than an example of silo thinking preventing identification, utilization and development. When the talent pool is managed as a corporate resource, broader experiences and opportunities are offered, due to increased mobility, experiential learning, sharing of knowledge, collaborative innovation and the building of cross-silo social capital.

Pervasive commitment: Talent is a business responsibility with active engagement in managing it at the board, C-suite and other management levels. Leaders are expected to take action to create inclusive, merit-based environments and to have the resources to do so. Diversity is regarded as a driver of leadership brand.

Commerciality: Integrating commercial, talent and gender practices is regarded as good business. As a result, talent and gender strategies address capability needs for the commercial drivers of client value, new revenue streams, emerging business models and cross-divisional services.

Influencing mindsets: Equality, inclusion and unconscious bias are monitored at each point on the talent management continuum. Mindsets on leadership style and career flexibility are not ignored, nor is gender imprinting. Gender imprinting refers to the attitudes that each person develops, from early significant relationships and societal influences, toward male and female roles. These gender stereotypes are imprinted within behaviours and thinking later in life.

Measurement: Processes and meaningful metrics for human capital decision-making, aligned with business strategy, are evident. Setting targets or performance indicators for diversity goals is linked to the presence of a greater percentage of women at senior and executive committee levels.

Disciplined governance: Effective governance structures extend beyond board reporting and a central Talent and Diversity Council to talent committees at different levels, career streams or client segments. Such structures focus dialogues and execution at the most senior levels.

Outward lens: Diversity thinking is not limited to looking inward. The focus is on customers, competitors and communities. The presence of an advisory board of external experts to advise, challenge and critique is indicative of those who objectively look 'in the mirror and out the window.'

The companies we studied apply their strategies more transparently, constantly, deeply and broadly to their businesses than their competitors. Their advice is clear: embed and blend gender inclusion into the business, creating people and client synergies.

NEXT PRACTICE: SKIRTING THE PIPELINE

A common perspective is that in order for women to be equally represented at the top of organizations, we need to reach down to pull women through to the top end of the pipeline. Again, multiple and integrated strategies to increase meaningful opportunities for women produce better outcomes.

Leading companies recommend moving away from targeted women's initiatives that exclude men. While women are being offered leadership development, it is done jointly with their male colleagues. The belief is that companies benefit when men bring these insights on women's leadership back into the workplace with greater levels of understanding and advocacy.

Telstra uses a holistic and integrated approach to increase women's representation at senior and pipeline levels, and engage men as change agents, creating an inclusive culture that is "leader led and business owned. By engaging men as change agents in gender leadership, it helps our men build their own leadership capability and knowledge around creating inclusive workplaces for men and women," explains Alex Badenoch, Executive Director, Human Resources – Talent and Organizational Development.

There are mixed views on the value of women's affinity groups. Some express the opinion that exclusive networks can be marginalizing, so they are used to build connections with men as well as other women. Some also feel an isolated gender network is not diverse or inclusive. The more successful groups tie their activities to business initiatives, including joint participation with clients.

The insider knowledge and career guidance that derives from the right networking is a given. More effort is being placed on helping women create their informal networks for multi-function cooperation, navigating the political terrain, greater visibility, multiple sponsors, and interestingly, perceived higher performance.

Experience is showing that giving women a sponsor is an enabler, accelerating their career progress. American Express believes that access to a sponsor has "boosted the number of senior women in the organization by encouraging talent-spotting and support." Caution is noted on the over-reliance on a single sponsor, as the relationship can be lost. Savvy women avoid this dilemma by continuous and purposeful communication with a range of key influencers and decision makers. Tracking these patronage arrangements more closely, and following up with a replacement sponsor where required, is advised for companies.

When asked how much risk there is in succession plans, the response was typically "low risk and conservative." Yet, companies that pay particular attention to promotion – earlier identification of potential, monitoring time to gain promotions and process transparency – are seeing more women at all levels. Even so, they know there can be unintended consequences. In order to achieve the numbers, women may be appointed to 'glass cliff' roles or lack transition support. As a result, new role orientation and transition coaching are increasingly offered.

It was noted that meaningful career conversations improve retention and promotion rates. Where companies offer career support as a part of talent management, they find associated benefits for women. It gives women a forum to ask for customized assignments, quality flexible roles or those that build on their strengths. It opens up the discussion on existing and future positions.

NEXT PRACTICE: DEVOLVING ACCOUNTABILITY

When boards see their role in human capital as extending beyond replacement or remuneration matters, they ensure accountability for a corporate-wide talent strategy that is aligned with the business strategy. They can then apply risk management to the capability gaps for a robust, diverse pipeline.

Advocacy from the chair and CEO does make a difference, provided it is authentic, enthusiastic and hands-on. When they signal

that diversity is a strategic goal, it makes a strong impression. However, broad goals and 'if not, why not' accountability have not been enough. More is needed. Quotas remain controversial, but the consensus is growing that a fact-based approach with metrics is required to accelerate diversity and inclusion outcomes.

To date, few companies set targets (those that do attribute successfully) or directly link the attainment of targets to pay or bonuses. It is more typical to assess individual managers on how they manage diversity from engagement survey results or how they rate on cultural competency in their performance review. There is an indirect reward impact. This may prevail until the need for quotas is settled.

Measurable objectives and transparency are powerful drivers of change. Royal Bank of Canada, which quantifies the goals it sets, believes that "if you don't have objectives and measure progress, things don't happen." As an example, one half of new hires have to be women. Diversity Scorecards and the Diversity and Inclusion Index track metrics for accountability.

Attention to short-lists for senior roles, vertical talent reviews, distribution of performance ratings, expatriate postings, early high-potential identification, gender representation in stretch roles, pay equity by level, succession slates and average promotion times, are de rigueur for leading companies. So too is not forgetting how clients or key assignments are being allocated to either men or women. Evaluating outcomes on these critical decisions takes championing diversity beyond a soft issue.

Achieving bench strength – while being responsive to customers and communities – requires specific, measurable actions for the key areas where diversity can help move the business forward. Accountability mechanisms ensure individual managers own and understand their contribution towards the wider objective.

NEXT PRACTICE: ADDRESSING BELIEFS AND BIAS

There is growing recognition among participants in this study of the critical role that gender plays in the socio-dynamics of work and the community. Companies, particularly in the resources and telecommunications sectors, are stepping out into their communities or into the education system to influence perceptions about gender roles, leadership and non-traditional paths where women can thrive.

Back in the workplace, the dichotomy between caregiver and career-builder creates anxiety for both the individual and the organization. There is a range of factors in play at the micro level and within the group dynamic. As one diversified industrial company explains, it is an area that "must change." This includes challenging societal expectations around parental, household, care and work roles.

The response has been to find ways for people, especially those in the dominant group, to 'get' diversity and accept the 'other.' The issue is that these efforts have been made at a conscious level. Addressing the unconscious bias requires a fundamental rethink.

An international law firm with offices throughout Asia and Australia, Allens Arthur Robinson is one of several companies taking genuine action. "Our diversity charter has the aim of recognizing, appreciating and utilizing the value of difference within the firm. Raising awareness and understanding of unconscious bias and then taking action to address negative bias is seen as a priority for creating change within our firm."

It is human nature to make distinctions. Everyone is unconsciously biased. The questions being asked by companies are: What can we do about something that is implicit? How do we mitigate in-group preference or out-group bias? How does the workplace deflect societal core beliefs? How do we address 'denial of disadvantage'?

Unconscious behavior does not impact only the individual; it influences culture and then business choices. One solution is to bring behavior out front, where it can be seen and managed. Several global professional services firms are making progress by reviewing the critical decisions at each stage of the talent management continuum. Revealing unconscious organizational patterns highlights how intentions and values are really enacted. Participants agree more work is needed.

The difficulty for women in leadership roles is that they have a long journey before their style and behavior are seen through a lens not clouded by gender schemata. In fact, when study respondents were asked: "What changes do you expect in the stereotypical leadership style from more senior women executives?" they mentioned consensus, collegiality, collaboration and other similar traits. Awareness that this was merely replacing one stereotype for another created disquiet.

As we know, neither women nor men are a homogeneous group. There are nuances. Companies today are looking for ways to help women and men work together to change behavioral norms.

NEXT PRACTICE: CHANGING WAY OF WORK AND CAREERS

Although there has been considerable focus on flexible work options for women by the companies in this study, they accept that this represents just one element of a larger trend towards changing work practices and responses to life-stage diversity.

National Australia Bank believes that "by being flexible in our work practices, NAB can deliver on our business objectives more effectively, and attract and retain the best talent in the marketplace – which is, by definition, diverse talent."

The need to redefine the way of work is a complex challenge. Emerging new business models, less focus on work as a 'place' and the shifting agendas from working across countries and markets are testing the way companies manage, empower and trust their people, not to mention monitor or reward them. Performance management, including service level agreements, needs to adapt.

With virtual teams that are spread across various time zones, the demands of remote leadership and team connectedness are unrelenting. 'Out of sight, out of mind' no longer holds sway. Work quality means more than flexibility – it is as much about autonomy. Autonomy offers control and influence over work, with responsibility to deliver what is required. This means the ability to self-manage and prioritize, while balancing workloads, moderating the intensity of work and communicating progress.

The employee value proposition is changing dramatically. Generational pressures are redefining what is expected from an employer of choice. Power and responsibility for career management have shifted from the employer to the employee, and organizations now need to reclaim it, mainly by rethinking their definitions of both career and career success. The expectation from employees is to have more active, creative and tailored support for their goals.

NAB Horizons represents an example of an innovative approach to sourcing talent from non-traditional backgrounds, including successful females seeking a change of career, industry or culture. Neil Cockroft, Head of Group Diversity and Inclusion says that, “We help talented women see how they might transfer their existing capabilities into a banking role, and provide successful candidates with a structured on-boarding program which enables them to fully contribute as quickly as possible.”

These changing dynamics in work and careers have deep implications for organizations and individuals alike. For women, it will unlock a number of roadblocks, including perceptions that flexibility in hours or career trajectory equates with a lack of commitment and executive potential. Companies that can get it right will gain the advantage.

ACTIONABLE LEADERSHIP

Gender diversity tests leadership. Some lead the way with purposeful intent while others follow. Companies that manage diversity well, manage their companies well, excelling at execution. Chairs and CEOs with a genuine commitment to making diversity a core competency challenge the underlying thinking that women need to change and assimilate in order to succeed in corporate cultures.

Questioning gender imprinting and how implicit bias plays out stretches leaders at all levels to think more inclusively about talent. Managing diversity is a change process. Clarity on the business impact is just a start. The next steps are to institutionalize actions to the extent that all people – irrespective of style, traits, thinking or schedule – can rise to the level they choose without barriers.

[ii](#) About this study: During 2010, The Talent Advisors, interviewed talent and diversity professionals from 22 listed and unlisted companies. They are small, medium and large organizations in the diversified industrials, financial services, government, health insurance, legal, professional services, resources and telecommunications sectors. In total, they represent over 630,000 employees based across the globe including Asia, Australia, Europe and North America.

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