IBM UK Newsroom

IBM and Chief Study Finds Women in Leadership Pipeline has Hollowed Out in the Middle

Advancing women in leadership is not a formal business priority for the majority of organisations surveyed, but there is a roadmap for sustainable progress



LONDON, UK, March 1, 2023 - The leadership pipeline for women has hollowed out in the middle, according to a new global study "Women in leadership: Why perception outpaces the pipeline—and what to do about it" from IBM (NYSE: IBM) Institute for Business Value (IBV) and Chief.

The study* of 2,500 organisations in 12 countries and 10 industries found a small increase in the number of women at the C-suite and Board level (now 12% for both), and an increase to40% representation of women in junior professional/specialist roles (37% in 2021). However,the pipeline for top leadership positions still hasn't recovered to pre-pandemic levels – 14% representation of women in senior vice president roles (18% in 2019) and 16% in vice president roles (19% in 2019).

In addition, fewer than half (45%) of organisations surveyed report they have made advancing more women into leadership roles a top, formal business priority.

"While we're pleased to see slight progress in the representation of women at the C-suite and Board levels, it's imperative that companies do more to fill the pipeline that leads to these powerful positions," said Lindsay Kaplan, Co-Founder and Chief Brand Officer of Chief. "Women are significantly underrepresented at nearly every level of the workforce. If companies prioritise gender diversity across their entire organisations through policies, investments, and a culture that meaningfully supports women, we'll see a transformative impact — equity for everyone in the workplace and stronger, more resilient businesses."

"Enabling equity and inclusion gives organisations a competitive edge, yet many companies donot act as if their success depends on it," said Kelly Chambliss, Senior Vice President and COO, IBM Consulting. "To thrive in a rapidly changing world, organisations must prioritise advancing women – and all historically under-represented groups – and take action to challenge structural barriers and unconscious bias."

The study also found:

• **Optimism is rising, but it doesn’t reflect reality.** Respondents estimate their industry will see gender parity in leadership in 10 years, compared to 2019 when the average industry estimate was 54 years. But the reality is, at the current rate of change based on survey data, gender parity is still decades away.

• **Structural barriers and unconscious bias continue to hinder women’s advancement.** Since the height of the pandemic, more organisations have implemented career development planning for women, diversity training, and the creation of women’s networking groups. However, biases persist – for example, when asked if women with dependent children are as dedicated to their jobs as women without children, the majority of respondents say yes, this is what leaders in their organisation believe, except for male managers—only about 40% agreed.

• **The attributes perceived as critical for leadership also remain gendered.** Respondents shared men are primarily valued for creativity and being results-oriented with integrity, and expected women to be strategic and bold but also people-oriented.

• **The pandemic continues to have a disproportionate impact on women at work.** Respondents rank the pandemic as the most serious disruption facing women, in recognition of the immense, lasting toll it has taken on them.

"The research data shows the hollowing out in the middle is real,” said Salima Lin, Sr. Partner and Vice President of Strategy, Transformation and Thought Leadership, IBM Consulting. “Structural changes, including reimagining leadership tracks and role descriptions, improving pay transparency, and setting representation goals, can open new pathways for women to progress to more senior roles.”

The study also presents a roadmap for sustainable progress based on leadership practices gathered from the research findings, including:

• **Reframe women’s leadership advancement in the language of business results,** such as quantifying the concrete economic gains that can accrue from righting gender imbalances.

• **Give your strategy teeth, such as putting specific directives and measures behind your organisation’s action plan,** like setting measurable goals for women’s advancement.

• **Enact an action plan aimed at driving gender equity across the full leadership pipeline,** like going beyond awareness training to using experiential learning techniques like role playing and reverse mentoring to help shift biases.

• **Re-design roles at the top that work for top talent,** for example, limiting hiring criteria to a core set of gender-neutral requirements.

To view the full study, visit: https://ibm.co/women-leadership-2023

***Study Methodology**

The global study, conducted by the IBM Institute for Business Value and Chief in cooperation with Oxford Economics, surveyed 2,500 executives, managers, and professionals—an equal number of women and men—from organisations in 12 countries and 10 industries. It follows IBM studies from 2021 and 2019 that surveyed respondents representing the same range of roles, industries and regions to allow for longitudinal analysis.

About the IBM Institute for Business Value

The IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV), IBM's thought leadership think tank, combines global research and performance data with expertise from industry thinkers and leading academics to deliver insights that make business leaders smarter. For more world-class thought leadership, visit: www.ibm.com/ibv.

About Chief

Chief is a private network designed for the most powerful women executives to strengthen their leadership, magnify their influence, and pave the way to bring others with them. Launched in 2019 by Carolyn Childers and Lindsay Kaplan, Chief's mission is to drive more women to the top and keep them there. Chief has been recognised as one of Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, and its diverse membership includes 20,000 senior women executives. Learn more at chief.com.

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