



TUTUS & TRUCKS

*Addressing Unconscious Bias
and Perceived Risk
to Retain and Engage Mid-Career Women*

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Introduction: Bias and Risk

The title of this paper refers to the fact that if we want to effectively address our failure to retain and attract mid- and senior-level women in the workplace, we need to address the gender-related biases that originate in childhood. We can't undo those biases in adults who've grown up with them (this paper does suggest many ways to mitigate their risks), but we can work toward eliminating the bias for future generations. Buying trucks for our daughters and tutus for our sons represents the gender-bending approach we need to take to raise future professionals who recognize talent and skills as an individual trait, not an inherent quality of a particular demographic group.

Until we raise that unbiased generation, we need to

- 1) acknowledge our biases, and
- 2) build systems to prevent them from compromising the talent-related decisions we make for our organizations.

Our biases, particularly those laid out on pages 3-4, lead us to evaluate mid-career women as 'risky' hires, whether they're already part of our organization, or an external candidate, particularly one looking to re-enter the formal workplace after time off for caretaking.

We need to recalculate our understanding of risk, in the twenty-first century workplace environment that calls for flexibility, continuous learning, creative problem solving, interpersonal savvy, and communication skills, among other skills that are – statistically speaking – strengths of mid-career women. ***The REAL risk to our businesses today is not reframing our hiring and promotion practices to build teams that reflect the makeup of our customer base.***

Recognizing Your Biases

The first step in overcoming the unconscious biases that get in the way of companies hiring, promoting, or retaining women at all levels is often simply getting people to accept that those biases exist in the first place.

Unconscious biases are an inescapable outcome of the natural human “tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing,” and do not indicate active discrimination or ill intent (McCormick 2016). What they are is an unconscious decision-making tool that leads to evaluating or selecting people based on factors other than their qualifications, and so can prevent teams and organizations from identifying the best professionals for their work.

Common Biases In The Workplace

A wide range of research has shown that men and women are often held to different performance and behavioral standards. These disparities influence who gets hired, promoted, and assigned to high profile assignments. (To find links to this research, please refer to the links included in the section titled “Sources.”)



LINKING COMPETENCE TO LIKEABILITY.

This bias often appears by how mid-career women are described, both in passing and in performance reviews. Unlike a man who will be seen as “confident” and “strong” when he asserts himself, a woman will usually be called “aggressive,” “ambitious,” or “out for herself.” A woman who is deemed competent might also be disparaged as not being nice enough. But a woman who seems nice might also be judged as being less competent (McKinsey 2015).

ASSESSING PERFORMANCE BASED ON PERCEIVED POTENTIAL VS. ACTUAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

This bias helps explain why a woman will typically be hired and promoted on the basis of what she has already accomplished while a man is often hired and promoted on the basis of his perceived potential (McKinsey 2015).

ASSIGNING CREDIT AND BLAME FOR OUTCOMES.

This bias results in women being given less credit for successful outcomes and assigned a greater share of the blame for failures. To further exacerbate this bias, many women tend to credit their success to external factors such as “working hard,” “getting lucky,” or receiving “help from others.” This tendency to deflect praise can lead to the steady erosion of self-confidence and an increased reluctance to put themselves forward for promotions and stretch assignments. On the other hand, men generally attribute their success to innate qualities and skills (McKinsey 2015).

PREJUDGING THE IMPACT OF MOTHERHOOD.

This bias surfaces both before a woman has become a mother and afterward. The assumption is simple: that women as a whole are less committed to their careers. They may be placed on a “mommy track” and presented with fewer opportunities to rise up the ranks (McKinsey 2015).

RESENTING THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER DIVERSITY PROGRAMS.

This bias can account for the resistance that HR managers and talent professionals experience when attempting to implement or broaden a gender diversity initiative. A 2015 report by McKinsey revealed that 13 percent of the men responding to their survey believed that it was harder for them to advance within their organizations because gender-diversity programs put them at a disadvantage (McKinsey 2015).

BELIEVING THAT “OUR COMPANY DOESN’T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH GENDER.”

This bias is very similar to the previous bias. That same survey by McKinsey also showed that although 70 percent of men believed that gender diversity was important, only 12 percent believed that women had fewer opportunities.

A leadership survey commissioned by UNC in 2012 found significant disparities between how men and women responded when asked how effective they believed their organizations had been in recruiting women. Fifty-three percent of men believed their organizations were extremely or moderately effective versus 33 percent of women. When asked if they thought the number of women in senior-leadership positions had increased over the past five years, 57 percent of men believed the number of women in senior levels had increased versus 36 percent of women (Storrie 2012).

Know What Success Looks Like

Creating a well-defined strategy that guides your organization's approach for grooming women into leadership roles begins with establishing benchmarks to lend support for specific policy changes and professional development programs.

In addition to helping companies identify areas where a gender gap exists, these benchmarks can help mitigate the adverse impact of certain biases, such as believing that a company doesn't have a problem with respect to women in the workplace or that gender diversity programs are negatively impacting men.

Pipelines for female talent at your organization

Pay and bonus gaps between men and women, particularly in management and senior-level positions

Percent of women in executive and leadership level positions, as well as leadership-track roles or programs

Comparison of the positions women hold throughout the organization in relation to men, and their likelihood to lead to executive roles

Recruitment figures at all stages of process and at all levels, by gender

The distribution of challenging and/or high-visibility projects by gender



The number of women participating in career development activities (e.g. mentorships, high-potential programs, leadership programs, overseas assignments, etc.)

Accommodation for non-work responsibilities for all employees

The number of men and women taking advantage of family leave

Percent of senior managers using flex time and/or remote work

The number of men participating in gender-related events and initiatives as allies

Recognition of unconscious bias

Employee ratings of your company's accommodation of out-of-work obligations, including childcare, for employees of both genders

Percent of employees who attend bias training to improve the way they hire and review professionals

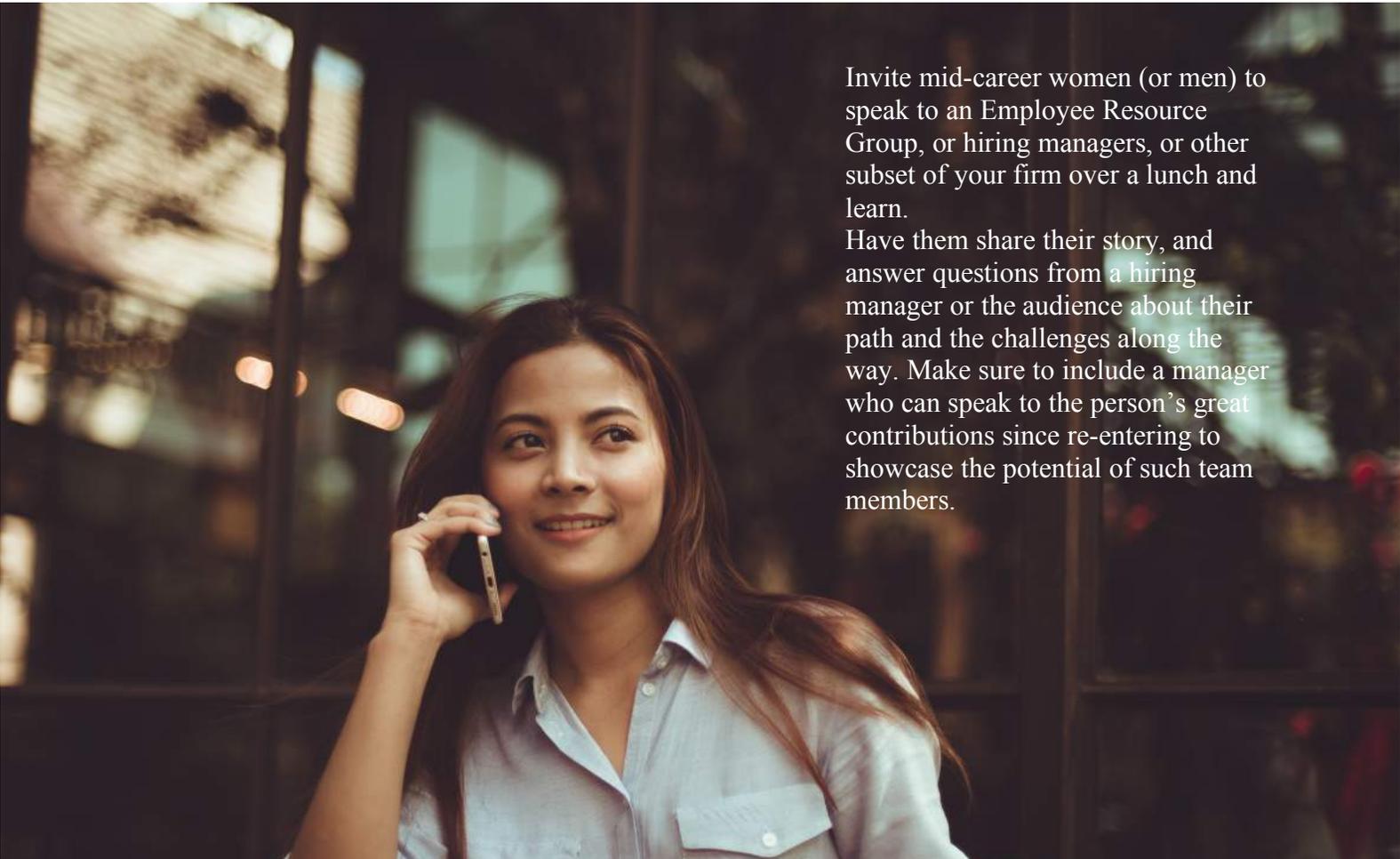
Retention trends

The number of women and men leaving at all levels, including an exit survey asking why they're leaving

Create A Roadmap To Success

Highlight mid-career women in your organization

Promote a storytelling culture that encourages women who have successfully re-entered the organization after an absence to share their stories with their colleagues. A storytelling culture helps women learn the specific tactics and strategies their peers used to work around specific challenges. Aside from promoting agency, this approach provides a sustainable way to convey organizational knowledge and brand values. There are also inevitably men who have had non-traditional career paths, re-entering after a break for childcare, eldercare, or entrepreneurship. Highlighting their stories will help normalize the potential for re-enterers to be great contributors.



Invite mid-career women (or men) to speak to an Employee Resource Group, or hiring managers, or other subset of your firm over a lunch and learn.

Have them share their story, and answer questions from a hiring manager or the audience about their path and the challenges along the way. Make sure to include a manager who can speak to the person's great contributions since re-entering to showcase the potential of such team members.

Revamp your recruitment process to attract more mid-career women

The recruitment process involves multiple touch points that send explicit and implicit signals about gender representation that create an unsettling combination of real and imagined challenges for women.

The stakes are high, since the wrong message can inspire mistrust in mid-career women looking to rejoin the workforce and damage recruitment efforts.

Job descriptions are a good place to start. The language used in many job descriptions can illustrate how companies may be inadvertently reinforcing gender stereotypes by signaling that only certain types of employees will succeed in their workplace.

Effective job descriptions not only convey the responsibilities of a specific job, they also convey a sense of the business culture.

That's why the language used to create the job description, or that a company employs in their mission statements and career pages, is so critical.

THE IMPACT OF FIXED VS. GROWTH MINDSET LANGUAGE ON HIRING RATES

Job descriptions that convey a "fixed mindset" attract a less diverse applicant pool. This is because most candidates subconsciously pick up on those clues that suggest that the company engages in stereotypes and will likely not support their needs for a flexible workplace that supports their goals.

Fortunately for employers looking to attract more mid-career women, job descriptions that use language that reflects a "growth mindset" not only tend to fill at a significantly faster rate, women are twice as likely to be hired for these jobs.

Jobs with a high density of fixed mindset languages fill 11 times more slowly than jobs that contain more neutral phrasing. In contrast, jobs with a high density of growth mindset language fill 1.5 times faster. Furthermore, women are twice as likely to be hired at jobs that contain growth mindset language in their job descriptions (Romero 2016).

GROWTH VS. FIXED MINDSETS IN A NUTSHELL

According to Stanford psychologist, Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., the author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, people with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence or talent is a fixed quality. They believe that talent—not effort—creates success, and as such they focus their energies on documenting their intelligence and existing talent instead of growing their skills or knowledge. On the other hand, people with a growth mindset believe that their intelligence and talent can be developed over time through dedication and hard work. This attitude fosters both resilience as well as a love of learning.

Examples of fixed mindset language in a job description or interview

Job descriptions or hiring managers that say:

They are looking for people who are . . .

- “rock stars”
- “natural geniuses”
- “high performers”
- “uniquely talented”
- “overachievers”

They are looking for employees who have . . .

- “a brain for _____” (fill in the blank, for example, engineering, numbers, finance, etc.)

Examples of growth mindset language in a job description or interview

Job descriptions or hiring managers that say:

They want to help employees . . .

- “learn, discover, and grow”
- “learn new things”

They are looking for employees who are . . .

- “highly determined”
- “highly motivated”
- “love learning”

They are looking for employees who have a . . .

- “commitment to improvement”
- “willingness to strive”



Establish policies that resonate with mid-career women

Retention policies should be coupled with specific, measurable goals that make it possible to track an organization's progress (or lack of progress) over time to ensure that they're put into practice and supported by management at all levels, not just put on the books by HR or executive leadership.

PROGRAMS AND BEHAVIORS THAT INCREASE RETENTION

Formal programs that identify high-potential women. These programs should encourage women to create personalized development plans and provide opportunities to be offered stretch assignments, job rotations, and mentorship opportunities with senior leaders.

Supervisors and managers should regularly check in with the people on their teams to uncover their goals and provide the support and encouragement their people need to pursue their goals. Managers should also be reminded to pay attention to how the work has been divided within the team to make sure that plum or high profile assignments have been evenly distributed by gender.

Provide high-level support for flexible work options. While offering flexible work options is a wonderful benefit, the reality is that merely offering them is not enough. Not when employees are afraid to take advantage of flexible schedules because of the negative impact it may have on their career. According to a 2015 McKinsey report, more than 90 percent of women and men believe taking extended family leave will hurt their careers. The result is that although flexible work/life programs are offered in many businesses, employee participation is generally low. (The sole exception to this trend is telecommuting, which when offered, tends to be widely adopted by employees.)

Removing the barriers around taking advantage of flexible work programs requires a multi-faceted approach. For instance, you might need to provide managers with additional training to overcome their reluctance to offer flexible work options. An effective rollout might necessitate equipping managers with tools to help them manage their employees remotely. It might also require a long-term investment to build a team culture that promotes trust and greater employee collaboration. And finally, you might also need to encourage senior executives to set the right tone by having them take advantage of flexible work options.

MORE IDEAS TO CONSIDER

Establish leadership transition training designed for women.

Offer professional development and sponsorship opportunities to women who are already at higher management levels. Senior women should be explicitly charged with building the pipeline of more junior women coming behind them, as well as identifying mid-career women looking to re-enter the workforce.

Provide resources to help women deal with the challenges involved with balancing their careers with childcare or eldercare responsibilities. This could include introducing them to other women who have successfully navigated a similar challenge, encouraging them to discuss their concerns with a therapist or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor, or discussing potential modifications to their current work schedule including part-time work schedules, extended family leave or child-care subsidies. It's also important to recognize that men are also increasingly in a position to have childcare or eldercare responsibilities, and should be included in these benefits.

- 90 percent of mothers and 85 percent of fathers reported a work-family conflict
- 45 percent of women reported that childcare challenges pushed them out of the workforce
- 24 percent of women said eldercare issues forced them out of the workforce
- 86 percent of women cited a lack of flexibility as their primary reason for leaving the workforce

Source: Storrie, 2012



For Mid-Career Women

What You Can Do To Improve Your Chances Of Landing Flexible, Fulfilling Work

Whether you've been out of the workforce for two weeks or 20 years, successfully resuming your corporate career will likely involve adopting new habits and taking a strategic approach to your job search. Taking an intentional approach will help you make informed decisions that should help boost your confidence. For further insights, please refer to our Additional Readings and Resources below.

- **Create a re-entry plan.** This includes updating your resume to better reflect what you can contribute to your employer. The *Knock 'Em Dead* series by Martin Yates provides a wealth of out-of-the-box suggestions for making sure that your resume reflects the key requirements a potential employer is looking for in today's market.
- **Strengthen and expand your network.** Employers are far more likely to hire someone who has been referred to them by someone they know and trust. Expanding your network not only increases your chances for finding work, it provides a great way to learn about trends affecting the industries you're targeting.
- **Know your bottom line.** Factor how much you need to make to cover any childcare or eldercare costs that you will be incurring. Don't waste time pursuing an opportunity that won't make financial sense.
- **Dissect job descriptions.** The language used in job descriptions often provides critical insights into the culture and mindset of an employer.
- **Don't give up.** Returning to work after an absence is never easy, but when you hear the magic words, "So when can you start?" you'll know that all your hard work was worth it.

Additional Readings

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Additional Resources

9 Lives for Women: A network of resources for women looking for part-time or flexible, mid-career roles. <http://9livesforwomen.com>

iRelaunch: A not-for-profit offering conferences and consulting to build re-entry programs. <https://www.irelaunch.com/employers>

Path Forward: A not-for-profit helping businesses (primarily tech firms) recruit women. <http://www.pathforward.org>

Ellevate: A B Corp offering networking opportunities for women. <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com>

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ABOUT RESEARCH TRIANGLE FOUNDATION OF NC

The Research Triangle Foundation of NC is the steward of RTP, the largest research business park in the country. It is a private, financially independent not-for-profit dedicated to ensuring a bright future for all North Carolinians. To learn more, visit www.rtp.org.

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