

Career Development and the Future World of Work for Executive Women

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Women continue to be underrepresented at senior management level in large UK and US corporations despite growing organisational sensitivity to diversity issues and government initiatives. This study addresses how and whether this situation might change in the future, and the implications for career development from the perspective of senior women executives located in London. Building on a Delphi study and a subsequent focus group, three possible future scenarios are presented.

Keywords: Career Development, Executive Women, Scenarios

Despite growing organisational sensitivity to diversity issues (Wentling 2004), supported by public policies, initiatives and equal opportunity legislation, together with a plethora of commentary over the past 20 years, women continue to be underrepresented at management level in large organisations. The gender gap is more glaring, the higher the position in organisations and, in spite of great measures taken by various parties to increase women's opportunities, top management remains predominantly the enclave of men (Powell 1999, Vinnicombe 2000). According to Singh and Vinnicombe (2004) women constitute just 9.7% of directors listed on the UK FTSE and, as Catalyst (2003) report, 13.6% in the Fortune list of 500 top US companies. This has not grown significantly for a number of years and such recent growth as there has been can be attributed to the advent of non executive directors (Tyson 2003).

Over the last twenty years the field of what has become known as gender studies has been enriched by much exploratory and explanatory research into why there are so few women occupying senior organisational roles and the implications for career development. These include sector specific studies and surveys into areas as diverse as independent schools in the UK (McLay & Brown 2000), and financial services firms (Catalyst 2001), law firms (Catalyst 2001a) and the information technology industry in the US (Cordova-Wentling and Thomas 2005). There has been a tendency in many of the studies to explain phenomena in terms such as glass ceilings (Wirth 2001) and look for solutions at the individual level of analysis (Marshall, 1993) in order to show how women might more effectively respond to internal (e.g. self-efficacy, personality traits, academic achievement) and external (e.g. gender-role socialisation, work-family constraints, opportunities for advancement) factors (Cordova-Wentling and Thomas 2005). Proposed solutions encompass all or some of favourable governmental and organisational policies; supportive work environment, top management and organisational systems and climate; mentoring; networking; training and development (Knorr, 2005). Marshall (1995) described the situation of the 1990s very clearly.

Generally more change is demanded of women than of men. For example many discussions of work-home issues still portray women as the primary carers and as the people in charge of domestic responsibilities. They must adjust their career patterns and manage the practicalities of multi-stranded lives. This individualised emphasis is unlikely to foster radical change in organisational or social cultures and practices (Marshall 1995).

But can one today detect some evidence of a reversal in thinking and an emergent approach to career development as the declining birth rate of the developed world begins to impact and women are increasingly necessary as a source of executive talent? Reference is nowadays being made to a demographic time bomb impacting on organisations and society. The youngest baby boomers have turned 40 leading to an increasingly high % of older workers in the workplace, and an increasing % of the population over the retirement age. In the US it is reported that a new baby boomer turns 50 every 7.5 seconds. In 2000 13% of the US workforce was 55 or over. By 2015 this will have risen to 20%. Over the same period, the number of workers aged 25-44 will actually decrease, leading to an expectation of critical shortages of qualified staff especially for service jobs. In the UK there is a similar dramatic and unprecedented shift, with the number of young people dwindling, while the older section of the community rapidly expands. In the UK Government strategies have included equalising up retirement ages for men and women, and introducing age discrimination legislation, paralleling that in the US, to come in force in 2007. However, research studies to date have tended to focus on the here and now, and on policy and other initiatives that

need to be introduced to rectify an imbalance. How executive women perceive the future world of work, and what role they might play in it, and how one can move from here to there has been largely neglected

Theoretical Framework

The literature is relatively silent on research and frameworks specifically focusing on both executive women's careers and the future world of work. The topic of senior female executives has formed the subject of a special issue of *Women in Management Review* (Burke, 2003). It incorporated an exploratory study (Zelechowski and Bilimoria 2003) that identified two independent dimensions – influence and inclusion – as the two critical factors that enhanced or restricted the performance and contributions of women at the top of corporations.

Auster (2001) in her study into the satisfaction of mid-career professional women provides an integrating framework for explaining how demographics, career history, job, organisational factors, and stress affect their careers. Her model embeds a set of micro-level factors (individual, family, job design characteristics, stress and satisfaction), in a broader organisational and career context, in order to explore relationships. Individual characteristics such as parenting responsibility and race/ethnicity that directly affect mid career satisfaction are mediated by career characteristics such as career history and career support (mentoring and professional networks), which in turn are mediated by job characteristics, which in turn are embedded in a larger organisational context. She contends that networking, mentoring, stress, job and firm characteristics are capable of being levered.

Why are so few female executives to be found at senior level despite organisational initiatives - Wentling (2004) found that all of the multinational corporations she surveyed had initiatives designed to further the upward progression of women - and governmental policies? Research has examined phenomena such as commitment to personal and family responsibilities (Catalyst 2001 and 2001a), the growth in entrepreneurship and part time working for women leaving the corporate world (Catalyst 2002), the glass ceiling, trailing partners and exclusion from networks as barriers for international career moves (Linehan & Walsh 2001) and significantly higher resignation levels by women executives compared to their male counterparts (Institute of Management 1994). Erkut (2001) emphasised institutional not individual barriers in her US survey of 60 prominent leaders, and summarised her findings in the following terms: "Obstacles to women's leadership, lessened not gone".

Many studies focus on individual women and how they may "fix their problems." O Connor (2001) accepts that a glass ceiling exists but only partly explains why there are fewer women than men in senior level positions. She proposes that some women are less interested than men in reaching senior level ranks. She suggests the idea of a female career tree rather than career ladder stating that many women reevaluate their lives and make changes in priorities at several stages in their lives. They may do this as a result of discovering that work is not the only source of life satisfaction or by coming to terms with what they "care about". This may mean taking lateral career moves rather than upward ones, starting their own business, spending more time with family, taking up a new hobby, becoming involved in community work or choosing a less demanding job.

Concerns about the impact of demographic changes on the employment market, combined with the ethical, moral and business imperative to increase the number of women in leadership form the rationale behind methods such as focus group, Delphi technique and scenario planning being used to forecast the future world of work for executive women. Furnham (2000) points out that when one contemplates the future a clear distinction can be made between optimists and pessimists. Naïve, enthusiastic, optimists paint a glowing picture of the future and sceptical, cynical pessimists see the future as alienating and the speed of change unnecessary. He concludes that "futurology is a dangerous pursuit" (Furnham 2000). Nolan (2000), the Director of the UK Economic and Social Research Council funded Future of Work programme argues for innovative research methods with regard to the future world of work stating that "making sense of the future possibilities for work and employment remains one of the most challenging intellectual tasks of our time" and contends that some of the emerging scenarios that suggest either devastating or utopian futures are far too simplistic and speculative.

There have been attempts to develop scenarios of careers located at some point in the future. Most notable is that developed by Wilkinson (2002) for the year 2050 in which she constructs a future in which knowledge-based industries will be the norm in developed economies. However the knowledge will be dispersed and fragmented in an array of small businesses, with self-employed free agents moving from project to project. The dominant work culture will be Do It Yourself (DIY), anti-careerist, and large organisations will have lost out in the war for talent. She contends that this is a continuation of the trend towards the feminisation of work, and the emergence of a *genderquake* DIY economy that engages with but is unable to transform the mainstream corporations.

Research Questions

What might executive women's careers look like in the future? Do current executive women share and collectively aim for an ideal future world of work? If not, what alternative scenarios can be constructed?

Methodology

This is an exploratory study that adopts a phenomenological – inductive - relativist research posture. It takes the position that the experiences and perspectives of women in executive positions need to be utilised in order to examine the career development process as it unfolds over time (Whiston, 1993)

Following an initial literature review, a preliminary set of key informant interviews based on purposive sampling was undertaken with executive women to establish core issues and identify key themes impacting on their careers. This was followed by a web-based Delphi exercise and a subsequent focus group gathering, chosen with the objective of gaining a measure of consensus based on expert opinion as to the future world of work for executive women. The research for this paper was concluded by drawing upon scenario planning methodology to produce three scenarios from the gathered data of how a group of executive women construct possible worlds of work and careers for themselves and others like them occupying senior positions in 10 years time.

It has been claimed that the Delphi technique “obtains the most reliable consensus of a group of experts, by subjecting them to a series of in depth questionnaires, interspersed with controlled feedback” (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963). The Delphi Technique has degrees of flexibility in how it is operationalised (Kendall, 1977), however it has four core elements: anonymity, iteration, controlled feedback and aggregation of group responses (Rowe and Wright, 1999). In general, the technique involves presenting a number of rounds of questions about the future in the domain of interest, to a group of pre-selected experts. Like other subjective forecasting techniques Delphi is used when it is not possible to obtain objective data, and is based on the experts' beliefs, opinions, feelings and expectations. One of the problems of Delphi however is that because it seeks consensus it is a convergence not a divergence technique that squeezes out differences arising from strongly held opinions, and this issue had to be confronted as the study unfolded. Accordingly, the validity and reliability of results are much debated. This study was however more concerned with authenticity of findings and decision making utility, in accordance with the overarching research philosophy.

Scenario planning, although structured in a somewhat different way, has affinities with the Delphi technique and many approaches to scenario planning similarly draw upon a range of experts. Where it differs from the Delphi technique is the reliance on stories about the future through scenario building, a scenario being defined as “an internally consistent view of what the future might turn out to be – not a forecast, but one possible future outcome” (Porter 1985, p.63). A scenario can also be defined as literally the script for a play. In management terms it is “a tool for ordering one's perceptions about alternative future environments in which decisions might be played out” (Schwartz 1991). The process of scenario planning generally involves the development of three or four diverse plots and associated narratives, each of which illustrates the possible playing out of major forces driving change within a system, the interrelationship of these driving forces, and critical uncertainties in the environment (Wack 1985).

Scenario forecasting differentiates between predetermined factors and trends on the one hand and uncertainties on the other. Identified trends drawn upon by the informants for the scenarios constructed in this paper include demographic changes and talent shortages that are resulting in an increased perception of women being seen as part of the future world of work at all levels. Uncertainties encompass respondents' beliefs about issues such as work/life balance and removal or otherwise of institutional barriers to women's progress in the corporate world.

Conduct of Study

One hundred senior women based in the City of London, all earning more than £150,000 and operating at director level and above were sent letters informing them of the broad thrust of the research and requesting semi-structured interviews. The names were obtained from a marketing database of 1500 London-based senior women. The achieved response rate of 70% was considered to be indicative of a high level of interest in the topic. Twelve informal key informant interviews were then conducted in the participants' place of work or in local coffee shops. The remainder of the participants agreed to be part of future research if needed. The research questions that guided the preliminary study were: 1) Why do you think there are not more women in senior positions? 2) What can companies do better to retain executive women? Is there such a concept as successful work/life balance or 'having it all'? If not, what are the alternatives? 4) Does the corporate environment provide a responsive atmosphere for

women who want to achieve professional as well as personal success? 5) Women are leaving the corporate environment at a fast pace. Have you ever considered this? What would be your challenges around it?

One consistent response arising from the interviews was a deep concern about the future for executive women. Questions arose such as: Should I stay or go within my current organisation? With the current economic climate and focus on long hours and results, what are the implications for my personal life? Does starting one's own business work for women? Will organisations eventually change to provide a balance between business results and personal balance or is this impossibility for certain industries? Will society ever value women who stay at home or have untraditional careers? For many of the respondents, the view was pessimistic. Many wanted the researcher to leave the women issue alone, stating that it is outdated and the issues are about the economy, society and global change in the future.

Once the concept was identified of trying to understand how the future world of work might look for executive women, a trial Delphi Technique was conducted with a small group of 10 UK based experts using an email-based survey. The criteria used to select experts were: 1. Women who were considered 'executive' within their organisation or had responsibility for women and diversity within their organisation; 2 Women with broader experience of leaving an executive position in the corporate world to become an entrepreneur; 3. Women who ran networking clubs for executive women; and 4. Women who organised social enterprise and charities to support other women. In addition, independent women commentators on these fields were identified from prominent universities. The trial had the objectives of reviewing the criteria for experts, testing questions, understanding the process of the various rounds and identifying ways to encourage respondents to complete each round.

Twenty experts were asked to come to consensus on a view of the future world of work for executive women in the corporate world. Respondents were firstly asked to brainstorm their ideas on: "What is the future world of work for executive women?" and send their responses back to the researcher.

Twelve responses were collected; these qualitative answers were analysed, coded and then grouped into 10 themes: Business case for women - Women's attitudes towards work- Men's attitudes towards women at work- Feminine Leadership- Women and Entrepreneurship- Flexible working- Changing Demographics- Organisational cultures- Women's Networks- Other. Each theme had a series of qualitative comments on how this particular factor influenced the future world of work for executive women. The themes were then sent back to respondents who were then asked to comment and rate their top three ideas. From the second round, the top three themes overall, that is those factors deemed most important in the future world of work for executive women were:- Feminine Leadership Evolution, Organisational Culture Shifts and Women's Attitudes Towards Their Work. However, what did not occur was a clear understanding of the future world of work for executive women, rather a series of common themes deemed to be important.

The researchers felt that a more in depth understanding was needed from the experts, who were then invited to a face-to-face focus group afternoon session in London, during which these three themes from the Delphi questionnaires were utilised. Supported by facilitated discussion, brainstorming and visualisation techniques, the respondents created vision boards for the future world of work for executive women and discussed the factors that would contribute to accelerating women into leadership in the future. The research questions that guided the focus group workshop were: What is the future world of work for executive women? What is your vision for the future world of work for women? What needs to happen in order to achieve this vision?

Several issues were experienced during this session. Respondents due to their remote locations, senior level positions and lifestyles found attending face-to-face challenging, two were late and one had to leave early. The discussion was very lively and debate intense and it proved very difficult to come to consensus. One of the respondents dominated the conversation, a risk of such events (Tersine and Riggs 1976), and it proved difficult for some to voice their opinions. Some also found it difficult to visualise the future. However, due to the sessions being tape recorded, supported by detailed observation and note taking, more in depth data was collected around the themes of feminine leadership, organisational culture and women's attitudes towards work and how these factors might contribute to career development and the future world of work for executive women.

Results and Findings

The original goal for the research was to establish a vision for the future world of work for executive women. However, as the research progressed, it was clear that participants found it very difficult to come to one consensus on an "ideal" future world of work for executive women and instead three main scenarios emerged from both the Delphi questionnaires and the Focus Group Session.

Scenario 1: Female Executives as Entrepreneurs

Adherents to this first scenario believe that the future world of work for executive women will not look any different to the way it does today. The number of women occupants of senior organisational roles will be very small and many will not opt to progress to this level. There will be more pressure to conform to traditional “male, macho” managerial models as the business world becomes increasingly competitive and challenging. One consequence will be that many executive women will find this way of working unacceptable and will choose instead to leave the corporate world and work for themselves. In this vein one participant stated that “organisations will never change in my lifetime. I’ll do it my way. I am in control of my future. I can change the things I want when I want. My business is my destiny.”

In giving up the “corporate battle” and becoming self employed executive women will draw upon their extensive business expertise to set up some significantly sized businesses that will impact on society and give more credibility to women owned business. This will give confidence to younger and lower level women to also leave and set up their own businesses. This move by executive women to self employment will be accelerated by societal values that will place even more emphasis on work/life balance. Lifestyle choices will become paramount and there will be more success stories in the press and media of women who are becoming financially successful through working for themselves whilst sustaining a real level of work/life balance.

Executive women who have started their own businesses will be supported in a number of ways. Older executive women in organisations will mentor younger women who own their own businesses to offer them structured business support. Female entrepreneurs will also encourage other women to “go it alone” through informal and formal networks. Role models will be showcased through these networks as an opportunity to learn and grow from these models of success and new role models will emerge. As one participant stated, “The first mega black women entrepreneur will emerge as a role model, an afro Caribbean Anita Roddick.” Successful executive women will also join together to work in partnerships and small teams to form “smaller, competitive skunk companies which will entirely break the mould of long hours and huge bonuses for individual success”. This social entrepreneurship could have dramatic impacts for organisations if they become successful and the most talented people are attracted to work for them in large numbers.

Entrepreneurship will form just one part of executive women’s careers. Portfolio careers will be more prominent and accepted. This may mean a mix of self-employment and permanent work and organisations competing in the ‘war for talent’ may attempt to attract executive women back by the offer of a variety of work and flexible working arrangements. The employment of the future will be with companies that match executive women personal values. Many executive women will leave the corporate sector and move into the public or charity sector to increase job satisfaction because the values associated with these sectors are more aligned to theirs.

Scenario 2: The Business Drive for Change

In this second scenario, the CEO and boards of organisations will have recognised the business need for more women to be in executive positions and will have significantly increased their numbers through various company wide initiatives. As one participant stated, “organisations will have to clue up to more diverse workforces including women or they will not survive competitively”. This business need will be driven by both economic and demographic impacts. The “war for talent” will accentuate the business case for the retention of female talent, keeping valuable knowledge within the organisation.

Successful executive women will be highlighted as role models and encouraged to mentor younger female talent to increase female retention at all levels of the organisation. As one participant stated: “As more women enter the boardroom, the ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome - that is being the only woman on the board who sometimes stops other women getting there - will stop because they don’t have to fight so hard to be there.”

According to another respondent, “as the business drives change, men’s attitudes change because they see it is about numbers and figures and not just equality”, another adding, “actually, our customer base is predominately female, having more women on the board just makes more business sense”. This means that organisations will accentuate organisational support for the provision for executive women, who will work for more years and become “sandwich carers” for young children and elderly relatives. This could have further implications for virtual working and flexible arrangements.

As business recognises the need for change, there will be more of an acceptance of the unique talents and leadership styles of women being acknowledged and promoted within organisations. Executive women will be more aware of what drives them, and organisations will respond by providing more challenging projects and the opportunity to make a difference, rather than purely flexible hours to satisfy their needs. As one participant stated, “why should I change to adapt to the style of men around me all the time, I mean I do but I am constantly thinking, I need to be more direct, use a different style when I am naturally collaborative and intuitive, I don’t see men thinking about how to adapt their style for me!”

In this scenario, organisations will also recognise that not every woman will want to aspire to the most senior levels of the business, and will accept a “road less travelled” philosophy in career paths where different routes taken depending upon individuals’ values and needs. They will take on board the work/life balance needs expressed by one participant as follows. “I do see my future career with this organisation. I am good at what I do and I want to deliver for this business especially as our market gets more competitive. But I don’t want to be a partner, I want to stay at senior manager where I can still see my kids and not be penalised for this.”

The concept of “women’s issues” will be disappearing to be replaced by “The business need for individuality and strengths”. Some organisations will emerge – such as professional service firms - demonstrating excellence with this philosophy. Finally, the need to create a specific business case for executive women will disappear. It will come full circle as the case for people development re emerges where individual talents and unique contribution to the business are valued and the different styles and approaches of women will be incorporated into this approach.

Scenario 3: Female Executives as Pioneers for Change

In this third scenario, it will no longer be just the board of an organisation or HR/Diversity departments creating initiatives for change. Individual executive women themselves will not only stay within the corporate world, but also be more demanding about working practices that fit them and their values. They will actively seek to make changes to the organisational culture and practices, addressing the issues themselves. There will be a move away from “a macho culture where those who speak the loudest get heard” and recognition that “there are a number of people, mainly women who have a different style and need to be heard in their own way”. It will be commonplace to “have started an informal network to discuss these issues and have outside speakers on confidence, presentation skills and how to be authentic within the workplace.”

Executive women will be achieving organisational change in a number of ways. Firstly, they will be taking responsibly for their own individualised development and will have moved away from traditional training and leadership development. They will be making full use of executive coaches and mentors to enable them to deal with and transition change for themselves and their organisations. As one participant stated,

I am far too busy to attend courses all day and often they go over the same ground. I work with an executive coach that really helps me to focus on my leadership issues and challenges, many of which are about changing this organisation for the better for women like me.

Secondly, they will find more peer level support internally and collude informally and formally within organisations to drive culture change. Thirdly, they will have gained access to external networks to widen their personal network, share experiences and ideas and be inspired by role models to bring ideas for change back into their organisations. As another participant said,

Networks are the key to success, in and out of the company. It is great to meet like minded women and think I am not the only one that thinks this way, we can then share ideas and drive change, from the inside out”.

In this third scenario, executive women are driving change themselves through support and collaboration of other women; this will be achieved through one to one coaching, mentoring or networking.

Conclusions

In terms of the research questions, the process of the Delphi and the focus group did not lead to a consensus about the future world of work for executive women, and participants came from many different directions depending upon their previous experiences and philosophical and psychological outlook. This is to be expected in this type of exploratory research. What emerged is that for the respondents and participants there is not at this point, a common shared vision of the future, but differing perceptions that both shed light on how executive women perceive future career paths and additionally proved possible to composite into three distinct scenarios. This has implications in terms of individual, organisational and policy initiatives since the “how to get there”, that is action points arising, vary significantly depending upon the scenario constructed.

A particular point of interest was that as the scenarios emerged, it seemed clear that executive women feel they have a huge part to play in their own career development and the future world of work for others. They did not highlight government policy or even organisational policy as a lever in creating change in the future but rather emphasised their own individual actions and responsibility. In contributing to discussions about the future it was noticeable that at no stage did the contributors engage in wild speculation about how the future world of work might

turn out. This could be explained that their level of seniority and their experiences to date kept them well grounded. The area was too important to them!

The researchers have been careful not to go beyond the field data, but are aware that each of the scenarios has the potential to be enriched and expanded, and this could prove to be a useful next step.

Contribution to New Knowledge in HRD

The study in eschewing a merely speculative approach about the future in favour of a grounded approach has resulted in three distinct scenarios, authentically obtained, that are both valuable in their own right, and can also be used as a point of comparison for other similar studies. The approach reinforces the contention of Whiston (op cit) who argues that the actual experiences and perspectives of executive women need to be drawn upon if one is going to contribute to the career development of such groups in the future. By using Delphi and visioning techniques to get them to reflect upon the future of careers it provides another perspective to that adopted in previous studies as to how these experiences might be drawn upon. From a methods perspective it also identifies the need for flexibility in using convergence techniques such as Delphi when feelings are heavily engaged and opinions are strongly formed.

Finally much attention is paid in the organisational change literature to identifying an *ideal future state* and then identifying road maps for getting from here to there. Amongst criticisms that have been voiced about such an approach has been the issue: "Whose vision?" The findings of this study provide further evidence relating to collective visions. At the same time, the scenarios provide a basis for addressing the support and development needed for individual executive women to determine their particular vision for the future both from an individual career and also from a business perspective.

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