

MARKETING

Investing in gender equality boosts company culture

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Gaining a more gender balanced workforce helps companies succeed. Image credit: Longchamp

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Beyond giving a brand an image boost, achieving greater gender parity among employees and leadership can have an impact on a company's bottom line.

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At Haven Hill's Symposium on Equality on Oct. 31, speakers conferred about the data behind the need for more gender parity, as well as the ways in which companies can take equality initiatives beyond hollow campaigns. While many organizations recognize the business benefits of gaining more gender diversity in their workforce, truly achieving change revolves around tackling tough topics and shifting culture.

"Millennials want companies that have values, and values are also about diversity," said Yann Borgstedt, founder and president of **The Womanity Foundation**. "If you want to keep your employees motivated or in your companies, you need to find ways to have more equality and diversity.

"You want to do what is right, but also we want to do what is good for the economy, and if it's good for the economy, it's good for kids and it's good for everyone," he said. "So I just don't understand why in so many places men feel threatened by giving the same rights and opportunities to women."

Diversity data

Mr. Borgstedt pointed out that while women represent about half of the population, they only hold 21 percent of senior roles and only 3 percent of CEOs are women. Women at the head of startups are also far less apt to get funding than men, despite the fact that female-led ventures tend to see better returns.

The data also shows that having more gender diversity at a company will help employers attract value-based millennials, while also boosting retention.

According to media organization **Politico's** CEO Patrick Steel, his biggest challenge is recruitment, particularly because most Washington residents are already employed. Increasing the number of women in leadership positions at the publication has allowed the company to attract more female staff on both the editorial and sales sides.

Women who work for a female manager are 30 percent more apt to feel as though there is someone who is helping them advance. Politico also offers three months of maternity and paternity leave, opening the door to women to feel comfortable and secure about starting families.



A number of companies have put gender equality on their to-do lists. Image credit: Bloomingdale's

There is a discrepancy between genders on beliefs regarding equality in the fashion workplace, with 100 percent of women thinking this to be an issue, while less than half of men do.

Attributed to the fact that there are many women designers in the fashion and accessories world, many men believe that there is no issue with inequality in fashion. According to a report from McKinsey, *Glamour* and the CFDA, women start careers in fashion with higher expectations than men ([see story](#)).

While there is a lack of gender diversity in everything from politics to corporations, one business that has seen little progress in parity is financial services. Today about 3 percent of women work in wealth management.

Alli McCartney, managing director with UBS Private Wealth Management, said that part of the reason her field is still male-dominated is because it is commission-based, making the potential for losing out while on maternity leave a challenge.

Despite this lack of women in the workforce in financial services, it is becoming increasingly more important for banks and institutions to cater to female clientele. About two-thirds of women say they lead their household, and one-third earn more than their spouse.

Additionally, women are set to inherit money through wealth transfer, and many who have been in the workforce are establishing their own assets. Divorces and deaths of spouses are also requiring women to be more independent about their finances.

Yet with this growing need for advice, women often do not seek out financial services. Three-quarters of women under the age of 40 have no wealth advisor.



Soft skills will be important in wealth management. Image credit: UBS

Part of this lack of financial assistance may be tied to women's dissatisfaction with services offered by banks. Whereas men desire results such as power, opportunity and returns from their wealth management, women report wanting aspects such as community and creating an impact and legacy.

Therefore, Ms. McCartney says soft skills will be imperative for wealth advisors of both genders. Managers can also win female clients' business by offering flexible hours and building trust.

Making moves

While recognizing the need for more gender equality is one thing, putting it into practice is another.

Progress in gender diversity has stalled in the last few years, according to Jeanne Zaino, senior advisor at [AppliedTeconomics](#). Additionally, 20 percent of employees say that their company's efforts around gender diversity are merely lip service to the issue.

Citing examples throughout history, Ms. Zaino said that those at the top need to make a commitment to change, but diversity initiatives need buy-ins from stakeholders to have a lasting effect.

Getting executive leadership on-board often boils down to speaking their language and showing the risks and rewards of making a change.

In addressing gender diversity, companies also have to look at issues on the local level, as challenges often differ depending on location.

Angela Lee, chief innovation officer and associate dean at [Columbia Business School](#), spoke about overcoming biases and being unafraid to tackle tough conversations.

One thing companies can do is try to remove triggers for bias from their hiring process. For instance, orchestras began doing blind auditions, which resulted in more female musicians being hired.

In the corporate world, third-party services will take demographic indicators out of resumes to do merit-based matching for a position.

Companies may also want to think about how they are wording their job postings, removing language that appeals to certain types of individuals.

Ms. Lee also suggested opening up the door for healthy conflict by having meeting attendees fill out anonymous ideas of pros and cons to a particular plan. Companies can also spur innovation by pushing employees from different areas of the organization together, allowing them to gain new perspective and connections.

For women looking to move up the corporate ladder, Robert Reiss, founder and CEO of [The CEO Forum Group](#), suggests taking on C-level language. Addressing plans as they relate to the organization's mission and values can help an employee get on the top brass' radar.

Owning a P&L is another path to leadership, as is identifying a personal brand and strengths and finding a way to show them off.

Lastly, establishing and training a successor opens the door for women to take on new opportunities, ensuring there is someone to take their place.

With only 24 female CEOs in the Fortune 500, Mr. Reiss sees reaching 50 as a goal. At this point, women will reach a critical mass where they can mentor each other and help others rise to the top position.

For women in luxury, the world can sometimes be a hostile place, which is why it is important for them to learn to work together and support each other, according to two entrepreneurs who have done so for 20 years.

At the Women in Luxury 2018 conference, Carrie Ellen Phillips and Vanessa Weiner von Bismarck, two women who have been working together for decades, spoke at length about their experiences as women and entrepreneurs as well as how to build a lasting partnership. One of the things they said elevated them to their current position was their joint work ethic ([see story](#)).

"You've got to make the investment if you're going to make these changes," Ms. Zaino said. "You cannot make a one-time change and then walk away from it.

"You have to continue to assess and reassess what has been the outcome of that reform," she said. "Because reforms have unintended consequences, no matter if they're positive or negative."