

# A Study of the Career Development and Aspirations of Women in Middle Management

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*This article reports the results of a study on the career development and aspirations of women in middle management positions in business firms. The major research method was individual case studies, which relied on face-to-face interviews with a sample of thirty women in middle management positions in fifteen Fortune 500 companies. The studies revealed the factors most pertinent to their success and the barriers that have most frequently hindered their career development or progression. The studies also disclosed that the majority aspire ultimately to attain top management positions and believe it is either very realistic or somewhat realistic that they will succeed. Initiatives that HRD professionals and corporate leaders can take to maximize the human resource of women managers are also suggested.*

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1986, p. 390), in 1950 fewer than 35 percent of U.S. women worked outside the home. By 1960, the number had climbed slightly, to almost 40 percent. In 1985, for the first time in history, more than 50 percent of U.S. women were in the workforce. Furthermore, this percentage has continued to increase each year. The trends indicate that, through the year 2000, the majority of the 25 million new entrants into the job market will be women. Johnston, in his 1987 book *Workforce 2000*, estimated that by the year 2000, native-born white males—long the corporation's main source of managerial and executive talent—will account for only 15 percent of the net increase in the workforce while native-born women will make up 55 percent (p. 85). The rest will be minority men and immigrants.

As the numbers of women working have changed, so have their roles. Women were once thought of as transient employees who worked only to purchase luxuries, to supplement household income, or to provide additional spending money; however, women's income is now relied upon by most two-earner families. It is predicted that by the year 2000, the husband and wife in

eight out of ten couples will work (U.S. Department of Labor, 1992, p. 18). In a surprisingly large proportion of cases, women are the sole breadwinners (Nieva, 1989). Stead (1987, p. 57) determined that two-thirds of working women supported themselves, and Kessler-Harris (1982) found that women were committed to their jobs and desired meaningful careers with significant advancement opportunities.

Furthermore, women now seem more committed to their careers than women of earlier generations. This view is supported by the following data: women are working later into pregnancy (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993), women are returning to work faster after childbirth (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993), 78 percent of new mothers have returned to the labor force by the time their children are two years old (Rand Corporation, 1993, pp. 50–54), and the labor force participation of women with preschool children has more than quadrupled from 1950 to 1992 in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994, pp. 400–402).

The fact that women take their careers seriously comes through in other ways. For the first time, women now constitute over half of university students. The courses that they are enrolled in are increasingly career oriented. For example, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1992, pp. 23–26), women were over 35 percent of those obtaining M.B.A. degrees in 1982 and 49 percent of those enrolled in undergraduate business programs. Over the past decade, the increase in the number of women graduating from leading universities has been much greater than the increase in the total number of graduates, and these women are well represented in the top 10 percent of their classes (Schwartz, 1989). Marriage is being delayed by some of these women, and families are smaller. Because careers are important, women with good positions or those launched on their careers are less likely to drop out of the workforce for long periods when they have children (Blau and Ferber, 1989). Those having the appropriate credentials take their careers seriously, work hard, and want to succeed (O'Neill, 1989).

Although women have gained access to virtually every line of work and many have advanced to certain levels in organizations, their access to senior positions remains limited. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1993, p. 32), women make up 47.8 percent of a loosely defined demographic category of executives, administrators, and managers. But only a very small number of women have top jobs in U.S. major companies. Although opportunities for women have increased substantially in recent years, there are still a great many barriers and the question of why so few women reach senior management positions in business firms is still unanswered.

Korn/Ferry International and the University of California-Los Angeles Graduate School of Management (1993, p. 26) found that minorities and women hold less than 5 percent of senior management positions in Fortune 500 industrial corporations and service firms. Furthermore, in the last ten

years, there has been only a 2 percent increase in minorities and women in the top executive positions of the 1,000 largest companies in the United States. Fierman (1990, p. 42) examined the 1990 proxy statements of the 799 public companies on *Fortune* magazine's combined lists of the 1,000 largest U.S. industrial and service companies and found that, of the 4,012 people listed as the highest-paid officers and directors of their companies, only 19, or fewer than one-half of one percent, were women. When a similar project was undertaken in 1978, out of 6,400 officers and directors on *Fortune* magazine's combined lists, which then included 1,000 industrial and 300 service companies, 10 were women. An analysis of the 1993 *Fortune* magazine list shows that among these companies at that time there was only one woman CEO—Linda Wachner of Warnaco, an apparel company. The U.S. Department of Labor (1991, pp. 23–30) analyzed data from a random sample of ninety-four reviews of corporate headquarters of Fortune 500/service companies between 1989 and 1991. The data indicated that, of 147,179 employees of those ninety-four companies, women represented 37 percent of employees and 16.9 percent of all levels of management, but only 6 percent of executive leadership.

Despite increasing numbers of women in the workforce and in business, women are definitely underrepresented in the most powerful management positions—those in the topmost ranks of the largest corporations that account for the bulk of this country's business wealth (Morrison, White, and Van Velsor, 1992). The literature holds plenty of evidence that women have an easier and faster start on their careers now than they did in the past (Coyle, 1989; Devanna, 1987; Forbes, Piercy, and Hayes, 1988; Hardesty and Jacobs, 1986; and Powell, 1990). The problem is that getting women into corporations is not the same as moving them up.

The literature presented indicates that the majority of U.S. women are in the workforce and that there are many women in middle management jobs, but they are almost never found in top decision-making positions. The key issue now is whether women will go to the top ranks or just remain in the middle. By studying and understanding not only the barriers that exist for women in middle management positions but also these women's career development and aspirations, we can learn how to facilitate women's development and their achievement of higher management positions.

For the purpose of this study, *middle managers* were defined as members of "the group of managers extending from top management down to those immediately above first-line management. They implement the strategies or policies set by top managers and coordinate the work of lower-level managers" (Van Fleet, 1988, p. 33). The middle manager's job is to coordinate with counterparts in other functional areas to see that the work of his or her own group or department is related as effectively as possible to the immediate objectives and operations of the enterprise, and it is primarily for this broad task that he or she is held responsible (Hennig and Jardim, 1977).

## Questions for Investigation

The investigation described in this article focused on examining the career development and aspirations of women in middle management positions in business firms. The following research questions were addressed: What is the educational background of women in middle management positions? What is the work history of women in middle management positions? What factors have assisted the career development or progression of women in middle management positions? What barriers or hindrances have women encountered in achieving middle management positions? What are the career goals and aspirations of women in middle management positions? What barriers or hindrances do women in middle management positions think they will encounter in trying to attain the position to which they ultimately aspire? What actions do women in middle management positions think they will have to take in order to attain the position to which they ultimately aspire?

## Methodology

The major method of this research study was the individual case study. Case studies relied on face-to-face interviews with a sample of women middle managers and required the collection of extensive data in order to produce an in-depth understanding of the career development and aspirations of the women being studied. The data provided during the interviews consisted of rich verbal descriptions (qualitative data) and quantitative data. The quantitative data provided the basic research evidence, and the qualitative data rounded out the picture and provided examples.

**Instrument.** An interview guide was developed to assist in collecting the data from the interviews. This guide was divided into six sections. The first section asked for personal information. This information was obtained in order to describe the personal background of study participants. The second section asked for educational background. Subsequent sections asked for work history, factors that had assisted study participants' career development, factors that had hindered study participants' career development, and finally, future career goals, perceived barriers, and aspirations of study participants.

A study advisory committee, made up of three business educators and three people from business and industry, reviewed the interview guide and study procedures. Also, a pilot study, involving a sample of five women in middle management positions in business firms, was conducted to determine content validity and appropriateness of the interview guide. The advisory committee and the pilot test participants agreed that the interview guide and the data being collected were appropriate for meeting the objectives of the study.

**Sample and Data Collection.** The researcher conducted in-person interviews with thirty women in middle management positions in fifteen Fortune

500 companies located in the Midwest (Illinois, Missouri, and Indiana). After a review of the total number of Fortune 500 companies in the state of Illinois (fifty), Missouri (fifteen), and Indiana (eight), a proportional sample was randomly selected to reflect the number of companies in each of the states. A total of fifteen companies was then randomly selected: ten from Illinois, three from Missouri, and two from Indiana. The Placement Service Office at Illinois State University was contacted for assistance in identifying the campus recruitment person for each of the companies. The campus recruitment person from each of the fifteen Fortune 500 companies was then contacted by telephone and was asked to assist in identifying two women in middle management positions in the company. Names, position titles, and telephone numbers of thirty women managers were thus obtained. Initial contacts with the women managers were made over the telephone—at which time, dates, interview appointments, and arrangements were made. All thirty women managers contacted consented to participate in the study.

Each participant received a letter confirming the interview appointment and a copy of the interview guide two weeks before the scheduled interview. The participants were therefore able to examine the research questions prior to the interview. The interviews were conducted on-site, in each participant's corporate office. During the interview, the researcher used the guide to focus the interview process. Flexibility was retained so that the researcher could probe into each participant's statements and replies and pursue additional issues related to the focus of the study even though not included in the interview guide. The interviews lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours and focused on the career development and aspirations of the women managers. The researcher took extensive shorthand notes during each interview, and these notes were transcribed after each interview.

The data from the interviews were content analyzed. Content analysis is a research technique for systematically examining the content of communications—in this instance, the interview data. Participants' responses to the interview guide questions and the related issues that arose during the interview process were read and put together as complete quotations and filed according to the topic or issue addressed. The content analysis of the interview data was completed manually and with computer assistance using the software program Excel. Responses were then analyzed thematically. Emergent themes were ranked by their frequency of mention.

To assist in ensuring the reliability of the interview data collected, the researcher invited a career development professional to review the interview data from three case studies and identify the various career development factors identified in the text. For each case study, the career development professional identified the same factors as the researcher.

**Description of Study Participants.** The thirty middle women managers interviewed work in industrial corporations with sales varying from \$500 million to more than \$20 billion and with assets ranging from \$600 million to

more than \$24 billion. The number of employees in these fifteen companies ranges from 2,560 to 112,400, with an average of 35,000 employees. The study participants are employed in a variety of industries (percentages throughout may not total 100 due to rounding): aerospace, four (13 percent); chemicals, four (13 percent); computer, four (13 percent); electronics, four (13 percent); food, four (13 percent); petroleum refining, four (13 percent); industrial and farm equipment, two (7 percent); pharmaceutical, two (7 percent); and publishing/printing, two (7 percent).

The participants ranged in age from 30 to 46, with an average age of 38.2 years. The majority (70 percent) of the women managers were between 35 and 44 years old.

Twenty-three (77 percent) of the participants were married, while five (17 percent) were single, and two (7 percent) were divorced. Of the married participants, eight (35 percent) have been married more than once.

The ethnic origin of all but one study participant was Caucasian; the other was African American.

Eighteen (60 percent) of the participants did not have children of their own. Among participants having children of their own, the children's ages ranged from 14 months to 22 years, with an average age of 9.6 years; the majority (83 percent) had children under the age of 11, with an average of 1.6 children.

## Results

The results of this study are summarized in four major sections: study participants' work history; factors that assisted participants' career development; factors that hindered participants' career development; and participants' future career goals, perceived barriers, and actions believed necessary to attain positions to which they ultimately aspired.

**Work History.** Participants were asked to identify their current position title and department or area. The results included thirty different position titles that ranged from director of human resources to manager of information systems. Participants held positions in a variety of areas: human resources, nine (30 percent); management information systems, seven (23 percent); finance, five (17 percent); marketing, three (10 percent); accounting, three (10 percent); engineering, two (7 percent); and research, one (3 percent).

The number of years of work experience acquired by participants ranged from 8 to 25 years, with an average of 15.1 years. The majority (77 percent) of the participants had 8 to 16 years of work experience.

Participants' managerial experience at all levels of management ranged from 3 to 17 years, with an average of 7.6 years. The majority (66 percent) of the participants had 3 to 8 years of managerial experience. Their experience as middle managers ranged from 1 to 10 years, with an average of 4.5 years. The majority (57 percent) of the participants had 1 to 4 years of experience as mid-

dle managers. The length of time that it took participants to attain a middle management position ranged from 1 to 20 years, with an average of 10 years. The majority (67 percent) of the participants attained a middle management position after 5 to 12 years.

**Factors That Assisted Career Development.** In order to learn about the factors that assisted their career development, the study asked the women managers to identify factors that they considered to have been the most important to their career advancement. The most frequently cited factors included educational credentials, hard work, mentors, interpersonal/people skills, demonstrated competency on the job (producing high-quality work), and willingness to take risks.

**Educational Credentials.** All the managers but one had earned a bachelor's degree. Sixty percent had gone on to earn master's degrees (mostly M.B.A.'s). All the women interviewed had received additional training to further their knowledge in management, human relations, and other job-related areas. In addition, more than one-third planned additional formal study at the M.B.A. level to further their careers. Many indicated that it is extremely important for women to recognize their deficiencies and be willing to return to the classroom for more training. Half of the women thought that a bachelor's degree is necessary to attain a position in middle management, whereas the other half stated that a master's degree is necessary. Seventy-three percent declared that an M.B.A. degree is needed if a woman is to be more competitive and to have a greater opportunity for advancement.

**Hard Work.** The women managers reported working an average of 53.6 hours per week, and the majority often took work home with them. They had traveled an average of 41.4 days in the past year on trips that required an overnight stay.

The women managers indicated that they had to be willing to take on more responsibility, be committed, be dedicated, work hard, and push and persist until the job was done. "Working beyond the standard work week and producing high-quality work is viewed favorably by my boss, and also gives top management the assurance they need to invest in my development" was the way one women manager characterized the importance of working hard.

Many of the women managers felt they had to work much harder than men to prove themselves to top management, as illustrated by this response: "Women need to work much harder to earn creditability, and we need to prove our ability to handle the next assignment beyond a shadow of a doubt, while men have instant creditability and are presumed capable of handling the next assignment unless they have blundered at the current level."

**Mentors.** Ninety percent of the women managers had mentors during their professional careers. Most often, it was a boss or a top manager who served as a mentor, and the majority (83 percent) were men. By definition, a mentor is someone who is already highly placed in a position of influence. A mentor is someone who has already gained the prerequisite experience and status needed

to support and promote the career of the less experienced individual. For this reason, mentors at the present time are most often men rather than women (Collins and Scott, 1980; Thompson, 1986).

Although a few women managers reported that they had received an array of benefits from a single mentor, most of them came to rely on several mentors, each for a different sort of help. The women managers indicated that their mentors were good role models, advocates, or instructors. The most frequently cited functions performed by mentors had been to provide the women managers with job opportunities and challenges to demonstrate their skills and abilities, to offer them feedback on their performance, to give them useful advice, to share the mentor's expertise, to encourage them to meet high performance standards, and to acknowledge their skills and talents and encourage their career development.

The majority (90 percent) of the women managers indicated that their mentors were the people they considered to have most significantly influenced their career development. They reported that their mentors had provided them with substantial help, which had assisted them in their career progression and in dealing more effectively with barriers. The statements made by the women managers confirm what Kanter (1977) pointed out in *Men and Women of the Corporation*: mentors can serve as a source of outward and upward influence in the organization.

*Interpersonal/People Skills.* The majority of the women managers stressed the importance of interpersonal/people skills as a means of being a productive and effective manager. The interpersonal/people skills most frequently cited as necessary for a manager were the abilities to work through others, to deal with and relate well to people at all levels of the organization, to understand how others feel, to motivate employees toward superior performance, to maintain good relations with customers, and to establish networks.

Several of the women managers commented on the importance of keeping in touch with people. One put it this way: "Do not lose sight of how important it is to develop and maintain smooth, cooperative working relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors. Treat people the way you want to be treated—show awareness and consideration to their opinions and feelings." Many of the women managers felt this was more difficult to do the higher they advanced. When Hellwig (1985), a senior editor of *Working Woman* magazine, reported on interviews with forty-five top executive recruiters, she, too, concluded that contenders for top jobs demonstrated strong managerial skills, especially strong people skills. According to Morrison, White, and Van Velsor in *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* (1992), the female executives who were ultimately successful possessed several common characteristics, including the ability to manage their subordinates and work well with people.

*Demonstrate Competency on the Job.* Demonstrating competency on the job, producing high-quality work, getting results, being accountable, knowing the job/field, and being consistently outstanding were mentioned by many of the



women managers as prerequisites for a successful management career. Most of the women managers indicated that they were expected to be extremely competent and very often more competent than men. This view is similar to the one expressed by twenty-two chief executive officers interviewed at twenty-five Fortune 100 companies by Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1987) about the special problems corporate women face. The chief executive officers indicated that the women who were successful in their companies had been screened very thoroughly—more thoroughly than the men, on the whole.

The women managers reported demonstrating their competency on the job in various arenas, such as starting or turning around a department, directing a major project, chairing a task force, planning and implementing a successful program, managing subordinates and customers, and traveling to another country to assist in company business. Many of the women stated that their performance always had to be outstanding, despite the degree of difficulty. This example was given by a women manager who took on a special project with all the odds against her:

I was given a special assignment to be a project manager for a very political and unpleasant project. It was a very difficult project to do. I needed to install a new accounts payable system, which the current person working on it could not do. This other person had been working on this project for over one year without success. I had to work with people I did not know and get the new system installed in three weeks. I was able to turn the project around with all the odds against me. I successfully implemented the new system within the time limit. I got well known and developed a good reputation for myself with the successful implementation of this project. It also proved to top management that I was managerial material and shortly after that I was promoted.

Another women manager took on an operations department with ten employees that was in chaos—her first management job. The problems she faced included negative attitudes, low morale, high turnover, overlapping responsibilities among workers, low productivity, and unfinished work. It seemed overwhelming, at first, but she turned the department around. This built her confidence and made top management aware of her capabilities.

It seems that consistently demonstrating competency on the job by producing high-quality work is of particular importance for women because they are under enormous pressure to do outstanding work all of the time. Many of the women noted that they had to be able to build a case for their own competence so compelling that top management was convinced without a doubt that they could succeed.

*Willingness to Take Risks.* Many of the women managers stated that they had made a job change that was regarded as exceptionally risky: for example, a move into an unfamiliar area of business, a taking on of new assignments, a

huge leap in responsibility, or a transfer into a lower job that afforded a better chance at advancement. Some reported that they initiated or accepted moves into what were said to be male fields (for example, international duties, quality control, and production planning) and therefore unusual and risky for a woman. Their moves sometimes required relocation or heavy travel, and the moves also usually involved a greater risk of failure.

Hellwig (1985) reported on interviews conducted by *Working Woman* magazine with seventy-three rising corporate stars suggested by forty-five executive recruiters. She found that all of these stars—contenders for top executive posts—had taken some risks (changed jobs, accepted a high-risk assignment, changed functional area, moved from staff to line job, demanded a promotion, or started their own businesses) that had helped them move up more quickly. Similarly, several of the women managers in the present study described making risky job changes in order to broaden their business experience and get exposure to the many functions of a business organization. Such risky job changes included tough transitions from a staff position to a line position and deliberate attempts to broaden their perspective and knowledge by moving into such areas as finance, marketing, employee relations, and information services. Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1992) noted that taking risks early in one's career is often necessary preparation for top jobs.

The success factors cited by the women managers in this study are similar to those identified in other studies. For example, female executives in a 1986 Korn/Ferry International survey reported a concern for results, a desire for responsibility, hard work, effective human relation skills, ambition, persistence, and aggressiveness as factors that got them where they are today. Similarly, when Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1987) interviewed fifty-two women in general management positions at twenty-five Fortune 100 companies; the majority mentioned credibility and presence, strong advocacy, mentors, and pure luck as factors that facilitated their career movement.

**Factors That Hindered Career Development.** To understand the factors that have hindered women managers' career development, the study asked the participants to identify "key events" or barriers they had encountered in the past that had hindered their career progression. Four barriers were mentioned most frequently: bosses who did not guide or encourage their career progression, gender discrimination, women's lack of political savvy, and women's lack of career strategy.

**Bosses Who Did Not Guide or Encourage Career Progression.** A major barrier the women managers reported facing in the workplace was bosses who did not guide or encourage their career progression. In most cases these individuals were described as "inadequate" bosses and were said to be insecure, to overmanage, to lack people skills, to be untrustworthy, to be incompetent technically, or to be unwilling or unable to provide critical feedback. Having an inadequate boss was a great disadvantage to many of these women managers, one that sometimes hindered their career advancement. When one woman

manager encountered a boss who was close to intolerable, she trusted the advice that she sought from top management:

I changed jobs and worked for a boss who did not like me. He was intimidated by me because I had longer experience in the area and faster movement in the company. He did not give me the opportunity to take on challenging assignments and was not interested in my development. He attributed much of my success to being a woman. I put up with him for over a year, having requested a move to no avail; I then decided to leave the company. When I talked to a top executive about my decision, he said the company did not want to lose me and asked me to reconsider. I decided to stay and shortly after was moved into a new position with more potential for advancement. This boss could have ended my career in this company, but I'm glad I stuck with it and continued to seek help.

Many of the women managers said that they did not get constructive feedback from their bosses. This is crucial because without feedback about job performance no one can improve her or his position. Without feedback, corrections many times could not be made and problems on the job escalated until they were beyond repair. One woman manager worked for a boss who was not at all helpful: "He was not very knowledgeable and could not communicate well or provide leadership to his employees. He could not make good judgments or evaluate my work and give me constructive feedback. I could have accomplished so much more, but he hindered my progress. In addition, he lost the confidence of the whole department. I did not get the credit I deserved, and this hindered my career advancement. He finally left the company."

*Gender Discrimination.* Gender discrimination was perceived as another major barrier hindering the career development of the women managers. In most cases, the managers interviewed believed that because they were women, they had advanced more slowly, had to work harder to prove themselves, were not taken seriously or were treated with less respect, did not receive equal pay for equal work, and were banned from certain jobs. Several of the women managers described working for bosses who had difficulties dealing with women or who did not believe in the development or advancement of women.

According to many of the women managers interviewed, being assigned the same responsibilities and the same titles as men in the company did not mean receiving equal treatment in other respects. The salary differential provides the most obvious example. Salary surveys conducted over the past several years consistently show that women are still paid considerably less than men doing the same job. This also holds true in management jobs, even when the women hold M.B.A.'s from prestigious graduate business schools (Taylor, 1986). Several of the women managers said that they believed they could be making more money if they were men. Inclusion in the bonus system, access

to high-status conferences, and a host of other benefits were also noted as skewed in favor of men. One woman corroborated these phenomena when she said:

I suppose there were other promotions I was not considered for because I was a woman. During my first position with the company, one of my male peers with less experience than me got promoted. My performance evaluations had always been outstanding, so I asked my boss if I had been considered for the promotion. My boss told me that he felt that I wasn't going to stay with the company very long because I would probably leave the company to have children. Shortly after that I left that department for another department and position which had more opportunity and less prejudice against women.

Fox and Hesse-Biber noted in *Women at Work* (1984) that barriers to promotion of women are reinforced by a variety of stereotypes. One of the most damaging stereotypes is the belief that women workers are unstable and unreliable. As a result, employers are often reluctant to promote or train female employees because they fear that women will quit when they marry or when they have children. Gender discrimination is often very subtle in form, even unconscious. For example, women are often excluded from meetings to which all male peers have been invited or are not invited to play golf with the boss. Therefore, women are often unable to participate in valuable informal business discussions. Being excluded has serious consequences. Information is power, according to Swain and Swain (1992). They contend that without inside information, women can not position themselves to move up in a company.

*Lack of Political Savvy.* In many instances, women managers believe they have difficulty conforming to company norms, fitting in, adapting to the organization's culture, knowing whom to approach for support, and determining an organization's informal power structure primarily because established political systems and networks are composed of men and are therefore not available to women. One female manager said: "I am more at a disadvantage than my male peers because I am excluded from the 'old boy' network because I am female. This network is crucial to accessing information about implicit norms, power coalitions, and acceptable behaviors and strategies. In short, this network is vital to knowing what is going on and understanding the implications of operating within the political environment."

Several of the women managers indicated that they had difficulty perceiving the organization's political environment accurately and that they did not have access to information that would explain it to them. They also had trouble learning the legitimate means of operating within the organization's informal power structure. One woman manager said: "I am not very good at determining whom I need to approach to get support for my views before a meeting. Also, I am not always perceptive of who are the informal power fig-

ures in the organization. This has hindered me from getting my ideas or project proposals accepted.”

Fitting into male-dominated companies presents yet another obstacle for women. According to Arlene Johnson of Catalyst, a research and advisory organization that fosters the careers and leadership development of women, “fitting in” is the bottom line. Bad chemistry and not fitting in are cited among the most common reasons for letting a female executive go, according to Swain (1988). Set cultural factors are not likely to change immediately, but future generations of women will probably find fitting in easier. However, today’s generation of women find it difficult to fit into the organizations because most of those organizations are run by men.

*Lack of Career Strategy.* Lacking specific career strategies, women often do not obtain proper technical training and do not identify what is most important for their careers. Moreover, many of the managers interviewed said they had encountered pressure and resistance from colleagues and partners and had family obligations that made their career plans more difficult. When they were in the first stages of their careers, some of the women had not realized that they wanted a career or that it was even a possibility. One women manager said: “I never thought of myself as a career person until I started to advance very quickly. I was married then, and my husband was not very supportive, and he really didn’t want me to work. I would hide my raises and bonuses from him because I was advancing quicker than he was in his career. My career did not matter to me then, but I continued to work extremely hard.”

Several of the women managers felt that they would have advanced more quickly if they had taken control of their careers and developed career strategies. One said, “I wish I would have started my career much sooner. I was a traditional wife and moved around with my husband. His career was important, but my career was not. I did not know what I wanted to do or the importance of selecting and planning a career, so I spent the first eight years of my work life changing jobs. I started to take my career more seriously and became more career oriented after I attained my master’s degree.” Higginson and Quick (1985) suggested that many women are handicapped when it comes to career planning. They assert that specialized training is required to remove this handicap. Women must be taught to perceive themselves as individuals, to seek recognition and status, to take more initiative, to think early about careers, to invest in getting returns on their capabilities, and to make formal choices about major life and career decisions by gathering relevant information about feasible options and opportunities.

*Future Career Goals, Perceived Barriers, and Actions Believed Necessary to Attain Positions to Which Women Managers Ultimately Aspired.* In this section of the interview, three types of questions were asked. The first set related to career goals and aspirations of participants, such as ultimate career aspirations and reality of career aspirations. The second set of questions related to barriers or hindrances that participants thought they would encounter in

trying to attain the position to which they ultimately aspired. The third set of questions inquired about actions that participants thought they would have to take in order to attain the position to which they ultimately aspired.

*Career Goals and Aspirations.* The women managers were asked to identify the highest position to which they ultimately aspired by naming the title, level, and department or area of this position. They were also asked to rate their goals on a scale from “very realistic” to “very unrealistic.” Eighty-three percent of those interviewed aspired to top management positions, and 17 percent aspired to upper-middle management positions. Seventy-seven percent believed it was either very realistic or somewhat realistic that they would acquire the highest positions to which they aspired. According to Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1992), the ability to envision oneself as a senior executive is a key to attaining that position. With this vision and some traditional skill building and other necessary preparation, the goal can become even more attainable. In a *Fortune* magazine article (Fierman, 1990, p. 62), Goldin, professor of economics at Harvard University, stated that “our best hope for the future are women who don’t see the ceiling but the sky.”

Sixty-three percent of the women managers interviewed had never interrupted their careers for more than two months. Those who took maternity leave were away from their jobs two years or less. These women managers intend to continue their careers, for they are well educated, committed to their careers, and not planning to drop out of the managerial workforce. This is how one woman manager stated her career commitment:

My father taught me how to plan and develop a sense of commitment to my career. He had a very positive attitude, and he brought me up thinking that I could do whatever I wanted to do. He taught me to be competitive and to strive for financial independence. He said I should plan my career long-term and think about the future. He said when I started my career I needed to have a good attitude, and I should have the drive to work until retirement. I take my career very seriously, and I think long-term about my pension plan, buying a house, and investing, because I am responsible for my financial support and someday, if I have a family, I may be responsible for their financial support.

Rosenfeld (1988) obtained the work histories of 5,083 women from the National Longitudinal Surveys. Her findings indicated that women’s work interruptions are becoming shorter and less common, especially among women in better-paying occupations. They consider the loss of earnings and opportunities to be greater than the benefits of staying home for several years.

*Perceived Barriers to Attaining Positions to Which Women Managers Ultimately Aspired.* The four most frequent barriers perceived by the women managers to attaining aspired positions were competition (fewer high-level positions available and many talented and competent people wanting these positions), fam-

ily obligations (getting married, having children, wanting to spend more time with family), being a woman, and not being willing to give what it takes to get the position.

According to the literature, the women in this study made an accurate assessment of the barriers they are likely to encounter on their way up the corporate ladder. For example, Hellwig (1985, p. 99) reported that 53 percent of the seventy-three women "ready to run corporate America" believe that career progress is becoming harder as structural change in organizations creates more competition for fewer jobs. Some female executives interviewed by Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1987) also saw this trend in their companies and believed that the pyramid becomes narrower the higher one advances, creating more competition for fewer jobs. These women executives also reported that the pressure of managing outside demands often becomes debilitating. They mentioned being torn between working and fulfilling family obligations. They wanted to have children, spend more time with their husbands and children, support their parents, build friendships, and do other things that they had postponed to reach the executive level. In the study conducted of women senior executives by Korn/Ferry International (1986), the participants were asked to identify the greatest obstacles they had had to overcome to achieve their success. Some of the most frequently cited obstacles were "being a woman" and resolution of personal role versus professional role conflicts.

*Actions Necessary to Attain Positions to Which Women Managers Ultimately Aspired.* The four most frequent actions that the women managers believed they would have to take in order to attain the positions to which they ultimately aspired were continue to demonstrate competency on the job (produce high-quality work), work hard (spend more time working), get experience and exposure in other areas and functions of the company (move to other positions or areas to become more diversified, learn more about the company and how it functions globally), and make major contributions in present and future positions or areas. These actions seem to be right on target, according to Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1992). In their study of executive women, the women who were ultimately successful were described as possessing an ability to manage subordinates, a willingness to take career risks and make career moves that provide broad business exposure, a high achievement level, a desire for success, and a willingness to seek help from senior executives.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that women are getting the education and work experience required to obtain top management positions in the future. The educational level of the women managers in this study is notably high. All the women managers except for one have earned a bachelor's degree, and over half have earned a master's degree. The educational level of the study participants is exceptionally high, particularly when compared to the participants in

a study of women middle managers conducted by Crawford (1977, p. 28), in which she found that only 56 percent held a bachelor's degree and none had a master's degree. Currently, over half of the bachelor's and master's degrees awarded go to women. In 1990, women were awarded close to half of the undergraduate degrees in business and management, in accounting, and in mathematics (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992).

The years of work experience acquired by the study participants ranged from 8 to 25 years, with an average of 15.1 years. Korn/Ferry International and University of California-Los Angeles Graduate School of Management (1993) noted that, if you look at the ranks of any major corporation below the top twenty people, you will find that 50 percent of the next group of managers are women. Like the women managers in this study, they are ready to make their move. Korn/Ferry International (1993) predicted that women will break through into top posts between 1995 and 2000. The cutting edge of the baby boom, the first generation of women to have lifelong full-time careers outside the home (like the women in this study), will have 25 or 30 years of business experience around the year 2000.

In addition to educational credentials, the study participants mentioned hard work, mentors, interpersonal/people skills, producing high-quality work, and willingness to take risks as factors most pertinent to their success. Today's women managers have an array of factors going in their favor. However, in order to improve the chances of successfully promoting women to senior management positions, business organizations need to understand the barriers and negative events that deny women managers the opportunities to develop and advance in their careers.

Each organization needs to identify, in a deliberate and systematic manner, the specific barriers and biases in its culture and work environment and to develop systematic approaches to eliminating them. The past barriers and the perceived future barriers identified by the women managers in this study are consistent with those found in many other studies (Catalyst, 1993; Fierman, 1990; Hellwig, 1985; Holly, 1992; Korn/Ferry International, 1986; Morrison, White, and Van Velsor, 1987; Taylor, 1986; Woody and Weiss, 1993). Time and waiting alone will not eliminate these barriers. Eliminating barriers to the advancement of women is something that has to be planned and made a priority by corporate leaders. According to Catalyst (1993), in order for real change to occur, corporate leaders must have the *will* to act; identify those dimensions of the corporate/environment that are *barriers* to retaining and advancing women; *develop and communicate* throughout the organization the *business case* for retaining and advancing women; and *implement initiatives* to eliminate attitudinal, cultural, and organizational biases.

Although the women managers in this study possess self-confidence, high motivation, a successful track record, high aspirations, excellent educational credentials, and career commitment, they will not continue to advance to senior management positions without the commitment of corporate leaders to



remove the barriers that block women's continued advancement. Now is the ideal time for companies to take advantage of an exceptional underused management resource and broaden their managerial base and, thus, their competitive edge.

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