



Corporate and academic responses to gender diversity

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Abstract

Purpose – To show how companies that address gender diversity issues as business issues, not just as human resources issues, will reap rewards both inside and outside the company. Also, to show how business schools can make a significant contribution toward the understanding of diversity as a business issue.

Design/methodology/approach – First, women's corporate managerial roles are examined: the economic and social reasons to focus on gender diversity and the costs of companies' failure to address diversity issues, specifically, turnover and retention. Next, women's roles as consumers are studied. Finally, women's roles as business students are looked at, specifically, the negative stereotypes reinforced in business school and carried into the workplace. The study concludes with examples of programs developed by Avon Products and Deloitte and Touche, LLP, to address diversity issues.

Findings – Provides statistics on women's workforce participation, costs of corporate turnover, women's earned college and graduate degrees. Identifies the key barriers to female career advancement; discusses the role of female consumers and business owners; provides company examples and case studies that illustrate the successful integration of women into academic and corporate life.

Research limitations/implications – Only Stanford and Harvard Business school cases are looked at, although the latter is the largest producer of case studies used in business schools. One of the two longer corporate examples discusses diversity strategies in Avon Mexico which may limit its relevance to other US companies.

Practical implications – Good source for bibliography on corporate and academic diversity. Particularly useful for corporate human resources professionals and women about to enter business school or start their first corporate job. Also useful for researchers/academics writing business school case studies.

Originality/value – Presents a strong case for the retention and development of corporate women as well as the need for business school cases to model behavior and modify negative attitudes toward women in business.

Keywords Gender, Women, Organizations, Business schools

Paper type Research paper

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One of the ongoing challenges to US businesses is how to effectively manage diversity – racial, ethnic, and gender. Diversity is not just a human resources issue; it is a business issue both inside and outside of companies. Some companies have responded to the call for diversity, but fewer have capitalized on it by integrating diversity into their business strategies. More companies need to respond to the challenge of developing the business case for diversity. Business schools, in turn, need to communicate these corporate efforts to students in case materials. Business school case studies should perform the valuable functions of modeling behavior and creating role models. Case studies need to present ways to model behavior and modify attitudes in order that diversity can be considered a means to an end, not an end in itself. Regarding role models, women do not see themselves in the important line positions that are critical to their advancement. The



notion of women as followers, not leaders, or as individuals who develop managerial and leadership skills through experiences of adversity rather than success, is reinforced in the minds of men and women by many case studies. Therefore, the value of diversity is not being leveraged in the classroom or the boardroom.

This paper will discuss the reasons to focus on gender diversity, the costs associated with companies' failure to address diversity issues and the need for business school cases to feature women in leadership roles. The paper will conclude with examples of two companies that have successfully integrated diversity into their business strategies.

Why focus on gender diversity

This paper focuses on gender diversity for several reasons. First, women have attained a critical mass in the professional and managerial ranks of a significant percentage of US companies, especially financial and services organizations; and, women constitute the largest segment of the increasingly diverse US labor pool. In 2004, women made up 46 per cent of all US labor force participants – up from 29.6 per cent in 1950 – and held half of all managerial, professional, and related occupations in US companies, up from 36 per cent in 1976 (US Department of Labor, 2005). Women's entry and increased participation in the professional and managerial ranks of American businesses presented corporations with their first diversity challenges.

Women are a highly educated group from which corporate America will need to recruit and develop future leadership. In 2001-02, women earned 57.4 per cent of all bachelor's degrees, 57.1 per cent of all master's degrees, 43 per cent of "first professional" degrees, and 47.1 per cent of doctorates in all fields, including almost a third of all science and engineering degrees and over half of all non-science PhDs (US Department of Education, NCES, 2003).

Given this influx of women into corporate and professional positions, as well as women's enrollment in traditionally male fields of study, it is noteworthy that their enrollment in top-ranked MBA programs continues to lag that of men. In 2000, women on average made up only 30 per cent of full-time MBA students at the top-tier US MBA schools, compared to 44 per cent at the top US law and medical schools (Graduate Management News, 2002). The reasons for this under representation of women in MBA programs will be discussed below.

The second reason to focus on gender diversity is that women have had a leading-edge role in transforming the American workplace. The growing dependence of US companies on women's workforce participation has been accompanied by a growing recognition that family/personal needs of all employees are legitimate concerns. Initially, conflicts related to work/family balance were seen as women's issues. Today employees expect companies to assist them with work/life balance, including programs/policies that address individuals' needs for workplace flexibility, and dual-career couples' needs for relocation assistance. Work/life initiatives are now regarded as fundamental to effectively managing diversity in American companies and professional firms, as evidenced by the annual rankings of companies on their family-friendly policies and programs that appear in business and women's publications (Branch, 1999).

The third reason to focus on women is that the lessons companies learn from managing gender diversity will serve them well in developing initiatives to manage other forms of diversity. Recent research benchmarking best practices for recruiting, retaining and advancing women shows that corporate initiatives designed to address the unique needs of women professionals and managers frequently serve as models for initiatives addressing the needs of other diverse groups (Catalyst, 1999a).

Costs of failing to address diversity issues

Corporations' costs of failing to address diversity issues are significant. They include the high cost of turnover and the inability to retain and advance talented managers. Catalyst, a US research and advisory organization, has identified the following as the most powerful barriers to female career advancement:

- negative assumptions in executive ranks about women, their abilities, and their commitment to careers;
- lack of career development and succession planning for women resulting in limited experience in line positions that lead to top management;
- failure to hold managers accountable for advancing women;
- assumption that women will not relocate for career advancement;
- lack of mentoring for women and exclusion from informal career networks where men learn the unwritten rules of success;
- perceptions that women's management and leadership styles do not fit with the corporate culture;
- appraisal and compensation systems that are not uniform for men and women;
- benefits systems and productivity measures that do not take into account new policies such as flexible work arrangements;
- discrimination and sexual harassment (Catalyst, 1998).

Turnover

Catalyst's proprietary research within corporations and professional firms shows that business organizations are experiencing turnover of women disproportionate to that of men. When women leave, companies often assume that they are choosing family over a career, opting to stay home with their children. Therefore, they erroneously believe there is nothing that the company could have done to retain these women. However, in confidential interviews, women reported that they had left for better opportunities or greater flexibility elsewhere rather than for family obligations.

Some employers have recognized the high cost of turnover of seasoned employees, reported in one study to average 150 per cent of the annual salary of a manager or professional and 75 per cent of the annual salary of a lower-level employee (Families and Work Institute, 1993), and in another study, as 193 per cent of a professional's annual salary (Galinsky, 1993). Obvious costs include the loss of investment made in recruiting and training employees and the cost of recruiting and training their replacements. However, the hidden costs of undesirable turnover may actually be more devastating: loss of intellectual capital and the potential for the departed employee to become a competitor; discontinuity in customer/client service with attendant dissatisfaction or loss of market share; and impact on the morale and productivity of the departing employee's work unit.

Corporate initiatives to address undesirable turnover are designed to:

- identify disparities in turnover rates of men and women;
- specify at what stage in career development turnover most frequently occurs for women and for men, and where there are differences, why; and
- clarify the reasons why women leave and where they go.

The glass ceiling

The costs of failing to retain and advance talented managers is shown by women's under representation at senior levels of leadership, despite their growing numbers in the management pipeline. Although a history of affirmative action in the United States, and corporate efforts to promote diversity have improved women's overall representation in the workforce, just 13.6 per cent of board seats at Fortune 500 companies were held by women in 2003; women of color held just three per cent of those seats. Increasing women's representation on top corporate boards is proving to be painstakingly slow – from 9.6 per cent in 1995, to 11.7 per cent in 2000, to 13.6 per cent in 2003 for white women – and for women of color, only one-half a percentage point since 1999 (Catalyst, 2003).

Women are moving into senior management and governance roles more rapidly in some industries than in others. Currently, the largest percentage of management women (including senior management) is found in the financial services industry (US Department of Labor and Women's Bureau, 1998). Even within financial services, however, women's representation in senior management varies by subsectors (US Department of Labor and Women's Bureau, 1998). Research also shows that women are still concentrated in functional roles traditionally viewed as female positions: staff positions such as human resources, corporate communications, community and governmental relations, and on the staff side of marketing, finance, engineering and research/development (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

The case for women

Companies' need to develop senior-level women is both a management issue and a customer issue. Those companies that have learned to manage gender diversity will be able to recruit and retain the most talented managers, reduce turnover costs, respond to the changing marketplace, and, ultimately, make better business decisions. In addition to the benefits reaped within companies such as increased retention employee loyalty and morale, there are benefits in the marketplace.

Women continue to be the primary buyers of traditional household and consumer products; but they are also becoming buyers of products that traditionally have been purchased by men, such as cars, computers and even condoms (Cutler, 1989). Since the early 1900s, American carmakers have recognized the power of women in influencing car purchases. By 1948, Ford, Plymouth, Cadillac, Oldsmobile, and Chevrolet were buying space in women's magazines (Pollack, 1996). While some companies continue to use blatant sexism in their commercials (Garfield, 1993), more and more are revamping their advertising strategies to capture the growing affluent female market.

General Motors has been a leader in targeting women. In 1991, Lincoln-Mercury's genderless Capri commercials used stick figures of people and lighthearted music, bringing in an estimated 65 per cent female buyers (Candler, 1991). GM targeted women for its Buick Riviera coupe, and the brand's advertising broke away from its family-oriented image (Halliday, 1997). Sensitivity to the female market is appearing on both sides of the Atlantic since Renault and other European carmakers were criticized by women for their patronizing sales language (Tylee, 1996). Women protested that the only car commercials targeted to them are for practical small cars, such as the Nissan Micra and Peugeot 106, rather than the more powerful, glamorous vehicles (Barrett, 1997).

In addition to influencing companies' communication strategies, the growing segment of female buyers has affected product design. Companies that want to sell to

women will have an edge if their products and customer service deliver a unique benefit to this market (Widgery and McGaugh, 1993). Once again, GM has been in the forefront. In the early 1990s, safety researchers from GM and the University of Michigan launched a joint study on the safety of pregnant women in vehicle crashes including development of a pregnant female crash dummy (Wolak, 1994). Cadillac did extensive market research with female car-buying prospects leading to findings on how women want to be treated by car dealers and on the importance of certain safety and security features (Feminine Tastes, 1996). More recently, Volvo car company invited hundreds of women employees to create a vehicle that suits their needs, resulting in a roomy, 215-horsepower coupe that's easy to park, maintain, and keep clean. Through customer research, the company discovered that women want everything in a car that men want in terms of performance and styling, "plus a lot more that male car buyers never thought to ask for" (*USA Today*, 2004). In the health and beauty aids category, Gillette's Sensor for women razor was designed by and for women. Even its color and name were chosen to avoid past stereotypes in the category (Maremont, 1993).

Women's purchasing powers have also increased in the business-to-business area both within large corporations and as women start their own businesses. Women entrepreneurs are flourishing in the United States. In 2004, 10.6 million firms were at least 50 per cent owned by women (CWBR, 2005). Between 1997 and 2004, the estimated growth rate in the number of women-owned firms was nearly twice that of all firms (17 per cent vs 9 per cent), employment expanded at twice the rate of all firms (24 per cent vs 12 per cent), and estimated revenues kept pace (39 per cent vs 34 per cent) with all firms (CWBR, 2005).

Women business owners want to work with law firms, accounting firms and other product and service companies that employ women in high-level positions and that is representative of their customer base. MCI business markets reported that women accounted for half the telecommunications and MIS decision makers they wanted to reach. In response to their buying power, MCI prominently featured women as techno-savvy characters in their Gramercy Press advertising campaign (Kondo, 1995). According to a study by Conning and Co., of Hartford, Connecticut, women business owners approach the purchase of insurance policies much differently than their male counterparts; they demand more service and, in turn, remain more loyal. Companies that recognize this difference will be better able to capture and retain sales from women entrepreneurs, who have been forming businesses at a rate twice the US national average (Dinnen, 1998).

Women entrepreneurs are also growing abroad. A survey conducted by the Institute of Management revealed that women in the UK founded almost one-third of all new small-to-medium-size businesses in 1997 (Gracie, 1998). As shown, companies that address gender diversity issues as business issues will reap both internal and external financial rewards.

Much of the argument for women managers' increased decision-making and buying power is predicated on their continued preparation for and commitment to careers in business. Women have prepared themselves for senior-level management positions by attending the top US business schools in increasing numbers. However, since 1994, the percentage of women enrolled in two-year MBA programs has failed to increase significantly.

Several reasons have been posited to explain this situation. First, most business schools have increased the amount of work experience expected for MBA applicants. The average age of the typical MBA student has risen to nearly 29 from 24 a decade

ago. By that age, business school is an unwelcome detour for women thinking about having children. A second reason may be the fields in which MBA graduates work. Nearly two-thirds of 1998 MBA recipients went to work in finance or consulting, fields that typically attract more men than women. Marketing and entrepreneurial careers, areas more appealing to women, attracted far fewer graduates (Schellhardt, 1998). Entrepreneurs, particularly, are less likely to see the value of an MBA.

B. Joseph White, dean of the University of Michigan business school, observed that women perceive both a glass ceiling and a lack of flexibility at major corporations (Waldsmith, 1998). Another reason has to do with ethical issues. Researchers believe that some women see the values espoused in business school as incompatible with their value systems (MacLellan *et al.*, 1997). Finally, researchers are investigating whether the business school environment itself may be a deterrent to women's attendance: the under representation of female faculty and the sometimes aggressive, or even hostile, tone of male faculty and students.

Interviews with male and female business students and faculty show that stereotypical attitudes toward business women develop long before they enter the workforce (Catalyst *et al.*, 1999b). These attitudes are reinforced in business school by the paucity of top management women in cases and by their presence in stereotypical roles when they do appear.

Women's portrayal in business school cases

Even today, women do not typically appear in business school case studies in leadership roles; rather, they are portrayed as employees confronting the familiar issues of balancing work and family and/or dealing with pay inequity, delayed promotions, or a hostile work environment. These cases are used as examples of diversity problems and how to solve them. Diversity is viewed as a peripheral human resources issue rather than as a central business issue.

Examples of these kinds of cases were developed by two female professors at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. They profiled seven women and the challenges they faced at a very aggressive, successful Silicon Valley high tech company. Each of the seven cases deals with a variety of gender-related issues and problems including barriers to advancement, isolation, pay inequity, the macho work environment, lack of mentors and role models, biased performance evaluations, the need for women to continually prove themselves and delayed promotions. None of the cases focused on the women's functional activities as vice president of marketing, director of software, or manager of business development, among others. Additionally, one of the cases focused on the progress of an administrative assistant, not a suitable example for showing women in senior management and decision-making roles.

Harvard Business School cases that focus on women in management role typically dwell on the challenges women face due to their gender, rather than business challenges. Examples include:

- *Harassment at Work? Sterling Aircraft, 1997.* This case discusses two gender-related situations – a highly respected company director who was having an affair with a subordinate, and a recently hired woman director whose boss made demeaning and vulgar remarks to her on her first day at work.
- *The Individual and the Corporation: Kathy Levinson and E*Trade (A), 2000.* This case profiles a lesbian mother of two who was the president and chief operating officer of the company. She was asked by representatives from a group

who had organized a campaign to defeat Proposition 22, a California ballot measure that proposed recognizing only marriages between a man and a woman. They wanted her to take a leadership role in the campaign. Kathy struggles with questions relating to how doing so would affect her high-profile role at the company and whether it would be seen as corporate sponsorship of a politically charged effort.

- *The Graffs (A), 1997*. This case discusses a conflict that arises in a two-career marriage of 27 years when the wife, Nicole, is offered an opportunity to become a judge, which her husband opposes. A considerable amount of space is devoted to discussions of extraneous information such as Nicole's and her husband's childhood, relationships to parents and siblings, and conflicts that Nicole experiences related to staying-at-home with her children vs pursuing an advanced degree and a career in law.
- *Ann Hopkins (A), 1991*. This case discusses the experience of Ann Hopkins, who was the only woman out of a class of 87 candidates nominated for partnership at Price Waterhouse. She was not advanced to partner; rather, her nomination was put on hold to allow more time for her to "demonstrate her skills and allay concerns about her." A partner who had originally supported her nomination withdrew his support; another partner joined him in opposing her re-nomination. Eventually, she was told that it was unlikely that she would ever become a partner at Price Waterhouse.
- *The Memo Every Woman Keeps in her Desk, 1993*. This case concerns a memo that a woman with a promising career in her company writes to the company's CEO complaining about sexism at the company. The case discusses pros and cons of sending the memo, contributed by two outside experts, both men.
- *Ellen Moore (A): Living and Working in Korea 1997*. This case tells the story of Ellen, an experienced consultant, who accepts an overseas assignment to direct a project in Korea. Ellen experiences difficulty when Korean male team members refuse to take directions from her. As a result, the project which Ellen is directing falls behind schedule. Ellen's attempts to get the project back on track are thwarted by an American colleague, Jack, who gives directions to the team that are counter to Ellen's directions. She is further undermined when the American project sponsor, George, sends a male senior manager to Korea to get the project back on schedule.

After reading these accounts, is it any wonder women might hesitate to pursue a career in business?

While these cases might be useful for a course in human resources or organizational behavior, they do not illustrate the women's successes and failures as business professionals, only as women. Male and female business students might be better served by profiling the path to the top for women such as Meg Whitman, CEO and president, eBay, Anne Mulcahy, CEO and President, Xerox, Andrea Jung, Chairman and CEO, Avon, and Carleton Fiorina, former Chairman and CEO, Hewlett-Packard.

Harvard Business School is the largest producer of case studies used in business schools. With six million copies of its case studies sold annually to business schools worldwide, Harvard's picture of the corporate environment is very influential. In the late 1990s, Harvard acknowledged that its case studies did not accurately reflect the current workplace, and agreed to add more cases that highlight women in senior

management. A group of leading US businesswomen contributed funding for this venture with the goal to “influence business curriculum at its core, not just at the margins by supplying guest lecturers or visiting professors” (Hays, 1997). However, only a fraction of cases inventoried by the authors in 2005 portray women *succeeding* in corporate leadership roles. Though it may seem heretical, the simplest way to accomplish this would be to substitute women’s names in case studies describing successful male corporate leaders. In addition, more cases studies that discuss the business case for diversity and provide examples of companies that have successfully integrated diversity into their business strategies need to be produced.

Cases that discuss the business case for gender diversity. Companies that have successfully integrated diversity into their business strategies have begun to reap the internal and external rewards previously discussed. Several Harvard Business School cases produced from 1999-2004 illustrate how discussions of diversity can focus on *institutional* strategies for diversity and the positive outcomes for women and other underrepresented groups, as opposed to examining problems of *individual* women managers. The message they convey about gender diversity is significantly different than the aforementioned cases. In addition, these cases show the key role of corporate executives in articulating the business case for diversity and embedding diversity strategies into the company’s strategic business plan, holding managers accountable for developing and promoting women, and creating a corporate culture that supports diversity strategies. Two of these cases – Avon Products (A), and Deloitte and Touche (A): A Hole in the Pipeline – are discussed below. Hopefully, these cases are representative of a trend in business case materials.

Avon Products (A), 1999. This case discusses the decision to promote a woman to an executive position in Avon Mexico. It recounts the key leadership role of then Chairman and CEO Jim Preston in rejuvenating the company. After addressing immediate issues that threatened the company’s survival, Preston turned his attention to the future. In his letter to the shareholders, quoted in the case, Preston summed up the company’s position: “We have, over the past couple of years, completed the first, largely financial state of the transformation of our company. We are now moving into the second stage—the growth stage—which deals with our customers, our products, and the ways in which we do business” (HRS, 1999). In June of 1992, Preston called together top Avon executives from all over the world to form what was called the Vision Council. The vision that he shared with them was to be the company that best understands and satisfies the product, service, and self-fulfillment needs of women—globally. The case goes on to explain that Preston wanted to create a company for women that would attract the best female executives in the world. The part of the vision that Preston most wanted to emphasize was the third part – the self-fulfillment needs of women. To achieve the vision, Marcia Worthing, SVP of human resources worked with a consultant to implement a relatively new approach to organizational development, a methodology called appreciative inquiry (AI). This approach focused on what worked rather than what did not. Through cross-functional interviews done by the employees, the organization used AI to look at what was positive about a particular theme and build off of that. It asked people throughout the operating unit to talk about what they liked about cross-gender working relationships and to get them thinking how effective those relationships could be. In Avon Mexico, a promotion of VP to be general manager of Avon Germany, was seen by Avon Mexico’s leadership team as an opportunity to support Preston’s vision by naming the first female vice president,

Lucy Laredo, in Avon Latin America. A subsequent case discusses the promotion of Lucy Laredo and the impact of the decision and her success in revitalizing Avon Mexico as it developed sales and marketing strategies that were consistent with the vision put forward by Preston.

Deloitte and Touche (A): A hole in the pipeline, 1999

This case describes the key leadership role of Mike Cook, Chairman and CEO of Deloitte and Touch LLP, in developing the business case for new firm policies and practices that supported women's development and advancement. The changes that Cook brought about in the firm ultimately changed the culture from an "up and out" environment to one where both men and women felt they could fulfill multiple commitments to work, self and family. Cook used the traditional research tools of his profession to make the business case for diversity:

Cook picked up his legal pad and sketched a graph . . . The line on top indicated the steadily upward rate of women being hired by Deloitte. The line below it, trending steadily downward, indicated the rate of retention of women. He called it "The Stupid Curve": it didn't take a rocket scientist – or even an accountant – to recognize that the growing area in the middle was the problem. While the firm was hiring more and more women, it was retaining fewer and fewer. Deloitte had a talent hemorrhage on its hands.

The case describes the business imperative for accounting firms seeking the best and brightest talent at a time when women were increasingly obtaining degrees in accounting. The economic downturn of the early 1990s had caused many businesses to bring in accounting and other professional expertise from outside rather than maintaining in-house staff. Thus, the marketplace for high-talent experienced professionals became very competitive and the cost of attrition of seasoned women professionals became very expensive. The limit on Deloitte's growth was not a matter of demand for its services, but a matter of supply – having enough people to meet that demand. The disproportionate attrition of women from the firm was compromising its ability to grow and compete. Cook established a task force on the retention and advancement of women and conducted research that challenged conventional thinking about why women professionals were leaving the firm. Findings from the research pointed to organizational factors, rather than individual women's inability to compete. The case concludes with senior partners realizing that it was the firm that needed to change, not the women they hired. A subsequent case discusses how Deloitte changed its policies and practices, the benefit to women and men professionals in the firm, and the competitive advantages that the firm experience as a result.

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