The career development and aspirations of women in middle management – revisited

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Abstract

This article reports the results of the second phase of a research study on the career development and aspirations of women in middle management in business firms in the USA. The major method of this research study was the individual case study. Case studies relied on in-person and/or telephone interviews with the same 30 women managers who participated in the first phase of the study in 1995. The majority of the women managers worked for *Fortune* 500 companies and were located throughout the USA. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the women managers have not attained the positions to which they ultimately aspire. The majority do not believe they are progressing as rapidly as they think they should. However, the majority of the women managers continue to aspire to top level management positions and they believe that it is very realistic that they will attain these positions.

Introduction

The majority of the USA's population is female. Only in the age group of 20 to 34 years do males outnumber females (US Bureau of the Census, 2001). In the last few decades, the number of women in paid employment and their rate of participation in the workforce have steadily increased. In 2000, approximately 60 percent of US women were in the labor force, up from only 33 percent in 1950. Women now account for about 46.2 percent of the workforce, up from only 29 percent in 1950. Women are projected to comprise 48 percent of the workforce by the year 2008 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). Like the USA other countries have had a rapid increase of women in the workforce. For example, in Denmark, women represent 45 percent of the workforce. In East Germany women workers account for 44 percent of the workforce; in France they account for 40 percent; and in the UK they account for 39 percent. The employment rate of women is rapidly increasing in the USA as well as in other countries (Fernandez and Davis, 1999; Florkowski, 1996; Norton and Fox, 1997).

Further, the 1960s through 1990s were periods of increasing post-secondary educational attainment among women in the USA. In 2000 women outnumbered men among the recipients of post-secondary degrees at every level, except the Doctoral level. Women now account for 57 percent of Bachelor's degrees, 58 percent of Master's degrees, and nearly 45 percent of Doctorates. Historically, educational attainment has been a predictor of increased labor force participation (US Department of Education, 2000).

Women's record of contributing to employment growth in the USA will continue and women are expected to fill 57 percent of the projected 25 million new jobs in the economy between 1990 and 2008. This influx of women into the workforce may be the most significant change in the history of the US workplace (Judy and D'Amico, 1997; US Department of Labor, 1994). The world of work has been seriously influenced by these trends, which, in turn, has had a tremendous

effect on women's career development (Blau and Ehrenberg, 1997).

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001), women comprised 47.8 percent of the total number employed in executive, administrative and managerial occupations in 2000, up from 39 percent in 1987. The supply of women qualified for management jobs has continued to increase, as more women accumulate work experience and complete management and professional education programs. Although women have made great progress in attaining management jobs, their access to senior level management positions remains very limited (Catalyst, 1999). According to Burke and Nelson (2002), in *Fortune* 1500 companies, 95 to 97 percent of senior managers – vice presidents and above – were men and only 3 to 5 percent were women. The representation of women on *Fortune* 1500 boards of directors are also limited. Less than 10 percent of the largest employers have women on their board of directors. Recent Canadian data is consistent with the progress in the USA. Consequently, 43 percent of all managers and administrators in Canada are female, up from 29 percent in 1982; but women are relatively rare at the top (Burke and Nelson, 2002; Catalyst, 2000).

Regardless of their functional and industry distributions, a general trend is affecting US women managers: they are plateauing at mid-level management positions. By definition middle managers are those who implement strategies and policies, whereas upper level managers are those who develop strategies and policies (Van Fleet, 1988, p. 33). The numbers indicate that, while women have entered the workforce and managerial level jobs, they are encountering barriers to advancement to those positions which would allow them to define organizational strategy and policy.

In 1986, these barriers were dubbed by the *Wall Street Journal* as the "glass ceiling" which was defined as the invisible barriers that women confronted as they approach the top of the corporate hierarchy (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1994; Fagenson and Jackson, 1994). This definition evolved from anecdotal evidence, which was later validated by a federally mandated study entitled "Good for business". The findings of this study were published in 1995 and synthesized a wide spectrum of research on barriers to progression to upper level management for women. The report's

purpose was to demonstrate that women are trying to advance within a context that is very adversarial. In summary, women are confronting three types of barriers to advancement: organizational, societal, and governmental (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Organizational barriers included failure to recruit, develop, and support women for upper level management positions; prejudice against women in performance evaluations; and existence of hostile environments (sexual harassment) (Fagenson and Jackson, 1994; Snyder, 1994). Societal attitudes are the sources of these organizational barriers, each barrier originating from perceptions of women as being less than 100 percent committed to their careers. Finally, organizational barriers are further compounded by lack of effective government involvement and inadequate collection of employment data.

Women are gaining the necessary education and experience and are committed to their careers, but they still encounter a "glass ceiling" (Powell, 1999). The relative failure of women to move into the ranks of senior management, in both private and public sector organizations in all developed countries, has been well documented (Izraeli and Adler, 1994; Burke and Nelson, 2002; Davidson and Burke, 2000; Fernandez, 1993; Wirth, 2001). Women in management is an important topic of concern, given that an increasing number of women are in the workforce, but only a very small percentage hold top level managerial positions in business and public administration (Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Crampton and Mishra, 1999; Wah, 1998). The significance of the absence of women in the highest and most visible positions should not be ignored (Burke and Nelson, 2002; Ely, 1995; Solomon. 1998). By studying and understanding the career development and aspirations, as well as the barriers that exist for women in middle management positions, we can learn how to facilitate the development and achievement of women with regard to higher level management positions.

"Middle manager" for the purpose of this study was defined as "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).

Objectives of the study

The first phase of this study was conducted in 1995 and its goal was to determine the career development and aspirations of 30 women in middle level management positions in business firms in the USA. Some of the findings of the first phase revealed that the six factors most pertinent to the women managers' success were educational credentials, hard work, mentors, interpersonal/people skills, demonstrate competency on the job, and willingness to take risks. Also, bosses who did not guide or encourage their career progression, gender discrimination, lack of political savvy, lack of career strategy, lack of opportunity, and family obligations were identified most frequently as factors that hindered their career development. The phase one findings also revealed that the majority of the women managers ultimately aspire to attain top level management positions, and they believe it is either very realistic to somewhat realistic that they will acquire these positions.

The results from the first phase of this study indicated that women are getting a good education, working hard, demonstrating competency on the job by producing high quality work, and are aspiring top level management positions. The second phase of this study conducted in 2000 (reported herein) focused on determining how these women managers have progressed and why they have or have not attained the positions to which they ultimately aspired. More specifically, the major research questions for this study included the following:

- In what types of education and training have the women managers participated during the past five years that have assisted them in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire?

- What has been the work history of the women managers during the past five years?
- Have the women managers attained and/or progressed toward the positions to which they ultimately aspired?
- What factors have assisted the women managers in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire during the past five years?
- What barriers/hindrances have the women managers encountered in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire during the past five years?
- Have the career goals and aspirations of the women managers changed during the past five years?
- What barriers/hindrances do the women managers think they will encounter in the future that will hinder their career progression?
- What actions do the women managers think they will have to take in order to continue to advance in their careers?

Methodology

The major method of this research study was the individual case study involving in-person and/or telephone interviews with a panel of women managers. The case studies required the collection of very extensive data in order to produce an in-depth understanding of the career development and aspirations of the women managers who were being studied. The data provided by the women managers during the interviews consisted of words in the form of rich verbal descriptions (qualitative data), as well as quantitative data. Essentially, this study used a qualitative approach to answer the research questions. A quantitative method in the form of frequencies and percentages was also used to describe the qualitative data.

This was also a longitudinal research study. A longitudinal study involves collecting data from a sample at different points in time in order to study changes or continuity in the sample's characteristics. The type of longitudinal research design selected was the panel study. A panel study involves selecting a sample at the outset of the study and then at each subsequent data-collection point using

the same sample. Longitudinal panel studies follow the same individuals over time; therefore you can note changes in specific individuals and also explore possible reasons why these individuals have changed. Panel studies also have the advantage of identifying who is changing and in what way (Diggle *et al.*, 1995; Gall *et al.*, 1996). The longitudinal data in this study are being collected prospectively, following the women managers forward in time. The long-term longitudinal nature of how middle-level management women develop and progress towards upper level management will contribute to the understanding of how to develop women for senior level management positions. It will also provide women with a better understanding of the ingredients necessary for success, and the obstacles they may encounter as they steer themselves toward middle and senior management positions.

Instrument

An interview guide was developed to use in collecting and recording the data from the interviews. The interview guide was divided into six sections. The first section of the interview guide asked for personal background information, which included current marital status, if they had children during the past five years, and if they intended to have more children in the future. This information was obtained to determine whether the personal background of the study participants had changed during the past five years. The second section asked for the education and training that the participants had attained during the past five years. The third section asked for work history information, which included employment, positions they had held during the past five years, and other factors about the study participants' work life. The fourth section asked for factors that have assisted in their career development. The fifth section asked for factors that had hindered their career advancement during the past five years. The sixth section asked for future career goals and perceived barriers to reaching their career goals and aspirations. The interview guide contained 42 open-ended questions.

A study advisory committee, made up of business educators and people from business and industry, reviewed the interview guide and study procedures. Also, a pilot study involving a sample of five women managers

from business firms was conducted for the purpose of determining content validity and appropriateness of the interview guide. There was agreement by the study's advisory committee and the pilot test participants 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 and/or telephone interviews with the same 30 women managers who participated in the first phase of the study (conducted in 1995). For the first phase of the study the researcher conducted in-person interviews with 30 women in middle level management positions in 15 *Fortune* 500 companies. The companies were located in the Midwest (Illinois, Missouri, and Indiana).

After reviewing the total number of *Fortune* 500 companies in the State of Illinois (50), Missouri (15), and Indiana (eight), a proportional sample was randomly selected to reflect the number of companies in each of the states (Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1990). A total of 15 companies were randomly selected: ten from Illinois, three from Missouri, and two from Indiana.

The Placement Service Office from a major university in the Midwest was then contacted to assist in identifying the campus recruitment person for each of the companies. The campus recruitment person from each of the 15 *Fortune* 500 companies was then contacted by telephone and was asked to assist in identifying two women in middle-level management positions for each of the companies. Names, position titles, and telephone numbers of 30 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 30 women managers who were contacted consented to participate in the study.

The women for the second phase of the study (conducted in 2000) were the same women from the first phase of the study (conducted in 1995). In 2000, 25 (83 percent) of the women still worked for *Fortune* 500 companies and a total of 23 companies were now represented (one from California, 12 from Illinois, two from Indiana, two from Michigan, three from Missouri, one from

Nebraska, one from Ohio, and one from Texas).

Each interviewee received a letter confirming the interview appointment two weeks prior to the scheduled interview. In total, 24 in-person and six telephone interviews were conducted with the 30 women managers from the 23 different companies. The interviews focused on the career development and aspirations of the women managers during the past five years. The interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours. On average, the interviews lasted two hours. The interviewer/researcher took extensive shorthand notes during each interview; then the notes were transcribed after each interview.

Data analysis
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 (Patton, 1990). 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.

Case studies can be written in a variety of ways. The multiple-case study report method was used for this study. In this method there are no separate sections devoted to individual cases. Rather, it consists of the cross-case analysis, which can be purely descriptive or a series of questions and answers, based on the major research questions for the study. This method synthesizes the information from all of the study participants and organizes it around topics or questions; appropriate examples can be drawn from the different cases, but none needs to be presented as a single case study (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994).

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. Reviewing each case study, the career development professional's identification of

factors was highly consistent with those of the researcher.

Description of study participants
A total of 30 women managers in 23 companies were interviewed. The median number of employees in these 23 companies was 34,000. The study participants were employed in a variety of industries, which included the following: Food, seven (23 percent); Chemicals, three (10 percent); Publishing/printing, three (10 percent); Pharmaceutical, three (10 percent); Industrial and farm equipment, three (10 percent); Petroleum refining, two (7 percent); Insurance, two (7 percent); Electronic, two (7 percent); Computer, two (7 percent); Health care, one (3 percent); Government, one (3 percent); and Aerospace, one (3 percent). The types of industries and those in which the participants were employed in the first phase (1995) and in the second phase (2000) of the study remained the same, except that the three following industries were added: Insurance, Government, and Health Care.

The participants range in age from 35 to 51, with the average age of 43.2 years; 21 (70 percent) of the participants are married (includes remarried), while four (13 percent) are single (never married), four (14 percent) are divorced, and one (3 percent) is widowed. During the past five years the study participants' change in marital status included the following: one marriage, two divorces, and a spouse died.

The ethnic origin of all but one study participant was Caucasian; the other was African-American. Of the participants, 17 (57 percent) do not have children, and 13 (43 percent) did have children. Of those participants having children, their children's ages range from five months to 27 years, with an average age of 14.6 years. The majority of the participants did not have children but, of those who did have children, the majority (61 percent) had children under the age of 16. The findings also indicated that participants have very small families, with an average of 1.8 children.

Of those participants with children, 12 (92 percent) do not intend to have more children in the future; and one (8 percent) intends to have more children in the future. Of those participants without children, 13 (76 percent) do not intend to have children in the future;

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two (12 percent) do intend to have children in the future; and two (12 percent) expressed uncertainty about the decision to have children in the future. According to the findings, the overwhelming majority of participants with and without children do not intend to have (more) children in the future.

During the past five years the study participants' family composition changed in the following ways: first, four of the study participants had one child each; and second, one participant adopted two children. All of the study participants who had indicated they intended to have more children in the future had had or had adopted children during the past five years. All of the study participants who had indicated they did not intend to have children or were uncertain did not have children during the past five years.

Results

The results are summarized in the following five sections, which parallel the major research questions of the study:
(1) educational and training of study participants;
(2) work history of study participants;
(3) factors that have assisted participants' career development;
(4) factors that have hindered participants' career development; and
(5) future career goals, perceived barriers, and actions believed necessary to attain positions to which they ultimately aspired.

Education and training
The majority 25 (83 percent) of the women managers had not pursued formal education to further their careers during the past five years. The remaining five (17 percent) had pursued formal education; two (7 percent) were currently pursuing Master's in Business Administration (MBAs), and three (10 percent) were pursuing professional certificates related to their fields. These five women managers felt that pursuing this formal education was very important to their future career advancement. It is important to note that, although the majority of the study participants have not pursued formal education during the past five years, the findings from the first phase (1995) of this study showed that the educational level of the

participants is exceptionally high. All the participants with the exception of one had earned a Bachelor's degree; 17 (57 percent) of the participants have earned a Master's degree (mostly MBAs), and one has earned a Doctorate degree.

The majority, 26 (87 percent), of the women managers had participated in some type of training to further their careers during the past five years. The eight topics of training most frequently pursued by participants included the following: management development, 11 (37 percent); interpersonal management, ten (33 percent); diversity management nine (30 percent); total quality management, eight (27 percent); leadership skills, eight (27 percent); communication skills (written, oral, listening), six (20 percent); strategic planning, five (17 percent); and computers, five (17 percent). The three topic areas of training that were not mentioned by the women managers five years before were: diversity management; total quality management; and strategic planning. Overall, the women managers felt that the training in which they participated during the past five years assisted them in continuing to advance in their careers. Training and education programs were a way for them to meet other managers, learn new skills, and increase their self-confidence. A woman manager who participated in a management development program stated:

> I spent four days at a management development course for executives. There were only three women there, and the rest were male executives who in most cases had never worked with a woman executive. During the course, we were all continually tested and videotaped. Several of the solutions toward which I led my team were far better than anyone's else's, and I learned that I was functionally excellent at what I do. This was a significant confidence builder for me.

The participants were also asked to identify the subject areas in which they currently needed additional training. The five subject areas in which it was identified that participants most frequently identified needed additional training were: communication skills (written, oral, listening), 12 (40 percent); leadership skills, ten (33 percent); negotiation skills, eight (27 percent); strategic management, seven (23 percent); and financial planning, six (20 percent).

When the women managers were asked five years ago to identify the subject areas in which they currently needed additional training, they only indicated one of the subject areas

listed above: communication skills (written, oral, listening). Instead delegating responsibilities; coaching/directing/mentoring employees; dealing with company politics; and networking were indicated.

Communication skills (written, oral, listening) continues to be an area where the women managers in this study need additional training. The findings seem to indicate that five years before the women managers were more concerned with improving their human relations skills and currently they are more concerned with improving their decision-making skills.

Work history

Participants were asked to identify their current position title and department/area. The results included 30 different position titles and ranged from director of telecommunications to vice-president of consumer marketing. They hold positions in a variety of departmental areas, including the following: management information systems, nine (30 percent); human resources, seven (23 percent); finance, four (13 percent); marketing, four (13 percent); accounting, four (13 percent); research, one (3 percent); and corporate strategic planning, one (3 percent). Three of the women managers changed industries; two also changed functions. One changed from finance to management information systems and the other from accounting to management information systems. The remaining one changed industry, but stayed in the same function of human resources.

The highest percentage of participants worked in the management information systems area, and the second highest percentage worked in the human resource area. Five years ago the highest percentage of participants worked in the human resources area, and the second highest percentage worked in the management information systems area. The only other mentionable difference is that the area of corporate strategic planning was added and engineering was omitted from the list.

Work experience

The number of years of work experience acquired by participants ranges from 13 to 30 years, with an average of 20.1 years. The majority (77 percent) of the participants have 13 to 21 years of work experience.

The number of years of managerial experience (including all levels of management experience) that participants have had ranges from eight to 22 years, with an average of 12.6 years of managerial experience. The majority (66 percent) of the participants have eight to 13 years of managerial experience.

The age at which participants attained their first middle level management position ranges from 22 to 41, with an average age of 32.4 years. The majority (70 percent) of the participants attained their first middle level management position at the age of 27 to 36 years.

The number of years that it took participants to attain a middle level management position ranges from one to 20 years, with an average of ten years. The majority (67 percent) of the participants attained their middle level management position in five to 12 years.

Work-related changes during the past five years
The majority 23 (77 percent) had not changed companies during the past five years, and seven (23 percent) had changed companies. The seven participants who had changed companies gave the following reasons: company reorganization/downsizing, three (43 percent); lack of opportunity, three (43 percent); and husband relocated, one (14 percent). The majority of the women managers are still employed with the same companies with which they were five years ago. Although some of the women managers have transferred to different locations demographically, the majority of women managers are still employed for the same company at the same location.

Of the women managers, two (7 percent) were still in the same position; 23 (77 percent) had changed positions once or twice during the past five years; four (14 percent) had changed positions three to four times; and one (3 percent) five times. All the participants with the exception of two had changed positions at least once during the past five years.

The number of years for which participants have been employed with their present company ranges from five months to 26 years, with an average of 13.9 years. The majority (53 percent) of the participants have been employed with their present company for 11 to 20 years.

Of the study participants, nine (30 percent) hold middle level management positions; 17 (57 percent) hold upper middle level management positions; and four (13 percent) hold lower top level management positions. Middle level management positions were held by 20 (67 percent) of the study participants five years ago and ten (33 percent) held upper middle level management positions. After five years the majority (87 percent) of the participants are still in middle level management positions.

During the past five years nine (30 percent) of the participants did not have any promotions; 12 (40 percent) had one promotion; seven (23 percent) had two promotions; and two (7 percent) had three promotions. The majority (70 percent) had at least one promotion during the past five years.

Career progression during the past five years
None of the study participants has attained the position to which they ultimately aspired. The study participants were asked if they are progressing toward the position they ultimately aspired. They were also asked if they are progressing as rapidly as they think they should.

The majority, 21 (70 percent), indicated that they are progressing toward the position to which they ultimately aspire, and nine (30 percent) stated that they are not progressing toward the position to which they ultimately aspire. The nine participants who indicated they are not progressing toward the position they ultimately aspire gave the following reasons: Being a woman, five (55 percent); lack of mobility, four (44 percent); not willing to give and/or give up what it takes to get the position, three (33 percent); company reorganization, three (33 percent); family obligations, three (33 percent); being older, three (33 percent); burn-out, two (22 percent); and career change, one (11 percent). Some of the participants gave multiple responses for not progressing.

When the participants were asked if they have progressed as rapidly as they think they should, the majority, 23 (77 percent), indicated no, and seven (23 percent) indicated yes. The participants who indicated they have not progressed as rapidly as they think they should gave the following as the most frequent reasons: being a woman, 12 (52 percent); lack of recognition for work, ten (43 percent); company reorganization, nine

(39 percent); lack of mobility, seven (30 percent); family obligations, six (26 percent); lack of exposure to the right experiences, six (26 percent); not willing to give and/or give up what it takes to get the position, five (22 percent); and lack of mentors, five (22 percent). (Multiple responses were accepted.)

Participants were also asked how satisfied they were with the degree to which their careers have advanced during the past five years. In reply, five (17 percent) of the participants indicated that they were very satisfied with the degree to which their careers have advanced during the past five years; ten (33 percent) indicated satisfied; eight (27 percent) indicated neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; six (20 percent) indicated dissatisfied, and one (3 percent) indicated very dissatisfied.

When the participants were asked five years ago how satisfied they were with the degree to which their careers had advanced to date, the majority 28 (93 percent) indicated they were either very satisfied or satisfied. The findings seem to indicate that during the past five years the women managers' degree of satisfaction with their career advancement has decreased considerably.

Factors that have assisted and hindered career development
During the interviews, two types of career development questions were asked. The first set related to factors that have assisted the participants during the past five years in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire. The second set of questions inquired about factors that have hindered the participants during the past five years in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire.

Factors that assisted career development/progression
Participants were asked to identify the factors that they consider to have been the most important during the past five years in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire. The seven factors most frequently mentioned by participants included the following: demonstrated competency on the job (producing high quality work), 15 (50 percent); interpersonal/people skills, 12 (40 percent); commitment/dedication/

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perseverance, 12 (40 percent); given the opportunity and support from company, ten (33 percent); willingness to learn new things and take on new responsibilities, eight (27 percent); hard work, eight (27 percent); and self-confidence, seven (23 percent).

It is interesting to note that, when the women managers were asked five years ago to identify the factors that they consider to have been the most important to their career advancement, they only indicated three of the ones listed above: hard work, interpersonal/ people skills, and demonstrated competency on the job (producing high quality work). Instead educational credentials; mentors; willingness to take risks; and communications skills (written, oral, listening) were indicated.

Barriers that hindered career development/ progression

Participants were asked to identify the barriers/hindrances that they have encountered during the past five years in attaining and/or progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire. The six barriers most frequently mentioned by participants included the following: Being a woman, 17 (57 percent); lack of support from boss, 13 (43 percent); lack of opportunity, 12 (40 percent); family obligations, ten (33 percent); company reorganization/ downsizing, eight (27); and age, eight (27 percent).

It is interesting to note that, when the women managers were asked five years ago to identify the barriers that they had encountered in the past that had hindered their career progression, they identified all of the ones listed above except company reorganization/downsizing and age.

Future career goals, perceived barriers, and actions

In this section three types of questions were asked. The first set related to future career goals and aspirations of the participants, such as ultimate career aspirations and reality of career aspirations. The second set of questions related to barriers/hindrances that participants think they will encounter in the future in trying to attain the position to which they ultimately aspire. The third set of questions inquired about actions that participants think they will have to take in order to attain the position to which they ultimately aspire.

Future career goals and aspirations

In order to determine the current aspiration levels of the participants, they were asked to identify the highest position to which they ultimately aspire. On a scale from "very realistic" to "very unrealistic", participants were asked the reality of acquiring the highest position to which they ultimately aspire. According to the findings, 23 (77 percent) ultimately aspire to top level management positions and seven (23 percent) aspire to upper middle level management positions.

The majority, 25 (83 percent), of the participants, five years ago, ultimately aspired to attain top level management positions and the remaining five (17 percent) aspired to upper middle level management positions. Of the 25 women managers aspiring to top level management positions five years ago, five of them lowered their aspirations to upper middle level management positions. They stated the following reasons for this decision: company reorganization; reached the glass ceiling; husband was relocated; burned out; and lack of company commitment to her advancement. Of the five women managers aspiring to middle level management positions five years ago, three of them raised their aspirations to top level management positions. They stated the following reasons for this decision: promoted three times in five years, so aspirations are higher; changed companies and now have greater opportunity for advancement; and divorced now, so I am devoting more time to my work.

The finding revealed that half, 16 (53 percent), of the participants believe it is very realistic that they will acquire the highest position to which they ultimately aspire; seven (23 percent) believe it is somewhat realistic; three (10 percent) believe it is between somewhat realistic and somewhat unrealistic; two (7 percent) believe it is somewhat unrealistic; and two (7 percent) believe it is very unrealistic.

Only eight (27 percent) of the participants five years ago believed that is was very realistic that they would acquire the highest position to which they ultimately aspired, and half (15 (50 percent)) believed it was somewhat realistic. The findings seem to indicate that the women managers are more optimistic now about obtaining the positions to which they ultimately aspire than they were five years ago.

Overall, the majority of the women managers continue to aspire to top level

management positions and they believe that it is very realistic they will acquire these positions.

Perceived barriers/hindrances to attaining positions to which ultimately aspired
Participants were asked to identify the barriers they think will hinder them from attaining the positions to which they ultimately aspire. The five most frequent barriers perceived by participants in attaining the positions to which they ultimately aspire include the following: competition (fewer high level positions available and many talented/competent people wanting these positions), 14 (47 percent); family obligations, 12 (40 percent); being a woman, 12 (40 percent); age, ten (33 percent); and company reorganization/downsizing, eight (27 percent).

Actions believed necessary to attain positions to which ultimately aspired
The final set of questions asked during the interviews inquired about the actions that participants think they will have to take in order to attain the positions to which they ultimately aspire. The five most frequent actions that participants believe they will have to take in order to attain the positions to which they ultimately aspire are: continue education/learning (update skills on an ongoing basis), 14 (47 percent); continue to demonstrate competency on the job (produce high quality work), 14 (47 percent); take advantage of opportunities, 12 (40 percent); network with top level managers, 11 (37 percent); get experience/exposure in other areas/functions of company, ten (33 percent).

Discussion

Even though the educational level of the participants is notably high (all the women except for one have earned a Bachelor's degree, and over half have earned a Master's degree), the results indicated that the majority of the women managers in this study have continued to pursue training to assist them in their career development and advancement. According to Burke and McKeen (1994), managerial women who participate in a greater number of education and training activities are more organizationally committed, job-satisfied and involved, and have higher career prospects. Therefore,

education and training seem to be of great importance to the career development of women managers. Nichols and Kanter (1994) noted that women must rely on themselves rather than on institutions to create careers. They must make their own career opportunities by pursuing training and experiences that can be applied anywhere. Similarly, Flanders (1994) noted that the responsibility for ensuring adequate training can not be left solely to the employer. To be successful, women must take personal responsibility for ensuring that they receive the training required to progress in their careers. Women themselves may often need to take the initiative to request the training they need in order to continue advancing in their careers. The continued investment in education and training of women managers, such as the ones in this study, will make it more difficult to overlook them in promotion decisions in the future.

The highest percentage of the study participants worked in the management information systems and human resource areas. The literature indicates that a large number of women opt for management positions in the human resource area (Burke and Davidson, 1994; Catalyst, 1996; Devanna, 1987; Fagenson and Jackson, 1994). According to a Catalyst's (1999) survey of women managers, women are more likely to hold senior management positions in human resources and communications. In addition, there is some evidence to show that opportunities for women in management may be greater in industries like computers and telecommunications that are experiencing a rapid pace of change. Fisher (1997) suggests this occurs because emergent industries simply have not been in existence for long enough to have established rules about who is or should be a manager, relying more on managerial ability than on gender to make employment decisions.

The study participants range in age from 35 to 51, with an average age of 43.2 years. The years of work experience acquired by the study participants ranged from 13 to 30 years, with an average of 20.1 years. According to Wernick (1994), chief executive officers (CEOs) are generally in their 50s and 60s when they assume the top position. Furthermore, they have usually spent 20 to 25 years "in the pipeline". Corporate leaders estimate that it takes 20 to 25 years in a corporation to achieve

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a high-level management position. It seems that the past notion that women were not in top-level management positions because they did not have the experience of their male counterparts is no longer relevant for the women managers in this study.

The majority of the women managers in this study indicated that they are progressing toward the positions to which they ultimately aspire; however, the majority do not think they are progressing as rapidly as they should. Being a woman was the most frequent reason given for not progressing toward the position to which they ultimately aspire, and also for not progressing as rapidly as they should. Being a women as a barrier to advancement has been documented by many researchers (DeLaat, 1999; Deloitte and Touche, 1996; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Northcraft and Gutek, 1993; Powell, 1999; Rosener, 1995; Schein, 1994; Swiss, 1996). For example, 400 executive women surveyed by Korn/Ferry (1993) reported that "being a woman" was their greatest obstacle to career success. Similarly, a *Working Woman* survey of 502 female executives in traditional business organizations revealed their belief that the No. 1 obstacle to women's advancement is "a male-dominated corporate culture" (Lawlor, 1994). The results of this study indicated that women managers often face many barriers to career advancement that are unique to their gender.

The challenge to organizations is to make sure that they value differences rather than denigrate them, and that standards of excellence recognize both male and female attributes. Tavris (1992) proposes that differences between the sexes must be analyzed without bias and that performance standards must be based on competence, not gender. According to Rosener (1995), gender plays too large a role in performance assessments and creates too many obstacles to the full utilization of women.

The findings of this study seem to indicate that some of the same factors continue to assist the women managers in their career progression, while other factors seem to assist their progression at different stages of their careers. Overall, the factors identified by the women managers in this study as being important to their career advancement are consistent with many other studies (Catalyst, 1996; Davidson and Cooper; 1992; Izraeli

and Adler, 1994; Morrison *et al.*, 1992; Swiss, 1996). Catalyst (1996) indicated that successful career women do share some common characteristics. Some of the factors women believed were most important to their progress were consistently exceeding performance expectations, developing a style with which male managers were comfortable, and seeking out difficult or high-visibility assignments. In their study of successful managerial women, Hennig and Jardim (1977) identified some characteristics that successful career women have in common. These included: having some idea of their future career goals, hard work, determination, perseverance, commitment to their careers, and achieving position and status in spite of many barriers.

The findings of this study revealed that, with the exception of reorganization/downsizing and age, the women managers have continued to encounter many of the same barriers throughout their career progression. Several authors have noted that many of the same barriers that keep women from achieving their full potential at the lower level of organizations continue to keep even the most qualified from advancing to top management (Burke, 1997; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Still and Timms, 1998; Wernick, 1994). In addition, according to Hamlin (1994), women in senior level management positions may face many of the same barriers as those who are still moving up the management ranks. Similarly, Swiss (1996, p. 70) stated that: "The executive women were just as likely to experience language demeaning to women in their current position as were the women in middle and upper-middle management. And they were just as likely to view gender as a factor in limiting compensation, promotion rates, and access to clients".

Reorganization/downsizing and age were the two new barriers that were frequently mentioned by the women managers in this study. According to Nichols and Kanter (1994), the reorganization and downsizing of many large corporations are dramatically heightening the pressure on women who are aspiring to reach top level management positions. Jobs in large companies are being eliminated by the thousands. Competition for fewer top level management positions will make it more difficult for women who already report many obstacles to reaching top level management positions. Hamlin (1994) noted

that reorganization and downsizing can present problems as well as opportunities for women in management. In some cases the last hired are the first fired. On the other hand, when early retirement is part of the reorganization process, higher level positions, usually held by men, may become available, thereby increasing advancement opportunities for women.

Many of the women managers in this study for the first time indicated age as a barrier to their career progression. According to Flanders (1994), women suffer from age discrimination more than men. Women are more generally perceived to be less ambitious and to have reached their peak at an earlier age than men. In addition, older women are also perceived as being less qualified than men because of maternity breaks and as having more time-consuming family commitments. Flanders (1994, p. 109), however, points out that in reality a woman's family commitments are likely to decline with age, as her children become older and more independent. Flanders provides the following tips for women managers in dealing with the age barrier: take every opportunity to update your skills and acquire new ones, and let others know that you are doing so; actively let your employer know that you are interested in undertaking training and advancing your career; actively seek opportunities to undertake new challenges and publicize your successes; and when you have the opportunity emphasize to employers the benefits the company gains from your age and experience (Flanders, 1994, p. 110).

Despite the sacrifices the women managers in this study have made and the barriers they have encountered, they have persisted, persevered, and have continued to demonstrate competency on the job by delivering high quality performance, and have continued to advance. The majority of the women managers in the study continue to aspire to top level management positions and they believe that it is very realistic that they will attain these positions. How far these women managers actually progress in their organizations depends on the commitment of corporate leaders to support the change needed for their continued advancement.

As more women enter the workforce, special attention needs to be given to those issues and factors that have a profound impact on their career development. Issues such as the factors that have assisted their career development, as well as barriers that have hindered their career development that were identified in this study need to be examined by leaders in organizations. This will assist them in obtaining a better understanding of how these issues affect the career development of women managers.

According to Burke and Davidson (1994), organizations that are successful in developing practices and policies that support the career development and aspirations of their managerial women create an environment where women are judged on their merits and increase their competitive advantage in the following ways: attract the best talent (talented women are more likely to be attracted to organizations that reward merit); retain the investment (cost savings – fewer women are likely to leave the organization); optimize potential and productivity (organizations that reduce the barriers faced by managerial women will reap advantages in performance and productivity); attract and retain clients (market share – organizations with talented managerial staff will become more attractive to potential clients); and better quality of management (when abilities, skills and performance become the criteria for development and promotion, the quality of management will increase) (Burke and Davidson, 1994, p. 5).

According to Kanter (1994, p. 1), full development of human resources is a key competitive advantage in the knowledge society. Letting talent rise to the top, regardless of where it is found and whether it is male or female, is essential to business success in free-market economies. Within this context, the equality of women in the work-force is no longer a politically correct luxury. It has become a competitive necessity. Organizations need to realize that utilizing women more fully is related to their survival. The full utilization of women in the workplace should not be only for moral or social reasons, but rather should be a strategy for competing economically and gaining a competitive advantage in the future.

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