

Foreword

The accepted wisdom is that women have difficulty in gaining acceptance for senior roles, outside the handful of activities that are thought 'suitable for women'. But our own experience as a top ten headhunter suggests that reality is not that simple.

We've been involved in the appointment of many women to very senior posts in international commerce and industry and in the government, higher education and voluntary sectors. Among these appointments were the first woman chief executive of a British FTSE 100 company, one of the few woman vice chancellors to run a British university and the first woman regulator of a British privatised industry.

The women we've worked with at this level have encountered remarkably little opposition in climbing the ladder of success. Indeed, as headhunters, we've found that the problem is not necessarily persuading clients to consider women; equally it is finding enough female candidates who are willing to compete for the top jobs – and who have the appropriate experience.

01	Summary
02	Background, objectives and method
03	Findings 1: glass ceiling?
04	Findings 2: traits of senior women
07	Findings 3: women, what it takes
15	Findings 4: today's day and age
17	Findings 5: rising to the future
20	Discovering more

Summary

so what is going on?

We asked Peter Wallis of SRU – who also writes as trend-spotter Peter York – to carry out qualitative research among a group of over 30 women who had convincingly proven their ability to reach the top of their chosen callings. We wanted to see what difficulties they'd encountered in getting there, in the hope of finding lessons that would help able women to overcome career obstacles.

The findings contradict the accepted view that men invariably make it difficult for women to get to the top. Most of these women had been greatly helped in their careers by men. Less surprisingly, the research found that their success was rooted in supportive parents, high levels of education and a great deal of hard work. Most important was the discovery that these exceptional women had a simple trick for breaking through the glass ceiling: ignore it. Rather than staring at their own reflections, like Alice they appeared to have simply stepped through the glass into a world concealed from their sisters.

It would be absurd to imagine that there are no areas of misogyny and prejudice left in our society. But this sample of female leaders does show what is possible today – and how it can be done.

Background, objectives and method

background and scope

There have been many studies of senior women in their working environment and of the glass ceiling effect. But what is little heard in the debate is the viewpoint of women whose careers have demonstrably *not* been limited by gender: the small group who are already at the very top in business and the public sector.

We selected respondents at the most senior strategic level. Their jobs are concerned with the direction of policy and management of their organisations. They are the 'thought leaders' in their spheres. The buck stops with them. These glass ceiling breakers include women who are CEOs of major companies, have reached the highest levels of the Civil Service, lead public boards and committees or have respected practices and policy responsibility in the law and other professions. They are exceptional individuals, but they have shown what is possible and how it can be done.

The focus of our study has been corporate and establishment Britain. We have not sought to include entrepreneurs who have built careers in structures of their own making (although as it happens one of our respondents started her career there), media stars, the police, the armed services or the medical profession. All these areas warrant separate study.

As the balance of the gender relationship changes, each generation faces a slightly different springboard and set of obstacles. This study looks at the current generation of senior women – for the most part in their late 40s and 50s, and educated during the 1950s and early 1960s.

objectives

Our objectives were to determine the factors that have led to success for the present generation of demonstrably successful women; and, from their experience, to define pointers both for other women seeking to emulate them and for corporate Britain.

method

We interviewed women who have reached 'Great and Good' status in the UK. We also talked to a small group of senior HR directors who have experience of best practice in the employment of senior women. All respondents were drawn from major UK companies, the professions and the public sector.

The interviews were lengthy – typically between one and two hours. No formal agenda or questionnaire was used, but interviewers ensured that the core issues were covered and gave particular emphasis to history, both career and personal. This allowed respondents to reveal their own priorities, concerns and emphases rather than reflecting the researchers' preoccupations.

Findings 1: glass ceiling?

Most of our respondents appeared at first not to acknowledge the glass ceiling phenomenon at all, leading us to ask: are they in denial? Have they forgotten? Are they exceptional? All three turned out to be true.

Even when pressed, they denied experience of active discrimination or harassment. Clearly, some had needed to make sideways moves or take initiatives to prevent becoming becalmed or ghettoised: *'I've never been harassed – just soft discrimination'*. But these manoeuvres were no longer front-of-mind. Memories of past obstacles and irritations had become humorous with hindsight: *'A judge once told me to wear a skirt!'*

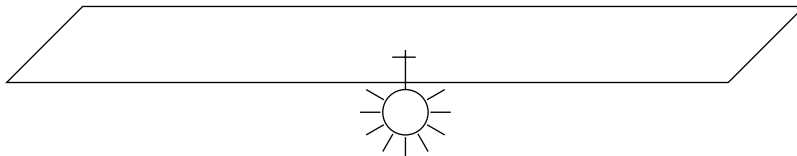
They had 'forgotten' because the view from the very top appears to encourage geniality and reconciliation – particularly in women. Indeed, the ability to rise above problems was a key characteristic of our respondents. They saw dwelling on past difficulties as a waste of energy and a habit which could also erode the precious self-confidence which, we found, has been central to their success.

They were exceptional. Their family backgrounds, education, sectors of work and personalities were very distinctive. They have talent and ability. There was a noticeable absence of bullies or bluffers. Respondents offered a range of possible explanations, including:

- Women may need to be better all round than men to be accepted/sought after
- Men can give themselves permission to report to a woman if she is self-evidently a superior human being
- Women are less likely to want success for its own sake and therefore their substantive worth is all there is.

Very successful women are unlikely to see their careers as a battle or a campaign. What drove them upward was the matter in hand, the enjoyment and sense of achievement that came from addressing challenges and opportunities. In no case had there been an ambition or strategy for self advancement for its own sake.

'No grand design – I like to be in the thick of things, where things happen. . . part of it is that I wouldn't be a good No2: I can't take orders.'



Findings 2: traits of senior women

Despite the variation in individual histories, a few themes emerged so consistently that they seemed to characterise almost all our respondents: self-belief, a high-quality education, a well balanced disposition and the ability to work hard and pay attention to detail.

belief in me, myself and i

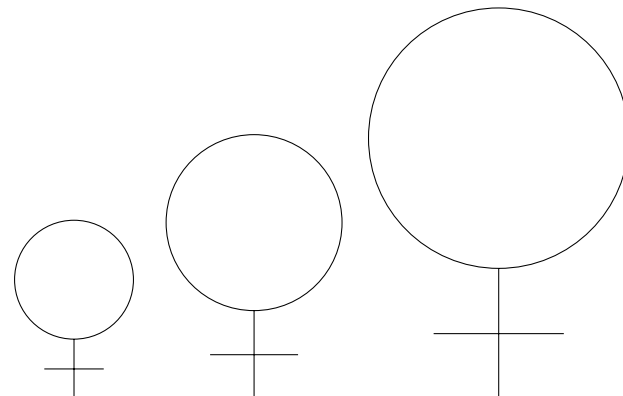
Very noticeably, these women have very high levels of self confidence – which appear to stem from an ingrained belief in their abilities and their judgement, rather than a thick skin or insensitivity. This tended to produce a ‘walking on water’ effect: if you have sufficient faith, difficulties will be overcome. ‘I am a woman, you are a man – so what?’ is the unspoken message of this confidence, and male colleagues appear to understand it.

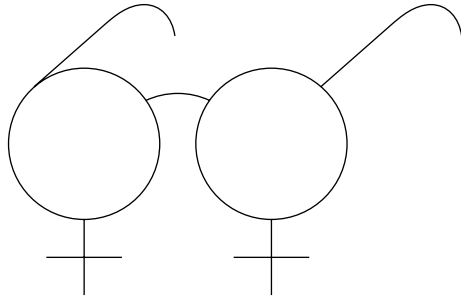
Respondents typically said that it had never occurred to them that as women they would have to take a lesser place in any traditional man’s domain. Some actually felt they had an advantage, because of their ability to deal with emotional issues. They had expected no trouble and encountered none.

‘I am never conscious of being a woman unless it is drawn to my attention. You should operate on the strength of what you have to offer. I am effective by being me.’

For a minority this self-belief was hard won, especially in cases where family and education had not been so solidly character forming. In some cases, their own talent – spotted by others – had opened their eyes to opportunities and carried them forward. The trick, and these respondents were aware it was a trick, was to keep your head and learn ‘not to look down’: *‘Don’t let them see you are thrown’.*

Self-belief, it would appear, can be an exceptionally powerful and effective tool in countering other perceived disadvantages, too. For instance, two respondents had Asian origins; both said they had experienced almost no racial discrimination at work or anywhere else in the UK.





education + education = freedom

This was a highly educated group. They saw education as central to their success. They were, at very least, as well educated as their male peers and in some cases better: no nice girls' schools near Ascot or sink comprehensives.

They had enjoyed learning. Many recalled their enjoyment of being tested and discovering they could excel, uncovering their power and building their self-belief. Most had had a traditional general education: History, Maths, English, Philosophy, Modern Languages, Law, History of Art for their first degree. Perhaps unsurprisingly for this generation, there were no business studies degrees or MBAs.

Oxbridge in particular had propelled them into a man's world. Some had become honorary men, for instance through a doctorate which freed them from the more limited social world of traditional women's circles in the '50s and '60s.

We came across only two people who had missed out on education: one from a truly working class origin who had later scrambled through night school and an external degree; and another whose parents and teachers had set their sights too low and simply denied her a crack at Oxbridge – to her lasting regret.

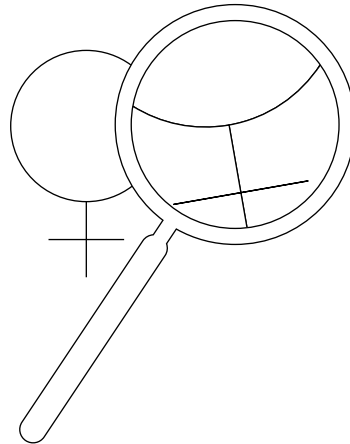
steady as she goes

The third essential characteristic both cited and displayed was the ability not to take things personally – to maintain a positive outlook and to move on quickly after setbacks. Variouslly described as ‘generosity of spirit’, ‘courage’, or ‘the ability to accept that you may sometimes be wrong or mistaken’, this resulted in seemingly well balanced individuals who would be hard to blow off course. There was not an obvious neurotic among them.

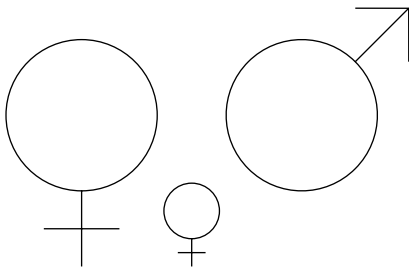
make light of hard work and details

Several respondents claimed that attention to the matter in hand rather than personal status was an advantageous female trait. Many said they had had to work harder, particularly by ensuring they had covered all the detail, but suggested that it would be unwise to make this a problem for male colleagues: *‘You can work harder than men, but don’t talk about it and don’t ever whinge about it’*.

None of our respondents combined working hard with playing hard. Almost all agreed that it was natural for working women to have two lives – work and children. Among those who had decided not to have children earlier on, most had done so in order to devote more time to work, not to indulge themselves with, say, a second home or long holidays. None had become keen racehorse owners or become hugely ‘social’ beyond duty and close-ish friends.



Findings 3: women, what it takes



No factors guarantee success, but seven elements are clearly crucial:

mum and dad matter

What do they think of women?

Our respondents often said the start came from their parents. Typically, the view that they could do anything they wanted came from both parents. Their mothers, whether graduates or not, valued education for women and encouraged their daughters to be as academic as they chose. Parents were almost universally described as believing strongly in education for both boys and girls. Barriers and ceilings for girls were not acknowledged: *'It never occurred to me that I couldn't'* was the norm.

'I never really thought about being a girl: I never thought there were any limits.'

'I did no work at university – I don't think my generation thought about careers or how to keep yourself for the rest of your life... Once I'd got the job I loved it, I was very happy, I became a noticeable person... but if I'd been a man I'd have had it years earlier.'

While their parents had been inspiring, many of their friends had grown up with more traditional expectations and had failed to fulfil their potential. For two respondents with less visionary parents, the first suggestions of possibility had come from friends and contemporaries: *'Abstract ambition is a male thing, it's only when someone you know does it...'*

The feminist movement in the US was influential: *'It gave a name to some of our dissatisfactions'*. Individual American women appear to have been ahead in aiming for the top and have been able to command senior posts here in the UK. *'Americans get senior positions because they're feisty and tough in a way that's not acceptable in an Englishwoman... English men buy the American brand.'*

Parents' occupation

Our respondents' parents were not hard-bitten go-getters. Mostly they were academics, civil servants and members of professions – people who believed that to serve and contribute was as important as money making.

We found very few top women could claim inspiration from parents in industry or commerce. Self-made entrepreneurs of that generation were not particularly interested in educating their daughters: they often came from backgrounds where education was little valued, and were unlikely to encourage or even welcome highly educated girls – who might even seem threatening to them.

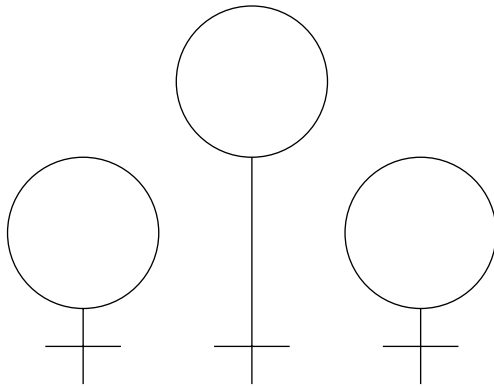
Parental influences had also led to a certain modesty about money: none of these women was in any way anxious to mention any form of grand lifestyle. They expressed satisfaction that they 'had enough' but made it clear they were not from backgrounds where conspicuous consumption was encouraged.

class issues

All our top women except one came from middle-class backgrounds – primarily the 'professional' rather than the 'commercial' sub-group.

Upper-class girls, from families where for several generations neither father nor mother had worked in the traditional sense, were less likely to have been encouraged to have a 'real' career. It wasn't thought necessary – just an optional extra, a blue-stocking tendency – and in many cases was actually discouraged as unfeminine and a distraction from catching your man.

Working-class women hardly featured in our sample. In the '50s and '60s working-class girls, even with a grammar school education, could look no higher than local government or the public sector. Our one working-class respondent had been brought up in a foster home where education was not a consideration and had gone straight out to work from school. She had caught up with spare-time learning as she saw the opportunities open to her and, as an entrepreneur, had made her own structure in a 'new' sector.



sector selection

It has been and still is important to pick your sector carefully.

Gender-blind sectors

Some sectors are more gender-blind than others. Among the favourites are media organisations and the civil service (which has clearly defined requirements and an examination tradition). Sectors with strong software and intellectual property components tend to be more used to women and more able to value women's traditional strengths – such as the 'soft skills' of interpretation and intuitive insight.

That said, none of our respondents claimed to have moved from a less gender-blind sector or to have deliberately selected a softer option than they would have chosen if they had been a man.

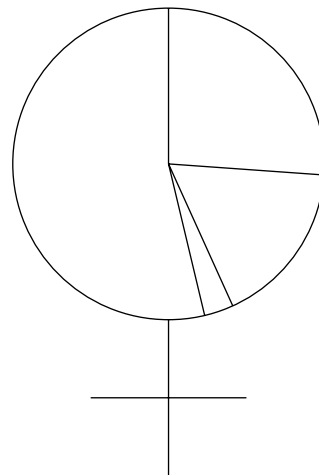
New sectors

Fast-growing new sectors like IT, with few established hierarchies or recruitment patterns, are hungry for talent from wherever they can get it. They cannot afford to select by gender: they simply need the best and must constantly create new opportunities. Their management tends to be young and less gender prejudiced.

Our sole entrepreneur had set up her own software company in the '60s. She was convinced that if she had wanted to set up in a traditional, male-run sector – such as manufacturing – she would have had no chance of attracting backing at all.

Roles

What about 'girlie' jobs – in areas like HR and PR – that are supposed to require touchy-feely female qualities? Most of our respondents had shunned such roles as limiting; others admitted using them opportunistically as a stepping stone to more senior status.



Packaging

Most of our sample dressed in a businesslike, plainish style – wearing obviously good quality clothes but with no attempts at ‘power-dressing’. Very few of them wore evident makeup or jewellery. Their appearance ranged from elegance and smartness to a cheerful, scrubbed untidiness. Being in the public eye had often been a trigger to upgrade the wardrobe and haircut – but on the whole they were not that interested, beyond the desire to look respectable and undistracting. They were not so much sexless as safely distanced by age, marriage, family or seniority and respect.

Nevertheless, several pointed out that being a woman gets you noticed and can be exploited in the later stages of a career. Above the glass ceiling, being a woman confers an intrinsic celebrity which is frequently an advantage.

Start at once

Few of our respondents were late starters – almost all got into the fast lane straight away. Making yourself useful from the start can open up avenues, particularly in the public service sector: for example, a good job in race relations at 25 could take you to a major appointment in your early 30s.

Being noticed early has its celebrity value, too: a female ‘bright young thing’ tends to have a high profile from the start. Visibility can be vital in lifting a woman out of junior line management, if insecure immediate superiors are too nervous to promote a woman: *‘Only top men are able to take a risk on a woman’*.

In short, it’s smart to take the long view: show yourself to be useful, avoid making enemies, and start to be part of it all as soon as possible.

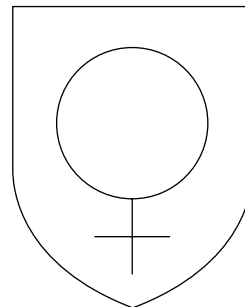
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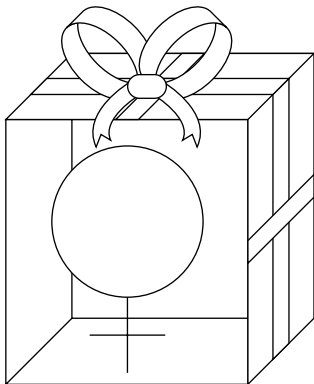
Looking back, our respondents said that a key success factor had been the development of their reputation. Once established, it had proved a potent tool – in effect, a marketable brand. While few had set out to manage their personal brand or their networking in a calculated way, they all now realised the value of making a name for themselves.

A well managed personal brand or name has great benefits. Best of all, it tends to be *offered* jobs while a ‘candidate’ has to compete for them. Over and over, we heard respondents say: *‘I’ve never gone after a job... I was just asked to do this’*. Personal PR, networking and brand management really do change perceptions and get people saying: *‘We must have her, because she’s a good candidate’*. The moral: don’t be a token woman – be a celebrity woman.

Brand champions

Having champions proved key for many respondents. While none had actually sought such a person out, many had acquired one by instinct and circumstance. Champions among the established Great and Good who ‘put your name about’ among the right people in the right way had proved very important, and many older people proudly parade their young ‘discoveries’. For women with less robust academic and family backgrounds, talent spotters had proved crucial in the first phases of achieving confidence and visibility.





no room for role play

Not for high calibre women

All our respondents said they had no time for role playing; they had simply been themselves. Conscious role playing was associated either with an earlier generation of ‘spinsters and male impersonators’ or with second-raters. Historically, we were told, women have related to men as kittens, mistresses, lovers, wives, nannies, mothers – or one of the boys. But role playing has proved more trouble than it is worth: *‘If I have used any ‘tactic’ it’s been my analytical ability’*.

Role playing with clients is a different matter. Respondents whose careers depended on client relationships said they assessed the role they needed to play man by man. If they needed to play the nanny or mother they did so. A senior woman in consultancy pointed out that the client relationship was so false and expedient that role playing was a natural part of the ambience.

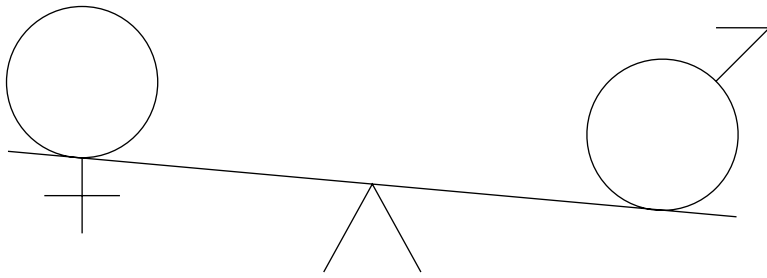
Wearing your gender lightly

Our respondents mainly said that they played it straight, acknowledging their gender/sexuality/femininity as a matter of course while wearing it very lightly.

The subtext of confidence is all. Most said they certainly weren’t ‘professional women’: they tended to be highly critical of groups and ideologies focused on gender, describing them as for losers or the ‘professionally aggrieved’: *‘I’ve never been involved in a women’s group – they’re irritating and unreal. Men and women should mix.’*

Discontinuous careers

Several respondents had created an entrepreneurial stage in their careers – often to facilitate child-rearing. Starting and growing a company or brand that is eventually bought by a mainstream business had proved an effective strategy to break the ceiling: *‘If I’d worked my way up I wouldn’t have done it – I’d have made too many enemies. I couldn’t have done it by their rules. It wasn’t worth fighting through the male hierarchy.’*



equal measures

Men at work

Men, according to our respondents, sense nervousness.

Our respondents were to a large extent fearless, secure in their self-belief, transmitting the soothing subtext of confidence. When working with men they had consciously avoided any impression of stridency or nervousness through a combination of assiduous homework and realistic objectives – braced by the mantra that if you don't expect trouble it is less likely to happen. The repeated refrain was: *'I'm not conscious of any problems – I don't seem to have had many/any'*.

'Psychologically, men are on the back foot with a successful woman.'

When gender problems did occur – male resentment of women affecting business decisions, fear of women leading to aggression – their effective methods of dealing with them had included:

- Brushing the problem aside – making it 'his' problem
- Rising above it – refusing to acknowledge irritating behaviour
- Moving the goalposts and dealing with it as a business issue rather than a gender matter.

What they did not do was:

- Declare a foul head-on
- Appeal to others to become allies
- Allow it to achieve corporate problem status.

Gender problems had rarely, if ever, included sexual harassment. This was seen as more often the fate of more junior non-graduate-intake women. Any early tendency to uneasy encounters evaporated with seniority: *'It's easier now I'm out of the realms of sexual possibility'*.

Mentors

Mentors were less public than champions but nevertheless had played a vital role as coaches and advisers as well as gateways to the critical networks. Several respondents said their husbands had been their greatest mentors – but for most, mentors had been quite distinct from lovers. Many men derive genuinely disinterested pleasure from encouraging clever young women whom they feel deserve their help. Typically, what colleagues had assumed was a sexual relationship was in fact based on something more important: *'He saw something in me and was pleased and proud to develop it'*.

Gallantry

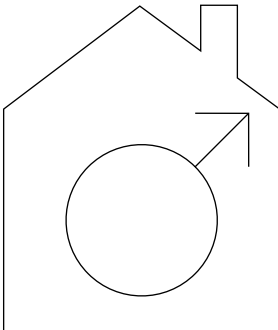
Among successful women there is a growing acknowledgement that equality with men brings a responsibility to behave with gallantry towards them – to be gentle with the male ego and not to use sexual weaponry to unfair advantage, either to persuade or to hurt. We heard much about the insecurities of middle-aged middle-management males threatened by a changing world and inexplicable new kinds of success, particularly that of women.

The man at home

This generation of successful women described their husbands as not quite in the traditional mould for their generation. These 'flexible friends' provided emotional support, mentoring and encouragement.

A number of respondents had had early broken marriages and chosen better the second time around: a commonly used word when describing current marriages and partnerships was 'comfortable'. Many had husbands or partners with complementary work patterns, who had taken a substantial share in childcare. A less aggressively career orientated husband provided a happy resolution for many of these women because:

- They did not need to spend time propping up their husband's career
- They needed to devote less of their time to domestic matters.



mother of all mothers

'Women have two agendas – it must be possible to work that out.'

Motherhood presents the greatest career problems for ambitious women. Our respondents often said their contemporaries saw motherhood as 'an excuse to give up' – yet they seemed to manage their own children with apparent success. Their techniques for success included new career patterns (see below) and helpful husbands: *'It's pointless to try and fit your career into male patterns.'*

Self-belief

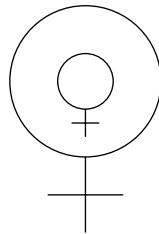
They approached motherhood with their customary confident attitude to questions of guilt or neglect. They did not envisage problems – and believe their children have grown up just fine. As far as they are concerned, if the parents don't feel guilty or project anxiety the children don't pick up on it – the fact that mum works is simply accepted by all as part of the way things are: *'If you have the ability the rest is a matter of faith. If you believe in yourself you can do it.'*

New career patterns

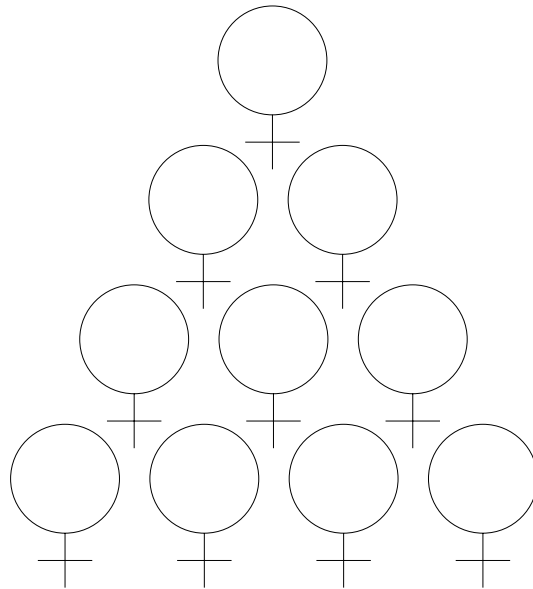
Many of these women had coped with child-rearing by pioneering new career patterns. Some, for example, had started their careers in traditional structures – and by gaining a partnership or achieving early seniority and strong personal branding in an organisation, they had been able to make good contacts and start their own businesses or practices while their children were young.

This transitional self-employed phase allowed them to have their children with them in the office and use their time flexibly. Once they were in their 40s and the children were older, they could typically sell themselves and their brands back into the mainstream at a very senior level.

Strikingly, though, everyone in this category said they now felt unable to extend the same flexibility to employees. Although they felt bad about this, they were adamant that it was a necessary business decision in all cases.



Findings 4: today's day and age



things are not the same

The traditional working environment was based on a model in which a public/grammar school educated 'officer class' led unwilling 'men'. This has now been almost entirely superseded by the more co-operative style of a generation untrained for battle. Hierarchies and disciplines have been replaced by a culture of encouragement and 'empowerment'. Women have contributed to this change and continue to benefit from it.

We hear much comment about women's natural concern for doing a job well, contrasted with men's need to be competitive and combative or to show off. But our most senior respondents tended to be unimpressed: *'Leadership is not gender based. There are ruthless, heartless women as well as men. All this empathy and warmth is complete rubbish.'*

the hr angle

The HR chiefs want women...

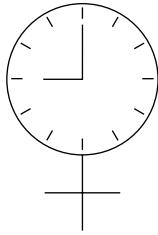
Our sample of male Human Resources directors was small but highly experienced, speaking for large organisations with diverse workforces. In their view, the case for more senior women in the workplace is won. Modern organisations recognise and need women's talent: *'The quality has drifted dramatically towards women, in terms of professionalism, ability and fit'*. HR directors say that they want more senior women to enhance organisational effectiveness – unfortunately the practical implementation remains imperfect.

...but not their children

All our HR respondents wanted to recruit the best young female talent, but acknowledged that children were the main obstacles to retaining them: *'If your middle layer of management is likely to leave or become part time in significant proportions, it makes running a business very difficult'*. Several of our top women respondents also said that they will sometimes recruit a man in preference to an equally good woman for this reason – in such cases women really do have to be better than men.

In the professions, the big London law firms for instance, there is a race for partnership within six years of recruitment. Once they've secured a partnership and built their personal 'brand', many of the best women leave to begin child rearing and a softer job out of town.

Firms want to offer recruitment packages that give women space for child rearing later on, but the perfect formula has not been found.



Part-time working

Part-time working has not proved a viable route to the top. Work spills over into non-working time and clients demand weekend attention: *'That's when deals are done'*. There are three main models in the UK:

Job sharing does not work at senior levels – learning curves and intellectual property that develop over time do not lend themselves to being passed back and forth

Mornings or afternoons only are difficult, as meetings and work inevitably spill into the afternoon or evening

The 3- or 4-day short week has proved workable for some, but weekends may be annexed at short notice for anything from a customer pep-talk to an M&A deal.

Findings 5: rising to the future

up-and-comers take note

Are you ready to rise?

Senior women have high hopes for the upcoming generation, but do not appear to identify closely with them. They see three problem areas:

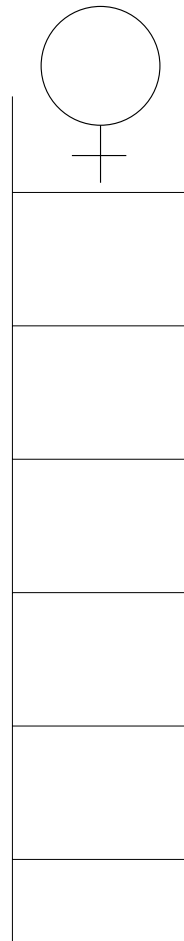
□ Young people in general are better qualified, better educated, more focused and more dedicated than the current generation in power... but seem a little dull. They come across as anxious and intense. And the girls seem worse than the boys. One respondent said she often favoured men because the women were so intense: *'Their first interest is themselves and their future, not the matter in hand'*.

□ Related to this is the tendency of both sexes to disappoint. The most driven and ambitious get the good jobs early, 'because they want them so much', but often lack the intellectual qualities to fulfil their promise. Ambition per se is not enough in corporate structures: *'Intellectual horsepower is essential over the long haul'*.

□ Young graduates who step in above the dogsbody level may 'have it all' too easily and too early. If they miss out on the character-forming struggles, they may lack the necessary rigour and toughness for more senior roles.

Are you mad enough to rule?

Will women ever lead the creation of complex, Murdoch-scale networks, or is empire building likely to remain a male initiative? Some respondents argued that only men had the form of madness that empire building requires.



a word in your ear

Your own career

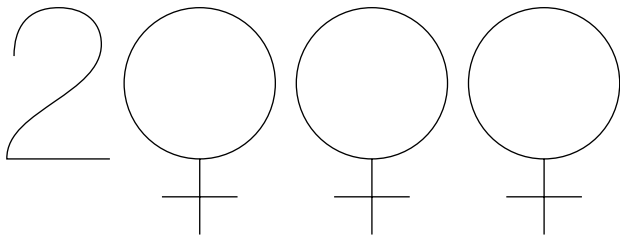
The next generation of women have two perspectives on the future: building their own careers, and guiding their children's ambitions. Respondents thought today's young women should:

- Play it straight – or ensure feminine wiles are completely invisible
- Avoid 'in your face' dressing-up
- Tread lightly over rough ground, recover quickly from failure, keep their nerve
- Always ensure a dialogue of equals
- Never let people see their fear, and keep heartache and headaches out of sight
- Focus on the matter in hand
- Acquire authority and be known for it
- Deny the gender issue!

What shall we tell the children?

In bringing up their children, the new generation should:

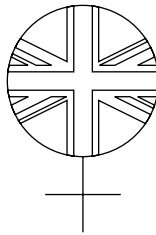
- Instil faith and all-round self-confidence in their daughters, teaching them the benefits of independence
- Assume equal opportunities for brothers and sisters
- Bring up their sons in complementary ways to fulfil themselves and relate well to women
- Educate, educate, educate.



captaining corporate britain

Organisations should nurture their female alumnae:

- They should take pride in their women employees and claim credit for them. Providing a stimulating environment and a springboard for the brightest and the best is a key recruitment tool.
- They should stay in touch with past employees as a way of regaining access to fully developed talent. To recoup their investment in the best young women they have trained they should be inventing ways to retain female talent beyond and through child-rearing. This may include accommodating or acknowledging the fact that women will be with their young children in mind, though not in body, for part of their working lives.
- As they recognise the advantage of women's influence and contributions, they should find ways to identify the aspects of female thinking and behaviour that represent best practice – and disseminate them to men.
- And finally, if corporate Britain is becoming more female-friendly, it should also recognise men's response to this and ensure that men, too, can find fulfilment in the new environment.



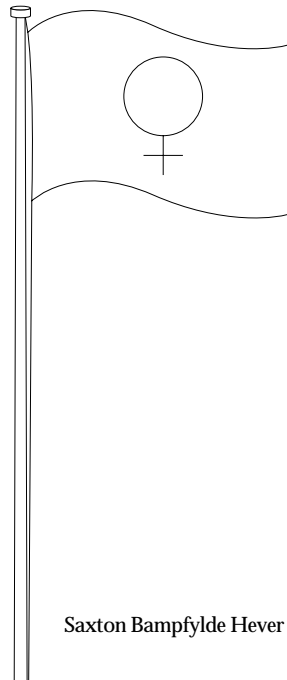
Discovering more

This study is only a beginning. We know there are fields where hostility to women is still rife. For example, as one of the sponsors of WHERE, the Women in Higher Education Register, we're aware that there is a long way to go before a representative number of women are holding top jobs in higher education. Yet other fields – such as PR or human resources – appear to be almost disproportionately staffed with women. Is either imbalance smart? We'd like to find out. And what about able young women at the start of their careers? Are things really so much better for them now?

We intend to commission a continuing series of studies and publish the results periodically. Your comments and suggestions are welcome: please call Paula Alexander at our Westminster office or email your thoughts and comments to glassceiling@saxbam.co.uk.

By sponsoring research and encouraging debate we hope to establish that able women of all ages are competing on an ever more level playing field and that in pursuit of top jobs they are increasingly likely to be judged on their abilities and not on their gender. That said, we've found that – all other things being equal – the odds these days usually favour the female candidates who feature on our shortlists.

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