

Research Insights

Women, leadership, and missed opportunities

Why organizations'
good intentions are not
good enough

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Business Value

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Bridget van Kralingen

Senior Executive Sponsor,
IBM Women's Executive Council
and Constituency

Senior Vice President,
IBM Global Markets

Foreword

The shock rippled into virtually every corner of the globe—a sudden jolt and then a year of unfolding upheaval. Since the start of 2020, the pandemic has disrupted the world economy and the lives of countless people. It did so with a force of historic proportion, though not in equal measure.

A particularly withering blow was dealt to working women, with millions cleaved from the global labor force over a single year. In the US alone, more than 5 million women were pushed from their jobs, putting female participation in the workforce at its lowest rate since 1988.¹

In this report, we examined leadership ranks across 10 industries and 9 geographic regions. What we found should set off alarm bells. Advancing women is not a top priority for the majority of global organizations. Employees feel “gender equity” fatigue over ineffective programmatic efforts to address the problem. And there is a clear need for new models of empathetic leadership.

For years, studies—including our own—have called attention to the systemic barriers to career advancement facing women. Still, the percentage of women in top leadership roles has not budged. There are fewer women in the pipeline today than in 2019, a situation made worse by the pandemic.

We are releasing the findings of this report on International Women’s Day 2021. Though it is my hope that in the future we will not need designated days to raise awareness about the importance of women in the workforce. Rather, they will represent moments to celebrate women’s achievements.

As organizations become more serious about achieving gender equity among their leadership teams, they will realize good intentions are not good enough. The time to act is now. This is the year organizations must commit to moving from talk to action, from action to accountability, and from accountability to results.

Without a doubt, the events of the past year exacerbated existing gender and diversity inequities in leadership ranks. But they also present businesses with a golden opportunity to course correct and deliver exponential impact. Doing so will carve a brighter path for women, for men, and for a recovering global economy now and far into the future.

Key takeaways

Organizations want to change.

But most are moving too slowly.

The number of women serving in senior leadership positions has barely budged over the past 2 years, with no gains in board seats or the C-suite. Perhaps most concerningly, today there are fewer women in the pipeline to fill executive roles than in 2019.

Times have changed.

But approaches haven't.

Too many organizations continue to pursue gender equity and diversity using broad-based programs that don't address underlying mindsets and lack a measurable path to value. Only 1 in 4 organizations make the advancement of women a top 10 priority. In a period when the pandemic has decimated many women's careers, relying on conventional approaches won't close the gender gap.

**Most organizations pursue
incremental change. But leaders
aim for breakthroughs.**

Organizations that see gender parity as a strategic asset are more successful. They outperform their competition on nearly every measure surveyed, from innovation to revenue growth to customer and employee satisfaction.

By Bridget van Kralingen,
Hillery Hunter,
Kitty Chaney Reed,
Carolyn Baird, and
Cindy Anderson

We've (not really) come a long way, baby²

In 2019, IBM launched its first study on women and leadership.³ Our goal was to see if the attention and resources devoted to supporting women's professional advancement had made a demonstrable difference in closing the gender gap. Two years have elapsed, and this past year brought a global pandemic. We wondered: how have things changed? (See Perspective: "About our methodology.")

Here's what we learned.

Despite increased awareness of gender imbalances, the lagging number of women in senior leadership roles has barely moved.

If awareness is the first step to action, then it's hard to imagine circumstances more rattling than the events of 2020. In the span of a year, the pandemic upended generations of working women, with more than 5 million just in the US losing or leaving their jobs.⁴ In addition, the Black Lives Matter protests shone a light on persistent racial disparities, revealing barriers that especially disadvantage Black women and other women of color. (See Perspective: "Stacked biases penalize women of color" on page 5.)

The disruptions brought renewed attention to the challenges women face as they endeavor to advance their careers, from the "second shift" that women work after their day jobs to the steep onramp many face when returning from a career break, and much more. These challenges are not new. Some organizations did step up interventions over the past year, expanding access to childcare and introducing flexible work programs to accommodate women, who globally continue to bear majority responsibility for childcare and eldercare in their families. But the IBM survey found most gender-equity efforts move too slowly and, in some cases, are slipping backward.

The sobering reality is that executive boardrooms and C-suites around the world look essentially the same as they did 2 years ago. Our data indicates they comprise the same small percentage of women (8% for executive boards and 10% for C-suites) despite a heavy push for diversity, along with national mandates in a growing list of countries that includes Norway, Spain, France, Iceland, and Germany.⁵

Perspective: About our methodology

Between November 2020 and January 2021, IBM surveyed more than 2,600 executives, middle managers, and professional women and men across the same 10 industries and 9 geographic regions we surveyed for our first women and leadership study in 2019. Of these, 429 "encore" organizations also participated in our 2019 study. Additionally, we held a global, two-day virtual "jam" with 3,100 women and gender diversity allies to capture their experiences and perspectives on this topic. For more information, see "Study approach and methodology" on page 16.

Alarmingly, these low percentages risk shrinking further. Our data indicates the pipeline of women needed to fill open executive positions has narrowed. Fewer women hold senior vice president, vice president, director, and manager roles in 2021 than in 2019 (see Figure 1). This contraction aligns with other dire statistics showing that women in the early and middle stages of their careers are most vulnerable to pandemic-related job displacements, with those aged 20 to 34 among the hardest hit.⁶ Without effective, immediate interventions, the loss of future leadership talent poses a long-term risk for organizations and for the economy as a whole.

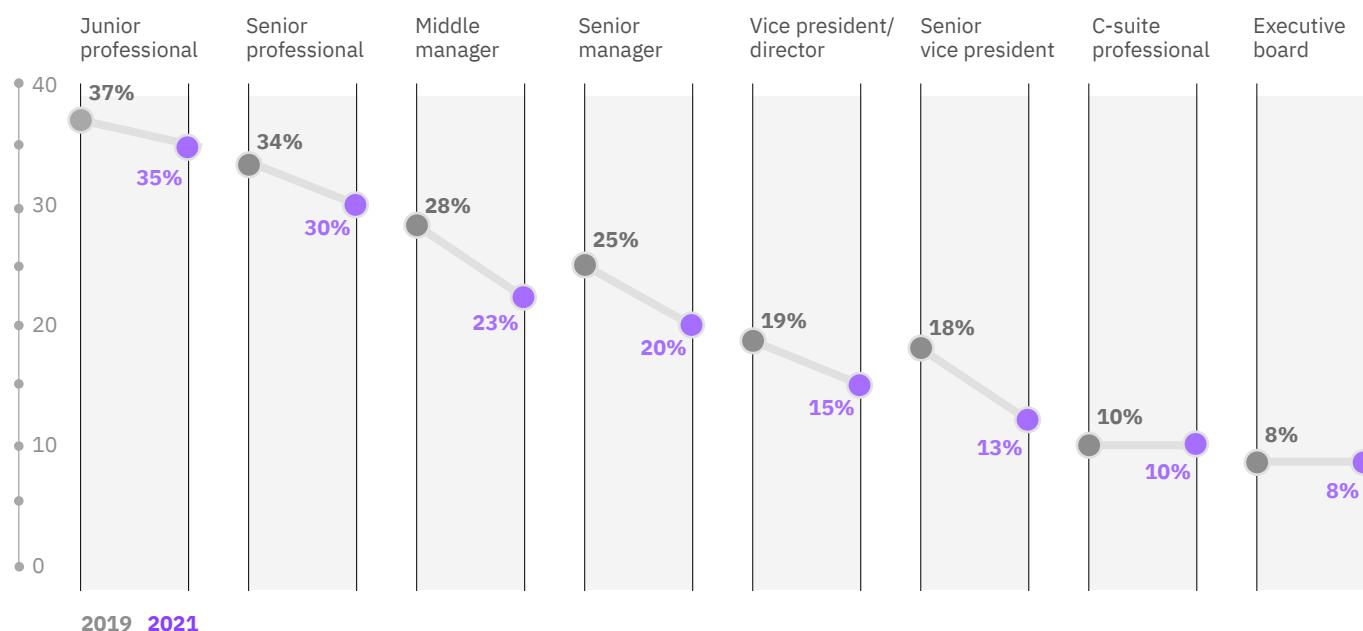
Yet, the events of 2020 showed organizations can move boldly when they want to.

When the global economy went into a tailspin following coronavirus lockdowns, diversity and inclusion initiatives were among the first casualties.⁷ But the Black Lives Matter protests propelled diversity and equity to center stage, spurring new, bold commitments and optimism.

Figure 1

The shrinking pipeline

Since 2019, the pipeline of women for leadership roles has gotten smaller



Adidas, for example, plans to fill at least 30% of open positions with Black or Hispanic candidates. PepsiCo has announced it will add more than 250 Black employees to managerial positions, including a minimum of 100 Black employees to executive positions. And Estée Lauder commits to increasing the percentage of Black employees at all levels of its company, including the management layers, over the next 5 years, mirroring the percentage of Black people in the US.⁸

Elsewhere, Norway's \$1.3 trillion sovereign wealth fund wants the companies it invests in globally to boost the number of women on their boards and to consider setting targets if fewer than 30% of their directors are female.⁹ And UK construction company Wilmott Dixon has projected that it will increase total gender parity by 2030, notable in an industry where women make up just 10% of the workforce, on average. This organization's reputation for excellence in diversity and inclusion is recognized: they placed fifth on the *Sunday Times'* list of the UK's 100 Best Companies to Work for in 2020.¹⁰

These examples show that organizations—from global, mega consumer brands to smaller industrial companies to trillion-dollar growth funds—can make big commitments in short order. To boost gender equity, and their own performance, businesses need to demonstrate the same energy and dedication. But success will require a different playbook.

Perspective: Stacked biases penalize women of color

Despite renewed corporate attention to diversity and inclusion, data reveals that Black women and other women of color face layered barriers—they are penalized because of their race and penalized again because of their gender.

A US-based diversity study by the IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) found that race and ethnicity account for much more discrimination experienced by women than gender alone. 34% of all women say they have personally experienced race-based bias, while 28% say they have experienced gender-based bias.¹¹

For women of color, it's even worse: 86% of Hispanic women have experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity and 70% because of their gender.¹² Pay disparities are similarly entrenched. On average, Black women are paid 38% less than white men and 21% less than white women.¹³ Hispanic women are especially disadvantaged—they earn less than all other racial and ethnic groups and have to work 23 months to earn what white men earn in 12.¹⁴

Women of color are also significantly underrepresented in professional leadership roles. Only 5 Fortune 500 companies have Black CEOs; just 1 of them is a woman.¹⁵ And across the senior leadership ranks, women of color hold just 1 in 25 C-suite roles and white women 1 in 5.¹⁶

More programs haven't necessarily translated to better outcomes.

We keep inching our way, expecting breakthroughs

Numerous studies confirm that organizations with high scores in gender equity gain not only a performance bump, but have happier employees.¹⁷ Organizations with the most women at the top can potentially deliver share performance and profits that are close to 50% higher than those organizations with the fewest, according to McKinsey analysis.¹⁸ Our own study found that more men who work for organizations with a higher ratio of female executives report being satisfied with their jobs versus men at companies with fewer women in top roles. These sentiments are all the more striking given that the survey was fielded during the stressful COVID-19 crisis.

But despite best intentions, only a small number of companies are achieving these benefits. Our research suggests efforts to improve equity and inclusion fall short in 4 ways.

1. Too much focus on programs, not enough on shifting mindsets.

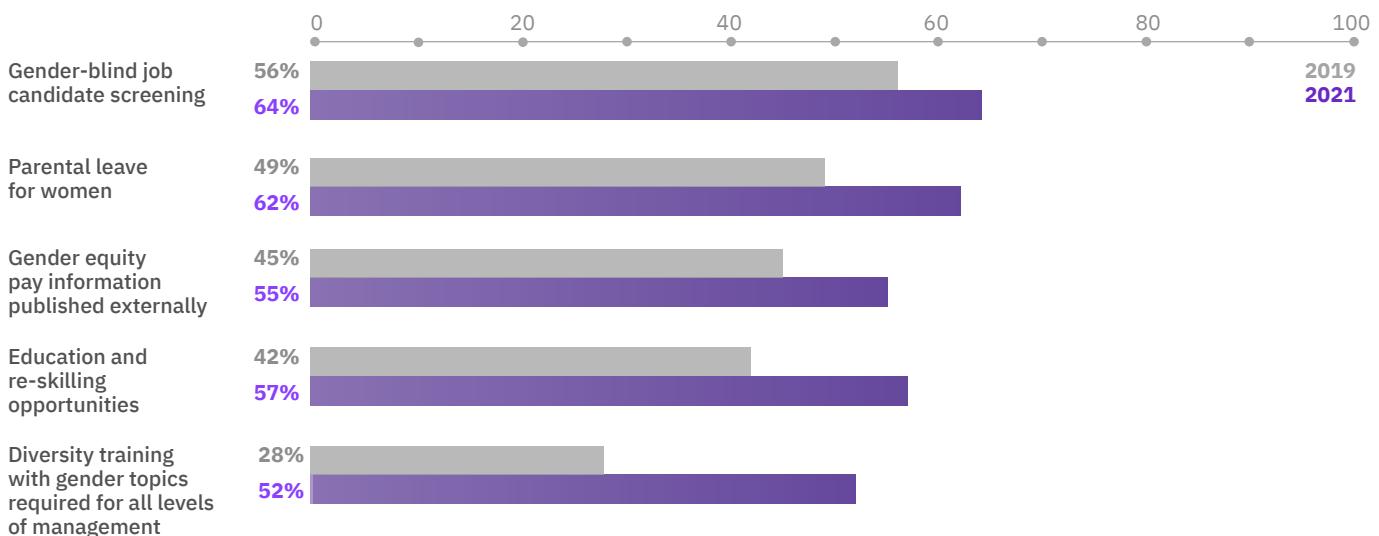
Compared to 2019, data shows that more organizations are instituting more initiatives to improve gender equity and inclusion. Gender-blind job screenings and parental leave for women are among the most commonly applied interventions (see Figure 2).

But looking at the 429 encore organizations (those that participated in both our 2019 and 2021 studies) provides a longitudinal view suggesting *more* programs haven't necessarily translated to *better* outcomes. Organizations may be using lots of tools, but the tools they're employing aren't getting at the fine edges—those mindsets and behaviors that create a welcoming, inclusive corporate culture and deliver business advantage.

Figure 2

Come together now

Ways organizations are working to improve gender equity and inclusion



Compared to 2019, for example, fewer encore organizations agreed that senior executives openly challenge gender-biased behaviors and language, and fewer confirmed that high-performing women receive promotions as often as high-performing men. Additionally, the percentages increased among those who chose a neutral response for these items. This suggests that in the most important areas, female as well as male employees are uncertain about the progress being made (see Figure 3).

That ambivalence may stem from a growing awareness of the many ways bias is experienced and the harm it causes. Given the severe toll of the pandemic on women's careers and the overdue wakeup call provoked by the Black Lives Matter movement, pleas of ignorance about workplace bias are harder to justify. One participant in the IBM Women's Leadership Jam said, "Let's first start with how real gender bias in the workplace is. It has never been more apparent than this moment when we see in actual data how much the COVID-19 crisis has impacted women more than men."

Mindsets matter, of course, but programmatic interventions don't appear to address them sufficiently. The survey found notable perceptual differences between men and women even in regions where gender and diversity policies are well established, such as the socially progressive Nordics. There, more than twice as many women as men say their workplace environment is male-dominated (30% compared to 13%). The US is home to stark differences as well, with 25% of women—but only 16% of men—saying that the "old boys' club" culture prevails.

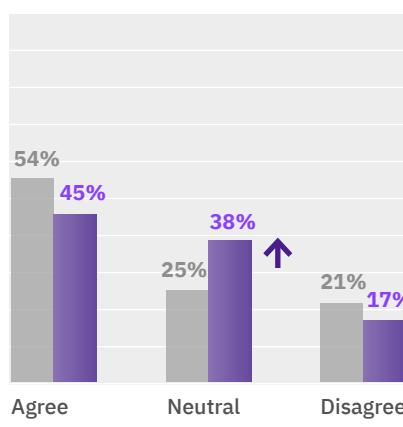
Perceptual differences also showed up among mid-level managers, which is significant, because they are often the first to recognize and support promising employees in career growth opportunities. More female middle managers than male affirm their organizations are progressing beyond regressive stereotypes that can hold women back from career advancement.

Figure 3

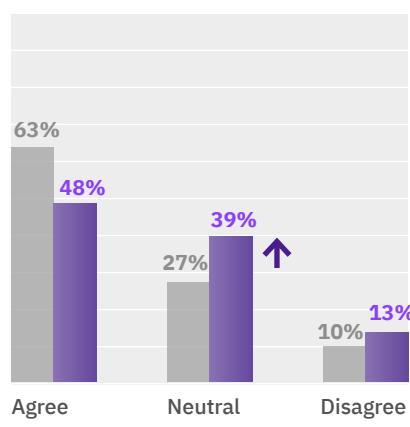
Ambivalence on the rise

Encore organizations had mixed perceptions about some practices designed to support the advancement of women at work

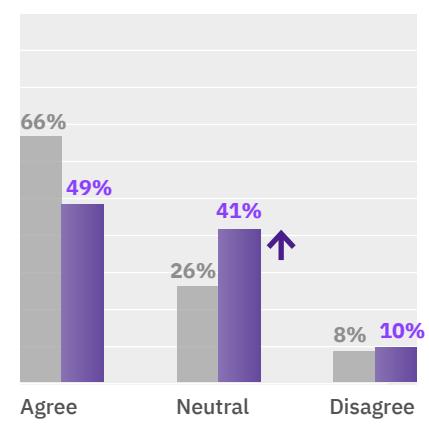
We require every job succession plan include women candidates



We ensure high-performing women receive promotions as often as high-performing men



Senior executives openly challenge gender-biased behaviors and language



For example, we asked middle managers if their organizations harbor ideas such as “women don’t ask for promotions or raises as often as men do.” Not only is this idea unfounded, it places the onus on women for their lack of advancement and pay gap. More female than male managers—36% more—say this common stereotype is not a barrier at their organizations. Likewise, 34% more female managers than males assert their organizations have relinquished the notion that women with children are less dedicated to their jobs. If managers still hold on to these archaic assumptions about working mothers’ suitability for advancement, these women can be easily overlooked or discounted when opportunities arise.

While it is encouraging that more female managers say stereotypes like these are outmoded at their organizations, women themselves are not immune to biased thinking. As one IBM Women’s Leadership Jam participant observed, “Part of the issue is how many women have normalized gender bias and accepted it. I work for a great team, but in a small group, I recently brought up the need to address gender bias. A female colleague was confused. She said, ‘What bias? I haven’t seen that on our team.’ Afterwards, I shared some of my own experiences with her. She realized that she had experienced the same, but had dismissed it as ‘just the way things are.’”

2. Accepting a “best we can do” attitude.

Less than half (48%) of respondents say their organizations set targets for gender equity, down from 66% in 2019. And while the majority (57%) of survey respondents say their senior management is held accountable for gender equity, nearly a third (32%) aren’t so sure, and the rest (11%) say this is not happening at their organizations. A major reason for the lackluster attention is that only 1 out of 4 respondents report that their companies make the advancement of women a top 10 formal business priority. Instead, the majority—58%—say their organizations adopt a “do it when they can” approach.

The lack of formal commitment and vision can muddy the path to value, leading organizations to fund a diverse array of initiatives, but without a cohesive strategy to help ensure program goals lead to substantive culture change. Hampered by scattershot accountability, efforts to improve gender equity and diversity can limp along—supported by good intentions, but without the muscle to sustain them.

A participant in the IBM Women’s Leadership Jam noted, “My male colleagues and coworkers do a great job of validating and listening. But I have not experienced firsthand any man calling out discriminatory behavior, putting himself at risk to support a woman being discriminated against, or working to correct discriminatory behavior (for himself or others). I think this distinction is important, because without male leaders role modeling, reinforcing, and rewarding the behaviors that show more active allyship, younger employees won’t have the example to follow.”

Our data suggests hints of fatigue and disillusionment setting in for both women and men. In 2019, 71% of women said they expected their organizations would significantly improve gender parity over the next 5 years. Most men—67%—were on board with this prediction. Just 2 years later, these percentages dropped to 62% of women and 60% of men. While the majority of both genders remain optimistic that change is possible, the trend is declining.

3. Trusting rather than testing convention.

Few companies would dream of launching a major product initiative without pulling in their best data, analytics, and talent. But some organizations rely on conventional wisdom to guide gender and inclusion initiatives. They choose interventions because of reputations for good practice without testing whether these “done before” efforts are the best route to deliver desired outcomes—or whether alternative approaches might generate better results.

For example, diversity training is a mainstay in most organizations. But a study by Harvard University found that in the typical ways such training is deployed—mandatory tutorials followed by questionnaires—the positive benefits rarely last beyond a day or two. Employees are good at guessing the right answers, which results in superficial learning. Far more effective, the study found, is creating experiential and voluntary programs.¹⁹

First Movers report a rate of revenue growth 61% higher than other organizations in our study.

Either way, organizations won't know what works without testing and tailoring. Similarly, many organizations cling to the convention that a bachelor's degree is a necessary precondition for employment. They fail to confirm whether this standard is relevant for success in the intended role—and whether it creates an unwarranted barrier for otherwise qualified applicants. (See Perspective: "Make it easier for women to enter high-growth fields" on page 11.)

4. There's a gnawing recognition that deeper change involves discomfort.

Bringing about gender equity involves difficult math and even tougher choices. To mirror outside demographics, one executive told us that every open leadership position in her organization would need to be filled by a woman or person of color. Few organizations have the stomach for change of that magnitude. And even less dramatic shifts can seem threatening to those already in place.

For example, data shows that men are aware of the importance of gender equity and support women's advancement generally. More than half report gender

inclusion is part of their organization's mission statement, and 40% of men agree with the idea that gender-inclusive organizations are more successful financially. These men see gender-equity as a win-win for both employees and their business.

But those men who perceive women's advancement as hindering their own opportunities, or compelling them to adopt new ways of working, may be reluctant to modify their attitudes and behaviors. When survey respondents were asked why they don't see more women in leadership roles today, the top answers had nothing to do with policy inertia. Instead, they reflected the pain of change and lack of accountability (see Figure 4).

Commentary from the IBM Women's Leadership Jam supports these findings. One woman said, "I think that most men are focused on not rocking the boat, rather than making contributions to correct and steer the ship toward equality." Another said, "I see men step up when the conflict is easy to acknowledge, such as overt bullying or sexual harassment, but often acknowledgment is as far as it goes."

Figure 4

Damaging assumptions

The top 5 explanations for why we don't see more women in leadership roles

#1	#2	#3	#4	#5
Assumptions that employees prefer to work for a man	Assumptions that male leaders are unwilling to share leadership responsibilities with women	Assumptions that fewer women want to take on leadership roles	Inadequate managerial accountability for promotion of women into leadership roles	Society's gender bias or sexism
				

Most businesses want to do better. But First Movers have figured out how.

A subgroup of organizations that we call “First Movers” stands apart in several important ways. 100% of First Movers:

- Designate the advancement of women as a formal top 10 business priority (compared to just 16% of other organizations)
- View gender inclusivity as a driver of financial performance (compared to 36% of other organizations)
- Are highly motivated to take action—they fully support the idea that businesses need to continue making changes to achieve gender equity (compared to 63% of other organizations)

Importantly, First Movers report a higher percentage of women for each of the executive positions we queried (see Figure 5). While they have yet to reach gender parity, they are already reaping the benefits of a more gender-balanced leadership. For these businesses, gender and racial inclusion have become a force multiplier—driving above-average financial growth and innovation, along with customer and employee satisfaction. Overall, benefits include:

–Stronger financial performance. First Movers report a rate of revenue growth that’s as much as 61% higher than other organizations in our study. Their performance speaks not only to raw sales growth, but also to underlying attitudes, with individuals who work at First Mover organizations expressing much more confidence in their companies’ prospects.

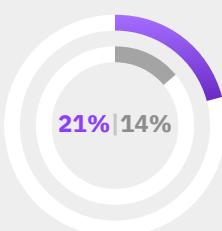
–Stronger innovation. A study by the International Labour Organization found that gender-inclusive organizations report a 54% increase in creativity, innovation, and openness.²⁰ First Movers report similar benefits, with 60% stating their businesses are more innovative than competitors—a 22% premium over the other organizations.

Figure 5

First Mover momentum

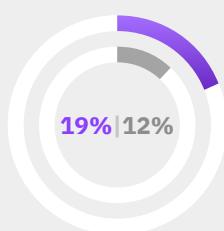
A higher percentage of women fill the First Movers’ executive ranks

Vice president/
director

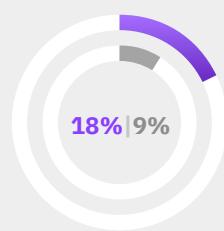


First Movers
Others

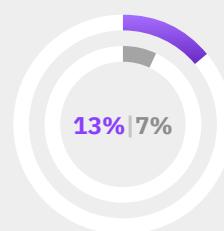
Senior
vice president



C-suite



Board of
directors



-Stronger customer satisfaction. More diverse perspectives enable inclusive companies to be more receptive to outside ideas and more attuned to the needs of others, including and especially their customers. That outside-in focus pays off: nearly three-fourths (73%) of First Movers say they lead their field in customer satisfaction compared to less than half (46%) of respondents from other businesses.

-Stronger employee retention and satisfaction. More women in the workforce, robust programming that leads to substantive change, and more inclusive environments translate to happier employees. 68% of First Movers say their companies top their competition in employee satisfaction and 64% say retention rates are higher.

From basic to breakthrough: Excellence in gender equity requires a shake-up

Advancing gender equity is a clear win. But doubling down on pre-COVID approaches won't get organizations where they need to be. Instead, the businesses that achieve excellence over the next few years will be those that approach women's advancement with an innovator's mindset. These 5 steps and their supporting actions can help organizations create the bolder breakthroughs they seek (see Figure 6 on page 15).

1. Pair bold thinking with big commitments.
2. Insist on making room.
3. Identify specific, crisis-related interventions.
4. Use technology to accelerate performance.
5. Create a culture of intention.

Perspective: Make it easier for women to enter high-growth fields

In an ever more digital economy, the ability to secure employment and advance in a high-wage career increasingly comes down to a candidate's digital and technical literacy. One way IBM is seeking to address this is through P-TECH: The Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools.²¹ Through partnerships with more than 200 high schools in 20 countries, P-TECH offers students the chance to get a combined high school and associate degree in a STEM field, tuition free. Targeted outreach and expanded options for job entry requirements can position more women for high-growth careers and give companies access to new pipeline talent.

Another approach is through "Returnships," a tech re-entry program that welcomes women back to work by providing them with intensive skills training and mentoring while being paid.²² A third strategy is rethinking job entry requirements, such as when the lack of a college degree can exclude otherwise qualified candidates. In response, IBM is sponsoring apprenticeships in "new collar" jobs, such as those in data science, cybersecurity, and digital design, that prioritize vocational training over a four-year college degree.²³

Move beyond well-meaning but abstract notions of “closing the gender gap.”

1. Pair bold thinking with big commitments.

In strategy, the most successful businesses move in leaps, not increments. They set their sights on 10X improvements, not 10% growth, and they create the conditions for exponential change internally. By doing so, they capture considerable advantage.

Actions to take:

Treat gender equity and diversity as though your business’s survival depends on it. Leaders should approach the gender equity opportunity with the same resources, rigor, and executive ownership as they would a major product launch, strategic initiative, or crisis response. As with business goals, if leaders are entirely comfortable with the status quo, they are not doing enough. Make gender equity a top strategic priority.

Define success in clear and concrete terms. Move beyond well-meaning but abstract notions of “closing the gender gap.” Outline what gender and racial equity mean for your organization and, specifically, what success looks like. Do the math. Include employees in defining that vision. Together, imagine a winning future state 3-5 years out in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Consider the investments and capabilities required to achieve that goal.

Drive accountability and don’t settle for acknowledgment. Organizations need to make inclusion everyone’s responsibility and back it with robust, tangible outcomes. Managers from the senior leadership level down should be assigned measurable goals, with frequent tracking and reporting to maintain focus and momentum. Those goals should encompass quantitative and qualitative dimensions that go beyond quotas. And goals should include a holistic assessment of the cultural and behavioral shifts needed to foster a welcoming, inclusive culture. Otherwise, acknowledgement without enforcement turns diversity into something that happens only when convenient, while creating a “feel good” experience for the acknowledger, who is already in a position of privilege.

2. Insist on making room.

Mandating diversity in teams isn’t just the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do. Through messaging, town halls, training, and other measures, executives need to clarify their expectations that managers at all levels staff diverse teams. As the research and example of First Movers show, gender-diverse teams are better for business. They are also how inclusion gets done.

Actions to take:

Make it a mantra to ask “Who’s missing?”

To source fresh perspectives and foster workplace health, heterogeneous teams must become the new normal. Diverse voices and bright minds are additive—including them doesn’t mean that others lose. Seats don’t need to disappear, but they do need to be reshuffled. To ingrain that mindset, leaders should establish a discipline that compels business unit heads and middle managers to look around at the start of any new project and ask, “Who’s missing?”

Set the rules of engagement. When business is on the line, change happens quickly. Assess your key partner relationships and make it clear that you refuse to do business with those whose teams are not diverse. Prominent organizations such as Goldman Sachs have already adopted this strategy, announcing it would not take companies public in the US or Europe unless they appoint at least one diverse board director.²⁴

Reward the rock stars and hold the line on others.

Empower leaders to operationalize the concept of a diverse and inclusive workforce and celebrate those who do—both visibly, through public recognition, as well as through personal incentive compensation and other rewards. Make equally clear that homogenous teams will not receive corporate funding or support, and any initiatives that are exclusively male or otherwise lacking diversity will be decommissioned.

3. Identify specific, crisis-related interventions.

The events of 2020 underscore that businesses need to move swiftly to remediate the significant challenges facing women and especially women of color.

Actions to take:

Focus on the middle. Leaders should pay particular attention to the junior and middle ranks of their organizations to fill a diverse pipeline. Targeted career re-entry programs, skills training, and new approaches to flexible scheduling can help organizations reduce the stressors facing women. (See Perspective: “Make it easier for women to enter high-growth fields” on page 11.)

Seek solutions that deliver exponential gains.

Recognizing the need to move quickly and the fact that no organization has limitless resources, companies should prioritize interventions that generate compounded benefits. Use data to track program performance and weight the portfolio toward those initiatives that deliver multiple sources of tangible value. For example, making sure women are equipped with the business, strategic, and financial knowledge to operate effectively at the senior leadership level is a critical but often overlooked element in coaching and mentoring. Closing that gap can open opportunities. Companies should also consider adopting creative new models of returning to in-office work, something that IBM Women’s Leadership Jam participants cited as crucial to enabling more women to reenter the workforce.

Show visible commitment. Diversity task forces and women’s leadership groups are an effective way to demonstrate the organization is serious about making concerted change. For example, IBM operates a Women’s Council composed of 20 senior executives—women and men alike—who come from Latin America, Asia Pacific, Europe, and the US to provide senior leadership commitment and representation worldwide to improve gender equity.

4. Use technology to accelerate performance.

Data, analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI) can help companies reduce hiring bias and take a more “customer-centric” approach when creating meaningful gender, diversity, and inclusion programs.

Actions to take:

Surface and validate new ideas. Digital tools, such as regular pulse surveys and ongoing sentiment analysis, can help organizations ascertain what’s working and what’s not with respect to women’s advancement. Building on this baseline, jams and other forms of virtual brainstorming can help crowdsource innovative approaches and test the efficacy of existing efforts.

Expand “routes to market.” Invest in collaborative tools and teaming practices that allow women and men to engage effectively in physical and remote environments even after the pandemic abates. Virtual agile team rooms and other active digitally enabled experiences can improve productivity and create new opportunities for employees to engage—helping those with family responsibilities (both men and women) to contribute meaningfully and advance in their careers.

Hardwire fairness into screening. When effectively designed, AI can flag gender, age, and ethnicity-biased language. This can trigger the re-wording of a job posting so it appeals to a broader spectrum of qualified candidates than typical screening engines would identify. Companies could also create an AI ethics team, with diverse staff, to raise awareness and develop protocols. This could include a standardized review-and-labeling system that validates the fairness, lineage, and production systems used, as suggested by one IBM Women’s Leadership Jam participant.

Where micro-aggressions tear down, micro-affirmations build up.

5. Create a culture of intention.

Authentic approaches to diversity require a conscious decision to include, advocate for, and welcome others. It extends beyond overt diversity policies for hiring and promoting employees to incorporate a multitude of everyday, intentional actions and acknowledgments that invite a variety of opinions and ideas in meetings, presentations, speaking engagements, and decision making.

Actions to take:

Move from a program mindset to a growth mindset. Diversity and inclusion initiatives are important, but organizations can't program their way to gender equity. Women want equal opportunities for learning, advancement, and career success, not shortcuts that pop them to the head of the line. By adopting a growth mindset, leaders are acknowledging the value that diverse perspectives can deliver to their individual employees, their teams, and their overall business. Leaders across the enterprise—from senior executives to first-line managers—need to be active evangelists, demonstrating and promoting inclusive attitudes and behaviors that drive this cultural change.

Be an amplifier. Where micro-aggressions tear down, micro-affirmations build up. Small, powerful, everyday interventions sow the grassroots changes needed to reap a healthy culture. Those in a position of influence, especially middle managers, should be on the alert for stretch assignments and career moves that match well with emerging talent. But all employees should be empowered to look for opportunities that enable marginalized voices to be heard—for example, in leading presentations or facilitating discussions. These may seem like trivial gestures, but they can resonate deeply. As these simple but meaningful moments accumulate, mindsets shift. An IBM Women's Leadership Jammer said, "One thing I have found helpful is for men to be advocates. In a meeting, encourage women to speak, and if you see someone is having difficulty getting a word in, step in to recognize that person."

Have the courage to embrace discomfort. Truly revitalizing performance means tackling complexity and persuading people to work in new ways. That work is messy and challenging—which is why many organizations avoid it. It's also why courage is the unsung hero in transformation. Leading organizations admit the discomfort of change and push through anyway.

Figure 6

From basic to breakthrough

How organizations can create exponential gains

	Basic	Breakthrough	Enablers
Strategic approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Diversity initiatives in place, often managed by HR, with broad targets for inclusion and advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Gender parity a top priority, with quarterly board-level and public reporting and CXO accountabilityBold organizationwide initiatives that show visible commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Digital dashboards providing management visibility, enabling early intervention, and driving better results
Targeted interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Initiatives that include staples such as mentorship, affinity groups, and unconscious bias trainingCompanywide events recognizing key days such as International Women's Day and JuneteenthPeriodic employee "pulse" surveys that gauge efficacy of programs and shape future design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Outcome-based initiatives focused on high-priority needs—for example, SOAR provides mentorship and leadership skills training for women, including those of color²⁵Outreach, such as reverse mentoring, that challenges conventional norms to instill new perspectives and cultural adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Design Thinking principles that use data, testing, and agile developmentRapid prototypingContinual test-and-learn cyclesAutomatic feedback loops, powered by machine learning
Career development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Recruitment and retention planning tailored to specific underrepresented segments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individualized "whole person" approachInitiatives backed by layered supports—for example, flexible working arrangements and more robust childcare and eldercare resourcesPersonalized development plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none">AI enablers that reduce bias in hiring and performance evaluationPersonalization technology powered by AI that has been co-created with users to help eliminate biasEmpathetic technology and digital "nudges," such as reminders using push notifications, SMS, and email
Collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Easy access to Zoom, Slack, Trello, and other virtual collaboration tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A virtual ecosystem comprising core tools such as Zoom, but also core practices, such as virtual war rooms and virtual agile teamsThe democratization of training or project opportunities, with access to remote sessions conducted by experts using augmented reality solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">AI technology that allows team members to work "side-by-side," digitally placing participants in a shared backgroundAugmented reality enabling digital information to overlay a physical environment that can be shared virtually through the use of smart glasses and mobile devices²⁶

Study approach and methodology

The IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV), in cooperation with Oxford Economics, surveyed 2,687 executives and professionals—an equal number of women and men—from organizations worldwide across multiple industries. Fielded in late 2020 through January 2021, this survey was the IBV’s second on this topic. The first was conducted for our 2019 study “Women, leadership, and the priority paradox.”²⁷

Our 2021 goal was to capture a longitudinal view determining the extent of progress in advancing women into leadership roles. As well, we wanted to broaden the scope of our research to assess the inescapable impact of the global pandemic on women’s careers and the additional challenges facing minority women.

Survey participants included C-suite officers (CEOs, CIOs, CFOs, CMOs, COOs, CHROs, and Chief Diversity Officers [CDOs]) as well as senior VPs, VPs, directors, middle managers, and nonmanagerial professionals. All respondents were employed when surveyed. Overall, their organizations were weathering the global pandemic, with only 4% reporting a significant decline in business performance.

The 10 industries represented included banking, consumer products, education, government, healthcare, insurance, manufacturing, retail, technology, and telecommunications. They each comprise 10% of our total sample. The locations covered by our survey represent a mix of areas, with the gender gap ranging from large to small. Each country (or region, in the case of the Nordics) comprises 11% of the total sample: Brazil, China, Germany, India, Japan, Kenya, the Nordics, the UK, and the US.

Data findings are based on classification analysis, maximum difference scaling (MaxDiff) analysis—a form of choice modeling—as well as financial analysis based on average revenue growth (from 2018 and 2019). All data is self-reported.

In addition to our quantitative survey, the IBV hosted a global two-day virtual jam—the IBM Women’s Leadership Jam—in cooperation with the New York City chapter of the National Organization of Women. Six concurrent sessions covered topics ranging from how technology can help eliminate gender biases to allyship and the role men play. With more than 2,600 comments contributed and nearly 30,000 data points generated from polls, we used the IBM InnovationJam® AI Dashboard with Watson Natural Language Understanding (NLU) and IBM Research Project Debater Key Point Analysis to identify conversation themes, sentiment, and insights for suggested improvements.²⁸

About the authors



Bridget van Kralingen

[linkedin.com/in/brIDGET-van-kralingen-89524415/](https://linkedin.com/in/bridget-van-kralingen-89524415/)

Bridget van Kralingen is Senior Vice President, IBM Global Markets, responsible for IBM revenue, profit, business development, and client satisfaction worldwide. She is also the Senior Executive Sponsor of the IBM Women's Executive Council and Constituency dedicated to empowering and advancing women.

Hillary Hunter

linkedin.com/in/hillary-hunter-97962a14/
hhunter@us.ibm.com

Hillary Hunter is CTO of IBM Cloud, responsible for technical strategy for cloud offerings. Her technical interests have always been interdisciplinary, spanning from silicon technology through system software, and she has served in technical and leadership roles in memory technology, systems for AI, and other areas. She was appointed an IBM Fellow in 2017.



Kitty Chaney Reed

linkedin.com/in/kitty-chaney-reed-1643081
Kitty.Chaney.Reed@ibm.com

Kitty Chaney Reed is the VP of IBM Enterprise Operations. She is responsible for sales and business operations activities for all business units. Kitty leads a team of more than 3,500 employees, located in more than 40 countries, supporting sales leaders, general managers, and senior VPs around the world. Her team is accountable for driving transformation across the enterprise, stewarding IBM's operations into the future.



Carolyn Heller Baird

linkedin.com/in/carolyn-baird-0478083
cbaird@us.ibm.com

Carolyn Heller Baird is the Global Research Leader for Customer Experience and Design with the IBM Institute for Business Value. In addition to her research on topics impacting customer experience, marketing, and digital transformation, Carolyn also covers workplace issues such as enterprise experience and gender equity. Her work spans nearly 20 years as an experience strategy consultant.



Cindy W. Anderson

linkedin.com/in/clwAnderson480/
Cindy.W.Anderson@ibm.com

Cindy W. Anderson is the Global Executive for Engagement and Eminence with the IBM Institute for Business Value, responsible for amplifying research-based insights that help leaders make smarter business decisions. Cindy was previously a CMO, founder of a strategy coalition, and workshop leader for two sessions at TEDWomen.

Contributors

The IBV would like to thank the many IBM women and men—all passionate advocates for gender equity, diversity, and inclusion—who generously contributed to the development of this study:

Traci Bermiss, IBM Global Diversity and Inclusion Leader, Black Community

Haynes Cooney, Research Director, IBM IBV

Jennifer Knecht, Vice President, IBM Services Communications

Valerie Lemieux, IBM Marketing Performance Analytics Lead

Monica Logan, Senior Partner, IBM Business Transformation Services

Obed Louissaint, Senior Vice President, IBM Transformation and Culture

Anthony Marshall, Partner, Offering Leader, IBM IBV

Julie McDougal, IBM Diversity and Inclusion Leader, Global Women Community

Rachael Morin, IBM Global Advertising Manager

Paul Papas, Global Managing Partner, IBM Business Transformation Services

Carla Grant Pickens, IBM Global Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer

Inhi Cho Suh, General Manager, IBM Strategic Partnerships

Molly Vannucci, Partner, IBM Business Transformation Services

Maria Bartolome Winans, CMO, IBM Americas Marketing

Irina Yakubenko, IBM Executive Communications Lead to the CMO & SVP

Thank you to the “behind the scenes” team that helped make this study possible: Stephen Ballou, Madhuri Banda, Christian Bieck, Kristin Biron, Liam Cleaver, Pamela Dempsey, Jacob Dencik, Mandy Drouin, Talita Cristina Paro Fabene, Heather Fraser, Marie Glenn, Jordan Hand, Tegan Jones, Rachel Larkin, Kris Lawas, Kathleen Martin, Joni McDonald, Hebatallah Nashaat, Jim Newswanger, Stephen Ollice, Carrie Ritchie, Samantha Russell, Lucy Sieger, Mya Singleton, Smitha Soman, Kevin Vaughan, and Anne Marie Weber.

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In addition to our quantitative survey, the IBV hosted a global two-day virtual jam—the IBM Women’s Leadership Jam—in cooperation with the New York City chapter of the National Organization of Women. Six concurrent sessions covered topics ranging from how technology can help eliminate gender biases to allyship and the role men play.

With more than 2,600 comments contributed and nearly 30,000 data points generated from polls, we used the IBM InnovationJam® AI Dashboard with Watson Natural Language Understanding (NLU) and IBM Research Project Debater Key Point Analysis to identify conversation themes, sentiment, and insights for suggested improvements. To learn more, visit <https://www.collaborationjam.com>.

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New Orchard Road
Armonk, NY 10504
Produced in the United States of America
March 2021

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