

# Your Journey to Executive

Insights from IBM Women Executives  
from the 2012-2013 Advancing Women  
at IBM Executive Research Study



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## Foreword

Within a company, building new leaders is critical to meet growth and business objectives. Knowing this, IBM Diversity and Inclusion and the IBM Global Women's Council sponsored the Advancing Women at IBM Study, a research project focusing on IBM women executives.

During the course of 2012 and early 2013, 639 IBM women executives from around the world participated. The objective was to learn first hand from each of the women executives and document their collective executive journeys. The goal was to have successful women executives in IBM share their personal insights, learning and experiences regarding their advancement into and up the executive ranks in IBM.

IBM commissioned this study because we are deeply committed to the advancement of women in the workplace. The sheer number of executive women that voluntarily participated shows the importance that our leadership places on attracting and retaining talented women.

One result of the study is this paper, which is intended to offer insights for those who desire to become executives. We are not suggesting you have to follow each one to become an executive, or that doing so will result in a promotion. We are sharing these perspectives because we are convinced that they provide insights and ideas that will help you along your career journey and help you to achieve your highest potential.

The recommendations contained in the paper are not gender specific; they could apply to anyone. However, we will refer to women throughout the paper because the survey and interviews were exclusively focused on women.

## Introduction

Any company's success is dependent on the high performance of its employees. Our clients consistently tell us that IBM is distinguished by the performance, capability and dedication of our people. Interestingly, 95 percent of executive women who participated felt that consistent high performance was the most important factor in their advancement within IBM. But in a company with so many high performers, finding appropriate ways to stand out and separate yourself from the rest is also an important element in your success. In this paper we will share the insights, experiences and recommendations gathered from over 450 interviews with IBM executive women. This invaluable information has been pulled together for you to learn from and apply to your own career journey.

Three themes emerged from the study: 1) Be visible; 2) Plan your career; and 3) Integrate work and life.

For the first theme, Be visible, the idea is that high performance is essential, but not enough. To succeed to the executive ranks, you have to be visible. You have to be willing to take on critical, visible roles that stretch you, develop you and provide an opportunity to demonstrate competence and leadership. Our participants also emphasized the need to develop a strong network within the company who know your abilities and skills and who are willing to make them visible to their peers. You must also know how to promote yourself both internally and externally.

The second theme, Plan your career, emphasizes the requirement that you take control and plan your career. This requires proactive career discussions with your manager and actively seeking out the roles you want rather than waiting for them to come to you. But most of all you need to understand that you need a strong team of supporters that are acquainted with your work and can give you honest feedback on career decisions.

The last theme, Integrate work and life, may be the hardest to achieve, but is no less important than the other two. We heard from women throughout the study about the importance of working in a flexible environment. For many, the key may be in harnessing the right mix of programs, resources and support both within your company and at home and balancing that with the needs of the business.

## Study by the numbers

639

Women executives participated in the survey

450

Women executives were interviewed

30

Countries represented

200

Women conducted the 1:1 interviews



## Be visible

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"We have plenty of high performing women in IBM. It isn't about getting people to perform better; it is about visibility of those performing well."

# Be visible

In a high performance culture, women need to take advantage of every opportunity to make themselves visible and stand out. 95 percent of the survey respondents identified “consistently exceeding performance expectations” as the most important activity for career advancement. As one of our executives in the study said, “We have plenty of high performing women in IBM. It isn’t about getting people to perform better; it is about visibility of those performing well.” So how do you increase your visibility?

## **Seek out highly visible stretch and growth roles**

In conjunction with your manager, look for roles that provide an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to work through complex and business-critical tasks to your peers, leaders and decision-makers across the company. This may involve stepping outside of your comfort zone to take a role that will require you to learn and demonstrate new skills that will help you grow as a leader. Volunteer to lead a team. Seek out a stretch assignment that allows you to work with a group within the company that you are interested in joining. Take on a challenging role in another part of the business that puts you on a steep learning curve. The important point is to make sure you deliver superior results and let others know what you are doing. As one executive in the study said, “It is very important to do excellent work every day, but it is also important to stand out, to ‘sell’ your work to the rest of the company.”

“It is impossible to advance if you are invisible.”

## **Build your eminence**

Taking stock of your own personal eminence internally and externally will help you understand how well known you are in your field. Search your name on the Internet. What comes up, if anything? Your aim should be to formalize your brand—define who you are, so others will understand the value you bring to the table.

So how do you do that? You can start small or large, depending on your goals and the amount of time you can spend. Make sure you have a complete and up-to-date resume and internal profile and that you actively participate in internal social media networks, if applicable. For some this may also mean creating a profile in Facebook, LinkedIn or other social media tool and keeping a professional and social presence. For others, it could mean contacting your company’s communications team to volunteer for speaking engagements, press interviews, publication opportunities, panel discussions, etc. With the time constraints that everyone has, it makes sense to tie the work you are doing to build your eminence as closely as you can to your own job. Concentrate on what you want to be “known for” or the “expert in.” Consider blogging or tweeting about events or conferences you are already attending. If you can link building your eminence back to your own career enhancement and benefiting your company’s business, that will ensure you allocate the time you need and allow you to justify the time spent.

Of course it's critical to make sure you have deep expertise in your subject, coupled with strong communication and presentation skills, before you put yourself out there as a subject matter expert. So invest in developing yourself and maintaining your expertise by using both internal and external learning offerings.

### **Network**

Throughout the study, our executives stressed the importance of networking. But we also heard that women sometimes may not feel as comfortable networking as they should. So how do you network? Let's step back from the traditional idea of networking—a large social gathering with people chatting and handing out business cards. That is certainly one way to do it. But a network can be created every day from those you interact with on the phone, through e-mail, social media, etc. Make sure your network knows what you have to offer and what problems you can help them solve, and you will have the opportunity to influence the thinking of others.

Think about the diversity of your network. Do you have a good mix across geography, industry, profession, gender, race/culture, subject matter expertise, etc.? Are there areas where you need to expand your network? Remember the importance of a network is to get to know and learn from others and allow them to know you and learn from you, so you develop a mutually beneficial relationship. The added benefit is that networking can increase your motivation and job satisfaction by allowing you to share experiences and help each other.

### **Create a “career advisory team”**

The women in the study consistently cited the importance of creating a team of people around you that know your skills, talents and career aspirations. You can think of this group of people as your personal “career advisory team.” The ideal makeup consists of your mentors, former and current managers, coaches and advocates. But you should decide who can best help you with your career and make sure he/she is well-acquainted with your skills and development goals.

Defining the roles of your team is up to you, but here are some of the suggestions from our executive women.

- A mentor is someone who can offer valuable career guidance and advice and help you expand your network by linking you to his/her colleagues. You should have at least one mentor, but think about having several mentors who span across geographies, lines of business, areas of expertise and levels of seniority — offering you a diverse perspective. To find a mentor, look for others who have the skills, attributes and experience you seek. Your manager can also help connect you with the right person based on his/her knowledge of you, your career aspirations and development needs. A mentor can also provide you with insights and feedback on how to improve your performance as well as your “brand” and reputation.



### **Creating a team around you**

**93%**

of women indicated that they had an advocate

- Former and current managers are great additions to your team. They are well-acquainted with your skills, experiences and relative performance. Their feedback is critical to your ability to create and execute development plans that ensure you have the capability to succeed as your career advances.
- Coaches go beyond the role of a mentor. They help you with specific skills you need to acquire, such as technical/professional expertise, public speaking, building presentations, or engaging a client. For this role, find someone you admire for the particular skill you want to strengthen and ask for assistance in this area.
- Advocates are critical to advancement. An advocate is someone that knows you and has personal insights into your capability, performance and results. He or she goes beyond giving advice. This is a person that can represent you well based on his/her knowledge of your skills, performance and career aspirations, so that you are considered for positions that will grow and advance your career. 93 percent of the executive women in our study said they had an advocate. They stressed the importance of having strong advocates that know what you can do, are convinced of your potential and who are well-connected and highly respected within the organization. Finding an advocate is not quite as easy as a mentor. As one executive said, “Mentors advise... advocates take risks for you.” As such, you’ll have to earn the respect of an advocate through your demonstration of consistent high performance and strong results — across multiple assignments. Mentors and managers who have watched and supported you in the earlier part of your career may later become your strongest advocates.

Regardless of which members you choose to add to your team, the message from our executives was clear. You need to make sure those around know what you can do and what you want to do. The women also stressed that it did not matter if your career advisory team members were male or female, but it was important to have a diverse group of individuals supporting you.

### **Help other women with advancement**

Along your career journey you will encounter lots of people that will help you and offer encouragement. Reciprocate by helping your fellow women, and men for that matter, to develop. Helping others to achieve their highest potential is an expectation for every executive and is an important way for you to demonstrate leadership. Many of the women in the study said they made it a personal objective to help other women. One executive who works in a male-dominated industry says she goes out of her way to try to do just that. “When another woman comes in I try to say, ‘How can I help you?’” The assistance you provide to another person at a point in time of your career is likely to come back to you two-fold. And again you will continue to broaden your network and create an advocate for your skills and talents with each person you help.

The assistance you provide to another person at a point in time of your career may come back to you two-fold.



# Plan your career

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“Find what you’re passionate about, develop a game plan and execute that plan with confidence.”



# Plan your career

Throughout the survey, our women executives referred to the fact that many women (including the participants) think that if they do their jobs well, that will be enough. As one executive said, “Women expect to be rewarded and tend to sit back a little bit.” Unfortunately, that’s not always the case. Careers are not always handed to you. You have to take control of your career path, create a plan and take advantage of the human resource programs and resources available to you.

## **Create a career plan**

“Find what you’re passionate about, develop a game plan and execute that plan with confidence.” This advice from one of our women executives is the basis for creating your career plan. You need to know where you are going to figure out which path to take, so make sure you sit down with your manager and others on your career advisory team and create a plan for your career. Base your plan on what you truly want, where your interest and capabilities lie and what stirs your passion. Throughout the study interviews, our executives stressed the importance of knowing what you want and where you want to take your career rather than simply “going after a title.” If you follow your passion, the titles and promotions will follow you. The women executives also emphasized that asking for what you want is not perceived as aggressive . . . it’s expected. Think through your next job role and three steps ahead of that. Ask your manager to set up informational interviews with people that already have those jobs. This will help you decide if it’s truly a role you want and also allow you to see what skills you need to build in order to qualify for the job. Remember to look for highly visible roles that give you the opportunity to demonstrate your ability to senior management. Lastly, document your plans and make your ambitions known to your manager and “career advisory team.”

## **Engage regularly with your “career advisory team”**

Ask the members of your career advisory team to help as well. Can they help you to think through your aspirations and make contacts with colleagues in your areas of interest? Also ask them to give you feedback on career options and your readiness to take on roles within the company. Even after you create your career plan, you have to continue to have proactive career discussions with your managers and your team. Ask for honest feedback on your work, performance, skills and potential. Constructive feedback and criticism are essential to your ability to grow, so listen and execute on the insights. You’ll want to keep regular contact with each member of your team. The better acquainted your team members are with your skills, performance and talents, the more easily they will be

Have  
confidence  
in your skills  
and go  
after what  
you want.

able to be a strong advocate for you. Also, keep in mind what one executive said to us, “Women tend to question their own ability even though the company may feel they’re ready.” Have confidence in your skills and go after what you want. Taking on roles that require you to tackle a steep learning curve will demonstrate leadership and show your willingness to take on reasonable risks.

### **Stretch your skills**

To grow your career and increase your eminence or brand within the company, you are going to have to step outside your comfort zone and stretch your skills. This could mean seeking out short-term or stretch assignments or job rotations. In many cases, projects can be found by networking with colleagues. Your manager and human resources partner can also help you find these opportunities, but they have to know you are looking for opportunities to expand your skills.

If there are skill gaps, look for education, development experiences and opportunities to increase your skills and knowledge. Here are some examples:

- Formal course work—including technical and industry training—online or face-to-face
- Participating in appropriate company internal communities, if available
- Experiential development—such as on-the-job training, shadowing a client, executive or colleague
- External certifications, programs and degrees
- Books, journals and periodicals
- Participating in professional and industry groups on external social sites, such as LinkedIn
- Serving on boards or committees for associations related to your profession, area of expertise, and job role

- Joining and participating in events held by industry, trade, benchmarking or professional groups
- Watching webcasts, participating in virtual and in-person conferences
- Listening to earnings calls, investor calls, and other webcasts by clients and other leading companies
- Taking university courses relevant to your profession and expertise.

### **Expand your cultural reach**

According to the survey results, one of the top three attributes which leaders of tomorrow will need to succeed is a global mindset. For some women this may be obtained through an international assignment. However, for some an international assignment may not be feasible because of personal circumstances. Perhaps a short-term assignment, job rotation or job shadowing in another country could be the answer. Working on a global project or with global clients will also give you an experience outside of your own culture. Several executives interviewed suggested mentoring or coaching someone in another part of the world to understand his/her culture. Look for education and learning to help you strengthen your global mindset.



## Integrate work and life

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Flexible work arrangements are options that enable employees to meet their personal needs and also permit the company to deliver on its commitments to clients and the business.

# Integrate work and life

According to the survey results, the majority of executive women stated that difficulty integrating work and personal/family life is a significant obstacle to women's progress to the executive level. In a global, 24x7 workplace, it can be difficult to integrate the two. However, based on information gathered in the interviews, many of our executive women have learned to manage the obstacles in front of them. In fact, almost uniformly in our executive interviews, women cited the importance of a flexible work environment. As one executive said, "Lots of work can be done outside the 8 to 5 timeframe." But to take advantage of a truly flexible environment, women need to know what options are available to them and understand how to balance these options with the needs of the business. In addition, they also can learn a great deal from the women that have preceded them.

## **Don't feel guilt about decisions**

As you make decisions about what meetings or appointments you can attend or what projects you can take on, you may feel some guilt about your decisions. According to our women executives the challenge is not to ignore the guilt altogether, but at the least, try to minimize it. Make a decision and stand behind it. As one executive put it, "Don't spend your time feeling guilty afterwards because you may be putting unnecessary pressure on yourself." For times when you have to say, "No," offer alternatives where possible. Prioritizing is essential. And when you decide something is a lower priority, don't feel guilty about it. As one successful executive said, "For me, I have given up the concept that everything has to be perfect... the house is not 100 percent clean, thank you notes go out later than I'd want them to, etc."

## **Delegate**

As a high-performing woman, the idea of delegating anything at work or home can be scary. Facing the reality that you can't do it all can be a shock to your system. However, if you look at this through the veil of concentrating on the most important activities and handing off those activities that can be competently managed by others, then delegating doesn't seem like compromising.

At the office, think about what projects and deliverables you can hand off to others that would be mutually beneficial for them, as well. If you need assistance, ask. Having help may actually increase the value of the outcome. Consider what one of our executive women said, "The reason you get to the next level is not the hours you put in but the way you think, delegate, and take responsibility."

At home, determine areas where you can get help. Perhaps it's taking advantage of on-site drop-off daycare, employing an afterschool babysitter or nanny or seeking assistance with elder care responsibilities. Is grocery delivery or dry-cleaning pickup available in your area? If affordable and culturally acceptable, think also about using housekeeping and lawn care service. These are all time savers that could give you back valuable time to spend with your family or on other pursuits.

## Women in IBM

66%

Executive women  
are working mothers

*\*Based on data from YE2012*

Many of the women in our study recommended taking advantage of the IT and mobile tools available to you. Time management tools are critical for keeping organized. One idea is to keep a master calendar with color codes for each member of the house and for work and life events and meetings. Applications for your smartphone or tablet can help with this.

### **Create a support network**

Having a strong support network for your personal life is critical to meet the challenges of integrating work and life. You may need to ask help of those around you—friends, family, and neighbors. One executive advised, “Scheduling is so important. If you have an important family event, block that time. If you can’t attend an event, ask for support from other family members to attend.”

Perhaps you can join a carpool to help with taking the children to school, share meals or childcare, or take advantage of a “parents’ night out” offered at your child’s preschool. Having strong support at home could also mean talking with your spouse about doing more at home or even deciding to stay at home. Several women in our study told us that their spouses chose to become stay-at-home partners to provide better support to the family.

### **Understand the resources and programs available to you**

Find out what programs your company offers to assist with work/life integration. For many, flexible work arrangements are options that enable employees to meet their personal needs and also permit the company to deliver on its commitments to clients and the business. The use of these options and programs requires the employee and manager to balance the needs of the business and the employee, so talk with your manager to see what will work best for you and the company.

### **Seek out role models**

Sometimes realizing that you are not alone in a struggle for work/life integration is a great comfort. So seek out other women to have as role models. You can learn from each other. Find those successful women you admire and ask them what strategies they employ. Here are some tips from our interviews:

- 1) Take ownership of your calendar. “I integrate my work and family calendars into one and put important school events for my children in the calendar, so that time is blocked for me to attend those events.”
- 2) Be sure to spend quality time with your family during the weekend, holidays and vacations. “I reserve the weekend for my family and only get on the systems on Sunday night after my children go to bed to prepare the work for the coming week. And I truly take time off when I am on vacation, so I can spend quality time with my family.”
- 3) Invest time for yourself. “I make the effort to spend time to network with the professionals from outside of IBM. External networking helps me see things from different perspectives and get reenergized.”

And just as important as your journey to become an executive is to be a good role model yourself. Model the behavior you would like to see in others. Don’t call meetings or set an expectation that email will be answered on the weekends. Be respectful of

non-traditional work hours and time zones when scheduling meetings with colleagues or calling them on the phone. This is obviously difficult with a global company, but it can be manageable. Set aside certain days of the week you can work late or early, so you can interact with colleagues around the world. One of our women executives emphasized the importance of working smarter. For example, make sure your meetings have agendas, so you aren't wasting time.

Work/life integration extends to your own personal pursuits, as well. So don't overlook the importance of developing a fully-rounded you. This could mean fitting in a yoga class, going for a run or walk after a difficult meeting or just having some time to have lunch with a friend. As one executive said, "You have to take time for yourself—otherwise you can't take care of others."

Many of the women in the study stressed that work/life integration is not just a woman's issue. Men also struggle with this, as well. If we can encourage more open communication across both genders, perhaps we can help make work/life integration more manageable. And if more women stand up and say, "I have a hard stop at 4:00 p.m. to pick up my child," it may give men the courage to do the same.

## Research methodology

The Advancing Women at IBM Research Study included both a quantitative survey of 13 questions and set of one-on-one interviews with the executive women to gain additional insights and recommendations. For the survey portion of the study, we had over 639 executive women participate in May 2012. To delve deeper into the findings, the project team then took the survey results and developed the eight interview questions on topics including: Work/Life Integration, Building Professional Eminence, and Building a High Performance Culture. The one-on-one interviews were conducted with 450 IBM executive women from October 2012 to January 2013. The interviews were carried out by over 200 of IBM's identified future women leaders, giving them a chance to hear the feedback first hand and expand their professional network.

In partnership with IBM's Workforce Analytics team, using IBM's predictive analytics tools, we analyzed the survey data and over 270 pages of interview comments. Based on the input from each question, we grouped the findings into three main themes and developed the advice for women aspiring to be executives.

The project team included members from: IBM HR Diversity & Inclusion, IBM Business and Technical Leadership, and IBM Workforce Analytics. We would like to thank all of the IBM executives who participated. The overwhelming response received spoke loud and clear about the importance of this topic as a strategic imperative. We would like to also thank the hundreds of IBM women who helped conduct these interviews. This project would not have been possible without you. As we have heard from many of you, the opportunity to participate was an incredible professional development experience.

To learn more about the study, please contact Heather Howell, [hrhowell@us.ibm.com](mailto:hrhowell@us.ibm.com) or Kim Stephens, [kimstephens@us.ibm.com](mailto:kimstephens@us.ibm.com).

"I really enjoyed conducting the interviews. I have found it personally very insightful to hear firsthand what will make a difference to my own career."

— IBM employee in the UK

## **IBM's commitment to diversity and employee success**

Since our first woman hired in 1889, IBM has been dedicated to the inclusion and advancement of women in the workplace.

IBM's enduring commitment to diversity is one of the reasons we can credibly say that IBM is one of the world's leading globally integrated enterprises. We also understand that diversity goes beyond fair hiring practices and protection for all employees. It also includes a focus on how those disparate pieces fit together to create an innovative, integrated whole. We call this approach "inclusion."

While our differences shape who we are as individual IBMers, our shared corporate culture and values remain central to our mutual success. IBMers around the world work in an environment where diversity—including diversity of thought—is the norm, which yields a commitment to creating client innovation in every part of our business. Learn more at [ibm.com/employment/us/diverse](http://ibm.com/employment/us/diverse) and [ibm.com/employment/jobs/women\\_at\\_ibm.shtml](http://ibm.com/employment/jobs/women_at_ibm.shtml).



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