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Abstract

[Excerpt] There are many areas of opportunity regarding gender fairness that can be crucial in defining a workplace. Some workplaces tend to be male-dominated due to women employees' awareness, past experiences, and priorities. Male majority organizations give men the most power and influence over decisions, which in turn could affect women dramatically. Although the past discrimination women have faced has been changing, women may still face a variety of challenges in their male-dominated roles today. Those women who jump feet first into roles predominately held by males seek support from their colleagues while facing challenges of feeling incompetent, mistreatment, and lack of a voice in their workplaces. This article intends to explore these challenges and provide some possible solutions in creating an equal workplace for all employees.

Keywords

HR Review, male-dominated careers, female participation, workplace equality

Comments

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CORNELL HR REVIEW

Women in Male-Dominated Careers

Janelle Gaines

There are many areas of opportunity regarding gender fairness that can be crucial in defining a workplace. Some workplaces tend to be male-dominated due to women employees' awareness, past experiences, and priorities. Male majority organizations give men the most power and influence over decisions, which in turn could affect women dramatically. Although the past discrimination women have faced has been changing, women may still face a variety of challenges in their male-dominated roles today. Those women who jump feet first into roles predominately held by males seek support from their colleagues while facing challenges of feeling incompetent, mistreatment, and lack of a voice in their workplaces. This article intends to explore these challenges and provide some possible solutions in creating an equal workplace for all employees.

Why Women Do Not Participate in Male-Dominated Careers

Awareness & Settings

There are a variety of reasons that disable women from participating in male-dominated careers: lack of awareness, performance settings, backgrounds, and their ultimate priorities in their lives. Throughout history, most notable scientists were always predominately male. These preconceived notions that women receive at a young age may minimize their participation or interest in science and engineering fields and lead them to more female-dominated roles such as teaching. Another reason that women stray away from predominately male-held careers is because women sometimes set very high standards for themselves that hinder their ability to work well in male-dominated environments. Employees are said to perform better in their own gender-dominated society and career field. Women are seen as role models where they can use coaching styles in female-dominated professions; while men may be better managing in strict command styles. The lack of awareness and perfect performance setting for women may be two large factors pushing them away from male majority careers.

Past Experiences

In addition, a person's career may be determined by his or her experiences and/or his or her biological nature (nature versus nurture). There are cultural implications that enable or disable female participation in male-dominated fields. For instance, parental and mentor support are large factors in sustaining women in male majority fields. Although many women drop out of careers in male-dominated fields due to lack of support, others

might show resilience by using their struggle as a motivating factor to keep going. Although there is evidence that women face challenges that make them hesitant to join male majority careers, there is also evidence that some women are just not interested and deliberately choose a different route due to their own priorities. There are “sex differences in resources, abilities, and choices” that create a low representation of women in certain jobs, especially those related to academic disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (or STEM).ⁱ Men and women can vastly differ in the sponsorship, money, and support they receive in the workplace, which can affect their choice in career paths.

Other Priorities

Lastly, some women choose to put their role as a wife and mother ahead of their career decisions. These women often select part-time careers based on their spouses’ jobs to raise their children. For some, childcare costs are more than what a woman would earn in the workplace resulting in many women not being able to afford to work. Furthermore, women may seek out more free time to participate in valuable activities outside of their career and therefore may choose careers with fewer constraints of them to mitigate the balance between being a mother and working. Women ultimately have the choice to put their careers or family first, while some attempt to balance both equally. A woman can have different priorities for how she wants to spend her time, which may contribute to her choosing a family over a career.

Challenges Women Face

Lack of Support

For those women who choose to partake in a male-dominated career, they may face a variety of challenges such as: lack of support, lower income, a perception of incompetence, mistreatment and unfairness in their role, and overall lack of voice. Two key challenges women face in predominately male careers are a lack of support from their colleagues and a lack of equitable income. Attempting to fix the lack of support, women that do decide to try male-dominated careers may be more concerned with the interpersonal relationships they make rather than the work they are doing. The mistreatment and lack of understanding of women in male majority careers can make women eager to find support within their field. They may try to find support and fit in with the male population majority by adapting to male behaviors. Along with these challenges, women receive lower economic gains than males in the same field.ⁱⁱ There are efforts to rectify these negative impacts on women but there is still work to be done to create equality, especially when women choose male-dominated careers.

In the same way, the people in the professions, i.e., men may be unaware of the challenges women face with balancing their work and family. Some women believe that their young children put the most stress on their management of work and non-work roles. They may be the person solely in charge of their children on their sick days and need help during those emergency situations. For instance, when a child has a snow day

unexpectedly, mothers may have to miss work to take care of the situation. Together, these significant encounters make women hesitant to participate in male majority careers.

Image of Incompetence

In addition, women may have to work harder than men in their science, technology, engineering and math careers (STEM) to be rated as competent compared to their male counterparts. Women sometimes receive less credit than men for doing the same work in the fields. After interviewing four female engineers, it was clear that some women can feel biases in past male dominated professions. These biases in turn can affect men and women differently throughout their careers, but especially in their performance management. One woman in the automotive industry said the men got paid more and were offered the majority of promotional opportunities.ⁱⁱⁱ She believed she worked harder than the men in the industry did and was still not taken seriously. Upon receiving performance evaluations, her manager could not provide examples to define what she was doing wrong. Treating this employee differently than the rest and not being able to provide proof for her evaluation, her manager lacked consistency; he was not making the decision based on informational justice. The negative feelings the woman expressed, showed that she did not feel respected in this career and had no input in the decisions being made. This woman did not feel welcomed and appreciated in her work atmosphere—eliminating her trust in the company, which ultimately forced her to leave. Women may have to work harder to reach for equitable treatment in male-dominated careers and be considered competent among their male counterparts.

Gender Unfairness & Mistreatment

The harsh mistreatment women face in the male-dominated workplace presents a host of challenges. When asked about unfairness in their past male majority careers, the women who were interviewed explained their past mistreatment in a variety of ways. Disparate treatment or sexual harassment may have been occurring if employees are called nicknames or treated inappropriately based upon their gender. Some were called derogatory names like “sweetie” or “honey”, which created tension in their workplaces. Derogatory names ultimately drive a lack of professional conduct, which eliminates the dignity and courtesy in a workplace that all employees deserve. Other women felt they were working harder than some of the males who were getting promoted, claiming they always had to try to impress someone. The women believed they had to set higher standards than necessary just to be recognized. This demonstrates that some male-dominated fields may have lacked distributive justice in their reward systems in the past. These women did not feel they were being given the same treatment and opportunities as other males based upon their contributions.

Lack of Voice

Lastly, some of the women interviewed believed their past careers did not give them proper opportunity to voice concerns. Voice is discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, opinions, or concerns intended to help the organization.

An employee's silence can be a result of either the perception that the company will not change from that employee's voice or that retaliation will occur from their voice. Because the women felt that they were being judged by others, they were discouraged from speaking up, which resulted in decreased engagement and creativity during meeting discussions. The women believed they had higher stress levels and had a lower sense of control regarding their performance and rewards without a voice.

Solutions: Creating Workplace Equality

Although changes are occurring slowly, many companies are working hard to create workplace equality in different ways: networking options, affinity groups, accommodations, better communication practices, work-life balance, and shifting company's male-centered mindset.

Networking

Many women feed off of others' support to eliminate the discomfort they face from their male-dominated companies, which makes support and networking very important. When surrounded by valued women, women had higher self-value which suggests that encouragement and support from colleagues impacts women's way of life in the workplace. Often times, women feel a sense of self-value from the reciprocation they receive from other women. When women or any employee receive little support, but especially in a male-dominated society, they are less motivated and innovative in their work. As a result, women need to network to experience the interpersonal justice they feel they deserve.^{iv} Career counselors are available in many workplaces that allow employees to dive deeper into their interests to understand themselves including their decisions with their career, education, and overall life. They provide options and support to those seeking growth or advising. Companies, especially with a male majority focus could ensure their career counselors are emphasizing to their women employees the availability of women's groups and available networks for women. This can help advise women that they are not alone in the company and there are many role models to learn from on their path to success.

Affinity Groups

In the same way, employees join affinity groups for a host of many positive reasons. Many women engineers spoke highly in support of the Women's Forum affinity group at FCA US LLC. Affinity groups such as the Women's Forum have been found to help women with their careers, build a culture of diversity, and ultimately drive community engagement. The Women's Forum has assisted women in gaining leadership development experiences, participating in lunch and learns, and building mentor circles to drive women engineers' careers forward. In addition, the affinity group enables women to gain a support system where they can hear one another's personal struggles which helps shed some light on being a woman in a male-dominated society. Moreover, the FCA US group members believed that this organization helped them to meet new people, volunteer, and learn from one another in a safe environment. After making connections

with other co-workers and discussing practical issues together through affinity groups, the women became more visible and valued in the company, and increased their motivation in their work while giving back to the community. Affinity groups like the Women's Forum have a positive impact on women's motivation, and ultimately drive a community of support and career development for women in male-dominated careers.

Accommodations

Companies can utilize the power of affinity groups to reduce equality in the workplace and rectify policies of causing mistreatment of all personnel in the workplace. In their own affinity groups, women can feel comfortable communicating their issues. Heads of each affinity group can meet bi-weekly with the managers of the company to discuss those important concerns that women are facing in their workplaces. Managers can improve the workplace by getting involved and showing respect for women employees and by taking care of their concerns. The continuous communication between affinity groups and managers can eliminate stress while creating a more comfortable environment for women. In the same way, some companies are transitioning to policies that show better understanding and comfort to pregnant employees. For example, some companies supply employees a private room and refrigerator to store milk after pregnancy. The meetings between affinity groups and managers can make sure each woman is represented fairly and can bridge the gaps between women employees' concerns and their managers and company policies.

Better Communication Practices

Companies can change some aspects about their communication and brainstorming tactics to encourage female employees to voice their concerns. Employees can be given surveys to anonymously explain when or why they do not feel they can use their voice in company meetings. Suggestion boxes can also provide a better way for employees to voice their questions and concerns anonymously. Before meetings, the manager can also send out an email with the topic the group will be discussing. From there, those who do not feel they can speak up during the meeting can send emails with their reactions or possible suggestions to the manager beforehand. The manager can announce the employees' suggestions and it will be the manager's responsibility to retrieve and speak out for the employees. Another way companies can help add voice is by having conversations circulate through each member of the meeting through a quick "spin", that way each person's suggestions are heard. These new ways of communicating are steps in the right direction to changing the overall climate of male-dominated careers for women to be represented fairly and consistently and treated the same.

Work-Life Balance

Managers in male majority careers can try to be more aware of the challenges women face balancing their work and home life by giving employees the option to manage their boundaries in hours, location of work and even vacation time to fit their preferences. Flexible hours can ease women's stress of travel, work, and being present in their

children's lives. "Companies are seeing that employees need a greater sense of autonomy in their work".^v Autonomy in the workplace means employees would receive more ownership of their work tasks and responsibilities and even may control their work schedules. This concept attracts future employees and motivates current employees to work harder for their company. One interviewee also noted she rarely checks her phone or email on weekends and vacations to keep her work and home-life separated.^{vi} Organizations should be more aware of the challenges that women face to support them as best as they can with their work-life balance.

Although many companies are taking action to make sure women can balance both work and family life, there are further steps that can be taken to balance work and parenting. Companies can provide childcare in their facilities to enable women easy access to a babysitter. Companies can also schedule "Take Your Child to Work Days" to make it easier for women on their children's various days off from school. Managers can show support by allowing employees a certain amount of free time in the workplace per week to make appointments and work around their children's scheduled activities. Companies can also provide employees with lunch once a week to decrease their number of responsibilities. This would allow parents to focus less on preparing meals and more time working or getting a proper night's rest for work the next day. Companies and managers can create new ideas to provide women a better way of managing their work and home life.

Cultural Mind Shift to Equality

Many women change jobs due to the challenges they face and lack of equality in male-dominated roles. A great example of a supportive company is FCA US which went through a large cultural mind shift from the old boys' club mentality to now making all female employees visible and sponsored. The women interviewed said they felt their interests were considered and the support they receive is beyond their expectations. They band together in sharing information and expertise to help educate one another and champion mentorship to funnel more female leaders in the organization. Female employees who have moved jobs to new women-sponsored companies feel as if their ideas and opinions are visible and seen as important. These women feel they give their best efforts because the company values them and their contributions. They have a sense of trust and commitment to their careers for the company's work in providing them fairness especially when seeing more women superiors in the field. Efforts are being made in male-dominated field to eliminate the challenges women face integrating into their role by placing emphasis on training and orientation for all their employees through a cultural mind shift to equality.

Explore Social Implications: Neutral Activities

The majority of women in male-dominated fields seem to have high confidence and self-efficacy which might be due to the fact that women have to be strong, fearless, and dedicated to what they believe in to push through the cultural and psychological barriers. Companies can eliminate the barriers of unfairness to help create a new world of gender

equality within an organization. According to interviews, women felt after-work social events were not inclusive to their interests and thus, not as comfortable asking for support in the workplace due to their feelings of exclusion. While managers cannot necessarily stop male groups of employees from retreating, they can schedule additional social events that are gender neutral. The company or manager of the department can host company picnics to create collaboration, community and teamwork among the group of employees. Employees can meet their colleagues' families and gain a sense of unity outside the workplace. Women will be able to feel more at home with their job seeing that their coworkers are trying to understand their lifestyles while including them in the fun. While there are many factors that affect the selection of a career, gender differences play an important role. By exploring the social implications that women face in the workplace, one can recognize why women may feel segregated and alone in male-dominated careers.

Conclusion

Women's choices, resources, and biases against them are affecting their career preferences. Many who do work in male-dominated careers face challenges of lack of support, voice, and acknowledgement of their balance between home life and their careers. The women, in turn, can create connections through affinity groups to gain support and collaboration. There are various actions companies can take to reduce women's feelings of inequality. One example is to let women manage their own schedules, which can facilitate women's balancing act between work and home. Companies can be more proactive to properly create a system in which women are comfortable and valued in their male-dominated careers. By incorporating some of these measures, women will feel more balanced with their male counterparts in the workplace, thus helping them be more productive to the company, creating a more satisfying and successful workplace experience for all employees. ✎

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