

CLIMBING THE LEADERSHIP LADDER

Why women remain underrepresented at leadership levels in
the technology industry?



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Executive Summary

The technology is an industry where women's share of leadership is far from parity. Despite strong diversity and inclusion efforts, gender disparity at leadership levels suggests that women lack equal opportunities and encounter barriers that impede their career growth and progression into leadership roles. The structural interventions and processes are necessary but not sufficient to remedy the disappointing lack of progress toward gender parity.

In interviews with 7 human resources (HR) professionals currently employed in the technology industry, this report provides insights into why women remain notably underrepresented as they climb the leadership ladder despite concerted efforts on diversity and gender parity, and what makes current efforts less effective at the leadership. Starting with talent decisions and how unintended bias impacts decision-making, this report highlights the importance of diversity at the decision-making tables, and how the paucity of women role models in the upper echelons of management perpetuates the status quo, amplifying the impact of leadership attributes premised on pernicious gender stereotypes.

To equalize the path to leadership, organizations need to go beyond structural changes and progressively disrupt bias in talent processes – selection, performance evaluation, and promotion. De-biasing people is as equally important as de-biasing talent processes to achieve more objective talent decisions and better diversity outcomes. Leveling the uneven playing field requires a sense of collective endeavor and an environment that promotes open communication and courageous conversations about existing gaps and potential biases that disadvantage women on several levels of the talent cycle. Only then can organizations make more substantial and meaningful progress toward gender parity, and reap the rewards of having a diverse leadership team.

Introduction

Background

Global workforce participation for women has been steadily increasing for more than 40 years¹. This macro shift recently affected compositions of even the upper echelons, as the percentage of global board seats taken up by women has increased². Today, women hold 26.5% of executive and senior-level management positions in S&P 500 companies³. Although the share of women at senior leadership positions has increased, it is still far from parity.

Recent research shows that gender diversity leads to better financial performance and business outcomes⁴. Despite this, female representation at leadership levels is less encouraging. Women remain significantly underrepresented at leadership levels, and their representation gradually decreases as they move up the corporate ladder⁵. Every business in which women are underrepresented corresponds to a missed opportunity not only for companies but also for society altogether.

¹ Catalyst, Quick Take: Women in the Workforce – Canada (May 28, 2019)

² Catalyst, Quick Take: Women on Corporate Boards (March 13, 2020).

³ Catalyst, Pyramid: Women in S&P 500 Companies (January 15, 2020).

⁴ Vivian Hunt, Dennis Layton, Sara Prince and Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, "Delivering Through Diversity," McKinsey & Co. (January 2018).

⁵ McKinsey & Co. and LeanIn.Org, "Women in the Workplace 2019" (2019).

More recently, many organizations have made meaningful progress towards gender equality and diversity by implementing structural interventions, institutional changes, and diversity initiatives. Although cultural transformations usually take considerable time and effort, the numbers above tell a different story: despite concerted efforts, progress is not fast enough, and gender disparity in leadership persists. In the tech industry, the discrepancy is even more palpable.

Women in the tech industry are 45% more likely to leave than men⁶. They see a lack of upward mobility or career progression as a major factor when deciding to leave their jobs⁷. Only half of women (53%) believe that they have equal opportunity for promotion to senior leadership roles as their male counterparts⁸. Almost half of women (42%) identify the lack of female role models in the field as one of the main barriers they face, while only 8% say they never experience gender bias in the workplace⁹. The progress toward gender equality in the technology workforce is long overdue. This issue has been around for a long time, but making substantial progress has proven to be tough. As a result, the business case for diversity and gender equity in technology becomes a stronger one that needs to be acknowledged and articulated across the industry.

Gender diversity is a multi-layered conundrum, and it requires a solid understanding of the underlying challenges that overwhelmingly contribute to the uneven playing field. Even with growing awareness and recognition of how critical diversity is to business outcomes, many organizations have been struggling to increase women's share of leadership at the top. While the existing initiatives and interventions are helpful, it appears that system-level changes do not always translate into attitude and behavior change. What are the factors that are hidden from view, leading to the underrepresentation of women in the talent pipeline? What are the less visible, less spoken reasons behind the slow progress toward leveling the playing field for women in tech? The challenge lies in translating diversity and equity efforts into impactful and sustainable actions, and that necessitates candid conversations about what is holding back progress.

To accelerate these conversations, it is critical to understand how decisions are made and how these processes are managed. Given that gender issues are deeply rooted and complex, it might be challenging to understand why the share of women in leadership positions is still low. The consistent gender disparity needs to be addressed by identifying components and gaps embedded in talent processes that are often mutually reinforcing. By engaging in interviews with human resources (HR) professionals who work in technology, this research aims to identify barriers to women's advancement, or at the very least, identify gaps in current talent decision-making practices that are contributing to suboptimal diversity outcomes in leadership positions in the technology sector.

Why HR Perspective?

HR touches every aspect, and every step of the employee lifecycle. They play a fundamental role in shaping talent processes and culture. They translate an organization's strategies and business objectives

⁶: ⁷: ⁸ Kim Williams, "Women in Tech: How to Attract and Retain Top Talent," Indeed Blog (November 6, 2018).

⁹ ISACA, Women in Technology Survey, "The Future Tech Workforce: Breaking Gender Barriers" (2017).

into tools and practices, creating a solid backbone of core talent processes, including recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion. Talent decisions are often distributed across the organization, with many individuals having decision authority, which makes it challenging to ensure true consistency. As a result, having HR that has oversight across the organization, being involved in talent decisions becomes more important than ever.

HR is strategically positioned to enact organizational change and offer a perspective on gender gaps in career advancement, as well as gaps in hiring, opportunities for leadership, and promotion. They are equipped with competencies and knowledge necessary to progress equity and diversity initiatives across the organization. As they continue to be the navigator of talent management policies and practices, this study focuses on the involvement and influence of HR in selecting and promotion decision processes, while exploring the underlying reasons that impede meaningful progress toward gender parity.

Methodology and Scope

For the purpose of this research, I conducted 7 (seven) structured interviews with HR professionals in the technology industry. I focused on HR professionals who work in medium and large enterprises. The questions for the interviewees were designed to reflect their experiences as they related to talent processes and to address specific challenges they face in decision-making processes along the talent lifecycle with the purpose of understanding the internal talent pipeline and subtle barriers to women's advancement into leadership roles.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership in the tech is a multi-pronged issue starting from very early stages of the talent pipeline – the percentage of women graduating from STEM degrees or filling entry-level positions in the tech remains low compared to men¹⁰. This study focuses on women's advancement to leadership roles once they enter the tech field, and provides insights about why women are not progressing at the same rate to leadership roles compared to their male counterparts.

Within the limitations of the small sample size, I tried to obtain a representative sample. My interviewees include both Canadian (5) and international (2) professionals with a variety of cultural and educational backgrounds. They were all full-time employees in the technology industry.

We spoke about the role and involvement of HR in gender diversity and talent management processes, including recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion decisions. We also talked about different hats HR professionals wear at the decision-making tables to ensure more objective talent decisions and better diversity outcomes. Beyond structural interventions and changes to close the gender gap, I was interested to understand the reasons that thwart progress toward gender parity in leadership and less visible factors that often lead to the underrepresentation of women across the talent pipeline.

Due to the small sample size, the results were analyzed manually, and the findings made cannot be extrapolated on a broader scale. The findings represent interpretations obtained mainly from the interviews, which are qualitative in nature, and they should not be generalized.

¹⁰ Kim Williams, "Women in Tech: How to Attract and Retain Top Talent," Indeed Blog (November 6, 2018).

Ultimately, the intention is to identify invisible barriers to women’s progression into leadership roles and what leads to poor hiring and promotion decisions that contribute to the underrepresentation of women across the talent pipeline. Insights derived from the interviews might represent an opportunity to rethink the role and involvement of HR in the fight for a fair and equal playing field in the tech field.

Findings

Finding One: While HR is often seen as having ultimate responsibility for promoting diversity and inclusion in the organization, true progress will only be made if responsibility is taken on by everyone in the organization.

- I. **Insight:** In practice, it is HR’s responsibility to enforce non-biased talent practices and decisions, but tension exists when it comes to resolving issues of bias with senior management who make the final talent decisions.

In many organizations, HR plays a pivotal role in shaping talent management and decision-making processes, and that’s why employers look to HR to overcome bias and promote greater workforce diversity. HR is well-positioned to take the lead role in eliminating perpetual biases, widespread assumptions, misperceptions, and default norms that contribute to an uneven playing field.

Many interviewees indicated that they are educated on both conscious and unconscious biases and trained to recognize and address these biases. They expressed a strong sense of responsibility to assess individuals’ decisions and judgments and make sure that selecting and promotion decisions are based on hard facts. Many emphasized that as HR professionals, they are responsible for holding decision-makers accountable at all levels to chip away at biased perceptions that often result in deeply flawed evaluations of candidates. They also indicated that in the organizations, HR’s role is to ensure decision-makers can recognize and address their potential biases that seep into decisions on hiring and promotion. They see it as their duty to champion unbiased decision making and talent decisions in their organizations. It appears that HR professionals have been a major force in challenging the outcomes and engaging in a deeper dialogue to address any hidden factors to ensure that the right decision is made based on objective information.

“As an HR professional, it’s my responsibility to show them their biases and challenge them to make better decisions.”

“A part of my job is to keep people accountable for hiring and promotion decisions and actions.”

There was a sense among many of the interviewees that when they pose questions to understand the factors guiding decisions and challenge a decision that might have been affected by unconscious perceptions, it often causes discomfort and defensive response. In most cases, the interviewees indicated that when they suspect and pinpoint decisions where decision-makers may unintentionally introduce bias, the first reaction is often one of defensiveness. Most decision-makers tend to think of themselves as

objective in their approach, and they may feel disappointed when their decision-making abilities are challenged.

“Challenging those biases is the hard part because unconscious bias is invisible to them, and it’s hard to explain people something they are blind to.”

“I need to show where the bias may lie. I need to provoke high-level managers to recognize their biases, admit them, and act on them.”

Many interviewees expressed a sense of vulnerability to engage in uncomfortable conversations with high-level decision-makers and ask them to address hidden biases that unintentionally limit the talent pool tapped for recruitment and promotion. When they challenge intangible, tough-to-measure factors that may influence decision-making, they are facing barriers to speaking up and prompting others to admit biases they did not realize they had. Although HR is expected to assess situations or decisions to avoid potential biases, ironically, most decision-makers often refuse HR’s intervention in the decision-making process. Tension appears to exist between what is expected from HR and what HR actually experience.

Many HR professionals emphasized that they need to handle difficult and uncomfortable conversations with high-level managers to help them recognize and counter their own internalized biases. They are, in fact, trying to get senior leaders to act on their own biases without having any direct power or authority over them. Some indicated that these conversations become stressful and sometimes personal when decision-makers who unknowingly carry out an unconscious bias are called out. It appears that HR professionals lack not only the right kind of support for having these conversations but also feedback systems to encourage open dialogue. As a result, conversations end up being stilted and strained; they do not happen enough, or they do not always translate into action due to the frequent lack of follow-through due to the feeling of the initial discomfort. If individuals continue to hide out in their comfort zone and avoid having tough conversations about unconscious bias, the status quo will remain intact.

II. Insight: Diversity cannot de-prioritized when timeframes get tight.

Most organizations take pride in their ability to deliver faster and more efficiently executed decisions. However, fast decisions are not always the same as well-thought-out decisions. When it comes to hiring and promoting decisions, organizations often rely on decision-making autopilot, and they fall victim to decisional shortcuts and snap judgments for the sake of saving time and effort. These deeply ingrained shortcuts or blind spots undermine decision making without companies knowing it. Because people rush, they become more prone to unconscious biases making rigged decisions. Hidden biases have the most profound impact on decisions that are made quickly without much consideration.

“People want fast-processes, but diversity needs thought, time, and effort.”

Making smart and well-informed decisions involves hard work, time, and thought. Many interviewees emphasized that it takes deliberate effort, patience, energy, and persistence to pinpoint, monitor, and change deeply rooted perceptions and automatic associations. There are too many factors to consider in hiring and promotion decisions, and lack of awareness perpetuates the cycles of gender inequality. Some indicated that HR’s involvement and intervention in decision-making is sometimes seen as a roadblock to quick decision-making rather than a checkpoint for better decisions, an outside view that breaks de facto decision-making bubbles. Left unaccounted for, unconscious bias creep into every stage of the decision-making process and influence who gets hired, promoted, or viewed as fitting into the mold of future leaders. Without a proper or concrete motivation to seek outside council in the decision-making process, unconscious bias will remain a significant barrier in the way of gender-equitable leadership.

III. Insight: Without an environment where open communication is core to their values, organizations cannot make meaningful strides in closing the gender gap.

Gender equality is not an easy conversation to have. It requires comfort with discomfort. Tackling the feeling of initial discomfort is an important and necessary step in evaluating talent more consistently and objectively. Decision-makers need to acknowledge that their confidence in their judgments may leave them vulnerable to unconscious bias, and be willing to accept potentially unwelcome aspects of their judgments. If individuals can step past that discomfort, they can actually grow and benefit from it as they begin to surface hidden biases and actively strive to overcome them. Without that, any potential biases, left unresolved, only fester and get amplified.

Diversity is an ongoing dialogue, a candid conversation that can ultimately spark change. The stigma of unconscious bias, even though it is slowly fading, is a significant barrier to inclusion. An essential part of tackling unconscious bias is to start a conversation about it. Cultivating conversations on the hidden bias, destigmatizing the topic, and owning the responsibility to overcome bias will help organizations factor unconscious bias out of the equation and move the needle on gender parity.

Despite the uncomfortable conversations, many interviewees also said that it’s worthy questioning a decision and checking it to make sure it’s not influenced by unconscious bias because it’s the right question to ask, and failure to ask the question may lead to poor decisions. They expressed that we all unintentionally exhibit biases in our judgments and choices. There is more complexity than we think driving people’s perceptions and decisions, and lack of open dialogue adds a further layer of complexity yet to surmount hidden biases that feed into hiring and promotion decisions. Without transparency and open communication, the gender gap in the tech industry will remain out of reach.

“Every time I challenge a decision, I hope I’m mistaken, and they are right. It doesn’t matter who’s right and who’s wrong. It is the right question to ask for the business.”

It appears that without holding difficult but courageous conversations about unconscious bias, it is not possible to shatter the status quo and achieve gender parity at senior levels. Avoiding difficult conversations will perpetuate the uneven playing field. In other words, age-old perceptions, patterns, and norms will persist to have enormous influence over hiring and promotion decisions. If organizations do not build the right kind of environment where employees feel comfortable and encouraged to discuss unconscious bias, and of support for these conversations, the efforts will drag on with no apparent hope of closing the gender gap at leadership levels.

IV. Insight: Diversity is not just HR's sole responsibility. It is the responsibility of everyone at all levels in the organization.

Regardless of how well structured the processes are to be objective, they will never be fail-safe. Tackling unintended gender bias in recruiting and promoting starts by acknowledging that implicit bias actually exists. Knowing that it is unintentional does not change the fact that gender bias profoundly influences decisions on hiring and promotion. Decision-makers need to be willing to acknowledge that despite their best intentions, they are susceptible to unconscious perceptions and assumptions that hamper better judgment and objective decisions.

Leaders who are making the final hiring and promotion decisions must progressively seek to dislodge biases by recognizing and confronting their own blind spots that can potentially impact hiring and promotion decisions and cause missed opportunities. Taking time to carefully consider relevant information and examine potential unconscious beliefs and perceptions can result in better judgment and decisions. Only then can we start talking about meritocracy.

It appears that organizations can significantly benefit from HR's involvement in the decision-making process. HR professionals have a unique position to help decision-makers develop a keen awareness of their own implicit biases and how such bias may sway their assessment of candidates. HR can act as a guide and provide inputs that introduce objectivity into decision making and allow more time for it, uncovering errors in thinking before they become errors in judgment. As decision-makers become more self-aware of what might be hidden or unconscious for them, organizations get one step closer to weed out biased decisions from hiring and promotion processes.

It is easy to think that gender diversity is an HR responsibility, as many believe that the natural fit for this responsibility lies with HR. However, it is the responsibility of every employer and of every employee to develop strategies and practices to combat barriers and inequalities women face in the workplace. While HR is often seen as having ultimate responsibility for promoting diversity and inclusion in the organization, true progress will only be made if responsibility is taken on by everyone in the organization. Regardless of seniority or occupation, leveling the playing field is a shared responsibility, and a collective endeavor would help organizations take proactive steps to overcome these barriers that hold them back.

Finding Two: Despite growing awareness and commitment to gender equality, evaluation and promotion processes still do not completely reflect that commitment and awareness.

Unintentional bias exists in various forms of manager-employee interactions from the very beginning of the employee lifecycle. Most companies are making concerted efforts to address and mediate bias through a variety of training tools and programs. They have policies and practices in place to de-bias processes in hiring, performance reviews, and promotion, and reformed processes to promote behavioral changes. These structural changes and interventions are necessary but not sufficient, to strengthen diversity at senior leadership levels.

- I. **Insight:** Biased evaluations create a compounding effect that amplifies the impact of biases cascading from one stage to another, inadvertently lead to biased promotion decisions.

The problem of biased performance evaluations is becoming more prevalent as performance reviews, by their very nature, rely heavily on human judgment that is susceptible to bias. And, this issue is mostly overlooked in the process and many reviews, laden with unconscious bias, go unchecked, perpetuating the status quo.

Biased evaluations in performance reviews are only one part of the problem. Because performance evaluations are direct input into promotion decisions, biased reviews get carried out to promotion processes and inevitably lead to biased promotion decisions. In other words, biased evaluations create a compounding effect that amplifies the impact of biases cascading from one stage to another. Therefore, promotion becomes the most problematic and volatile issue as they are often based on vague criteria and plenty of partially relevant facts and information, much of which is subjective, from disparate sources. Promotion decisions, highly subjective processes by nature, may seem arbitrary since biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, may determine which employees are promoted.

- II. **Insight:** Without more explicit criteria and consistent definition for leadership qualities, organizations are more likely to succumb to subtle gender bias in decision-making.

Most interviewees mentioned that promotion decisions are made by committees of senior leaders who know the opportunities that are on the horizon. Nevertheless, having committees does not necessarily suggest that decisions made are free of bias because promotion processes become more complex as more people are involved in decision-making, which may lead to collective out-of-awareness agreements about who deserves a promotion. In most cases, it might be just rubber-stamping senior leaders' decisions on who is promotable to leadership as decisions are discretionary. Therefore, diversity in the decision-making committee is equally, if not more, important than its size.

Many interviewees expressed that HR professionals have a less direct influence on promotion decisions than hiring decisions as promotion decisions are mostly made by senior leaders. Because they are not as involved in the promotion process as they are in recruiting, it becomes difficult to recognize and confront individuals' potential biases at different stages of decision-making.

My interviewees reported that HR serves as intermediaries between employees and decision-makers. They explained that when employees who have excellent performance reviews and are proven performers have not been promoted, they feel frustrated and think that the decision is unfair. Employees question where they fall short, and when they ask why they had not been promoted or why one person was chosen over another, feedback is often vague: 'being more strategic', 'improving communication skills', 'exercising leadership presence' and so on. One of my interviewees stated that she tries to understand whether these comments are a matter of style or a matter of impact because individuals, regardless of gender, can drive stellar results and achieve the same level of impact through different styles. To provide equitable access to career advancement opportunities, it is essential to give women feedback that is tied to business outcomes instead of gender-biased perceptions.

“When I read performance feedback, I ask myself: is it a matter of style, or is it a matter of impact?”

When decision outcomes are questioned, decision-makers often feel that their authority being challenged or undermined, or they are confronted with favoritism. However, many interviewees reported that regardless of seniority or experience, everyone is susceptible to unconscious bias, and despite their best intentions, decision-makers may end up promoting more men into leadership positions because of hidden gender bias.

“Promotion process is very hard. Manager and employee usually don’t align, and HR is in the middle. Conversations become very tough.”

Throughout my interview, HR professionals highlighted that they encourage decision-makers to establish well-defined criteria, rely on results and impact, and confront potential hidden perceptions that may result in skewed evaluations of intangible skills. In most cases, when there is no consistent definition of skills or competencies for leadership, intuitions and judgment inadvertently are applied as skills instead. Because promotions are governed by less explicit criteria for advancement, other hidden factors and unconscious bias play its invisible hand in decision-making. Candidates are often evaluated based on their ability to succeed in senior-level positions; however, how ability is defined and assessed is subtle. In most situations, the ability is assessed by decision-makers on the basis of factors that do not directly relate to individuals’ performance, such as their backgrounds or experience. In the absence of explicit criteria, the deep-seated perceptions and hard-to-quantify feelings are apparent in the promotion process, and such gut feelings sway decision-makers. Hence, it becomes steeper and challenging for HR professionals to identify and address unconscious bias that may affect promotion decisions.

“I encourage managers to be unbiased, challenge any assumptions, and focus on the impact.”

Despite growing awareness and commitment to gender equality, it appears that evaluation and promotion processes still do not completely reflect that commitment and awareness. Having the necessary organizational infrastructure, including an objective set of criteria, policies or programs in place is important, but not sufficient. To promote behavioral changes, it is imperative to create a sense of collective endeavor and embed rigorous approaches in talent management and decision-making processes. To combat subjectivity and bias pertaining to promotion decisions, decision-makers need to continuously question their thinking behind decisions, get HR involved, and be willing to admit and act on their own potential biases.

Finding Three: Increasing women’s presence and visibility in the upper echelons is not only the diversity goal but also a source of women’s advancement.

- I. **Insight:** Lack of women role models at leadership levels perpetuates deeply entrenched leadership stereotypes and associated biases.

A common theme between professionals interviewed was the paucity of female role models in leadership positions is hurting young women at the start of their careers in tech. Many interviewees echoed the need for visible and accessible female leadership, indicating that female leader role models not only empower young women to pursue leadership aspirations but also reduce stereotypical notions that women are less effective leaders. They expressed that the increased exposure to female leaders helps lessen deep-seated perceptions and biases. In other words, a strong female presence in leadership ranks challenges biased perceptions and implicit associations with women being less effective leaders. In contrast, the lack of female leaders may fuel biased perceptions of female leader effectiveness.

Many interviewees indicated that the perception of women’s ability to lead is one of the most significant barriers to women’s progression into leadership roles. The unacknowledged but prevalent biased perception that men are better suited for and more effective leaders than women often leads to the underrepresentation of women across the talent pipeline. Some highlighted that gendered norms and attitudes are less visible and much more challenging to confront, influence, and resolve. The stark fact is that such invisible barriers are the most important inhibitors of women’s advancement to leadership positions.

Multiple interviewees spoke about the presence of social similarity that disadvantages women in promotion decisions. Because men predominate leadership positions, success in leadership roles frequently involves stereotypically masculine traits. Specifically, when senior leadership positions are held predominantly by men cut from the same cloth, the attributes and criteria that are used to assess leadership ability may be more likely to emphasize the repertoire of leadership attributes the current senior leadership team has demonstrated. In other words, attributes deemed necessary for senior leadership roles are often reflective of the attributes and biases of the senior leadership team who make the majority of promotion decisions into leadership roles. This implies that decision-makers tend to appoint or promote candidates who mirror similar attributes and behaviors to their own. Put simply, this is a vicious cycle and a self-perpetuating cycle of gender imbalance. As more men get promoted into

leadership roles, the definition of success and leadership involves stereotypically masculine strengths, signaling that men are a more natural fit for leadership.

“When all senior leaders are male, and from one particular ethnic group, they have similar perspectives not only for the business but also for who gets promoted in leadership positions.”

“It becomes more challenging because inherent bias exists even in promotion criteria and leadership qualities they’re looking for.”

II. Insight: ‘Cultural fit’ that factors into selection and promotion consideration weeds out diversity.

The phenomenon of ‘cultural fit’ is becoming prevalent as many companies emphasize cultural fit when selecting and promoting leaders-to-be. Throughout my interviews, many professionals revealed that in most cases, selecting for cultural fit is a limiting constraint and unintentionally triggers unconscious gender bias deeply embedded in decision-making. Many mentioned that when decision-makers look for talent that reflects similar beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, they potentially weed out qualified candidates that do not match their view of ‘fit’ and end up unwittingly selecting candidates ‘like them’ because of implicit bias leading to a homogenous culture in the organization. In other words, when the cultural fit is reinforced as a major determinant of talent decisions, candidates are evaluated on the basis of stereotypes to fit into the current mold which severely reduces concerted efforts to broaden talent pool further. The idea of ‘cultural fit’ facilitates gender bias not only in selection but also in promotion decisions continuing to restrain women’s advancement in the workplace. Because leadership is heavily weighted with stereotypically masculine strengths, women are often stereotyped as not ‘fitting’ the mold of leadership, inevitably disadvantaging women. This ultimately affects who is promotable to leadership, contributing to women’s underrepresentation in the upper echelons. As a result, cultural fit weeds out diversity and perpetuates biased perceptions about what roles women fit. By looking for talent who will be a ‘cultural add’, organizations can bring in more diverse perspectives and make a meaningful difference in the battle against gender bias.

“As an HR person, when hiring, I look for a cultural add, not a cultural fit.”

With each step up the corporate hierarchy, decision-making teams become less diverse, and male perceptions and associated biases become more pervasive. As leadership remains predominantly male, the outmoded associations between masculinity and effective leadership continue to exacerbate women’s lagged advancement to senior leadership positions.

The mere presence of diversity within decision-making teams may result in stereotyped leadership and gender-based proclivities that are unintentionally embedded in the assessment criteria and performance appraisals. When organizations lack a senior leadership team that reflects a diverse variety of perspectives, they become more vulnerable to the deeply entrenched norms and societal beliefs about gender roles and leadership in the decision-making process. Because gendered norms undermine women's ability to lead and their effectiveness as a leader, women are often overlooked for promotion opportunities and remain significantly underrepresented at senior leadership levels. This effectively perpetuates the stereotypes about what a leader should be, portraying women as less suitable for senior leadership positions. Without diversity in the decision-makers, this vicious circle cannot be broken, and women continue to encounter subtle biases and barriers to career progression in the tech industry. Organizations should double down on efforts to chip away at ingrained gender bias and stereotypes in the evaluation of candidates for promotion by strengthening diversity at senior leaders and decision-making processes.

“We definitely need more diverse representation in the senior management level to break those inherent biases.”

In-depth interviewees revealed that company strategies and policies in fostering gender diversity alone have not translated into a fair share of leadership positions in the upper echelons of management. Many interviewees spoke about the deficiency of formal checkpoints in decision-making processes. Because organizations often fail to integrate formal checkpoints into their feedback mechanisms and promotion practices, decisions are more likely to be tainted by implicit bias that poses significant barriers to women's progression into leadership roles. These unseen barriers are substantial, systematic, and difficult to tease apart, and there are no easy fixes. Nevertheless, bringing more people into the conversation may reduce the influence of biases. It appears that organizations could make more informed decisions and minimize bias in recruitment, evaluation, and promotion processes by institutionalizing the practice of bringing in outside perspectives that are not directly part of the decision-making processes.

“We need to bring more people into conversations. This way, we can identify the potential bias of any sort all along the way.”

Changing gendered norms of leadership requires shifting well-established beliefs and behaviors, and it is profoundly challenging. Female role models can shift the whole age-old belief system that creates biased perceptions about women's ability to lead effectively and, eventually, inhibits women's advancement to leadership roles. Women's visibility in leadership can reset stereotypical expectations, and help eliminate the negative bias in how female leaders' effectiveness is perceived. Increasing women's presence and visibility in senior leadership is not only the diversity goal but also a source of women's advancement.

“Without role models, it is not possible to move the dial.”

Conclusion

Gender disparity in technology is a very real phenomenon. Many organizations have taken decisive steps to narrow the gender gap and launch more women into the upper echelons. And yet, achieving gender parity remains elusive. Women remain sorely underrepresented at the leadership levels, and their proportion steadily falls the higher up the career ladder they progress. The existing interventions, including training, programs, and policies designed to address gender gaps, are struggling to change entrenched mindsets and achieve equity.

Structural changes alone are not going to remedy the lack of equal gender representation at the top. To make real progress, companies need to surmount systematic inequalities and substantial barriers embedded in talent processes. It requires shifting ingrained beliefs and behaviors, which takes continuous attention, evaluation, and accountability. Companies need to create environments that cultivate candid conversations about gender equality and invite contributions by others. Only then can the issue of gender bias, both implicit and overt, be openly discussed and eliminated from recruitment and promotion processes as a whole.

Leveling the playing field is an intentional and effortful process. While HR plays a fundamental role in shaping talent processes and tools, they cannot do it alone. It needs a more robust and broader narrative about the case of gender equality, in which everyone is actively involved and contributes. For current efforts and interventions to be successful, organizations need to change how decisions on selecting and promotion are made and improve the quality of collective decision-making by bringing in multiple perspectives and increasing diversity in decision-makers. They need to identify decision points within talent processes where decision-makers are prone to unintended gender bias that seeps into recruitment, evaluation, and promotion decisions. Until decision-makers acknowledge their own blind spots and consciously recognize obstacles that present for women’s advancement, the status quo will remain intact. The risk of maintaining the status quo means that organizations will continue to bypass women who qualify for leadership roles and lose the potential rewards of having a diverse leadership team.

Increasing the number of female role models across a range of levels creates a trickle-down effect. It does not only inspire other women to pursue leadership aspirations but also breaks down broadly held perceptions and pernicious gender stereotypes holding women back. Having female role models in positions of influence stands for all the critical steps along the way to equal opportunities for development and advancement of women into leadership and to more diverse and inclusive workplaces. Without that, organizations will not be able to close the gap on gender representation at leadership levels and to create more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

HR professionals that were consulted for this study highlighted that organizations are deeply committed to diversity and inclusion, and supporting women is a strategic organizational priority expanding the strategic role of HR as effective change agents. However, to achieve gender parity, it takes buy-in at all

levels of the organization, from top leadership to middle management, and a sense of accountability among decision-makers to support women in their career progression development and advancement in the workplace. For HR to drive greater impact, it is imperative that they have a voice and active role at decision-making tables as well as the ability to influence promotion decisions being made at leadership levels. Without organization-wide recognition and participation, gender equity initiatives and programs become nothing more than a band-aid.