

WOMEN, WORK & SUCCESS



A REPORT ON THE FINDINGS OF THE PERSPECTIVES COACHING SURVEY ON
WOMEN & SUCCESS

JANUARY 2006

Prepared by Mark Bahnisch, BA Qld BComm (Hons) (First Class) Griff, GradDipBus (Distinction) QUT

INTRODUCTION

The most significant social change in the last three decades has been the large scale entry of women into the workforce. At the same time, the world of work itself has been changing quickly, and old goal posts for success have become obsolete. Globalised markets drive competition, knowledge work is displacing routines, postmodern organisations have moved towards networks rather than hierarchies and careers have been transformed from progressions up a ladder to entrepreneurial utilisation of skills. Generational change is about to hit business, with younger employees seeking interest and autonomy in their working lives rather than stability and predictability. At the same time, issues of flexibility have come to the fore. Employees want flexibility to balance work with personal goals and life, and employers need flexibility to be responsive to a fast changing environment.

Yet not all employers have responded appropriately to these momentous social changes. In April 2002, Fiona Krautil is the Former Director of EOWA, observed that Australia has the lowest percentage of women in management of any country in the developed world¹. EOWA research in 2004 showed that Australia was well behind the USA in the percentage of women on boards and in senior executive positions in ASX200 companies compared to Fortune 500 companies². The latest ABS figures³ show the number of women in the full time workforce falling, and women still earning on average \$285 less a week than men. Even managerial women earn \$190 less a week than their male counterparts. The Karpin Report in 1995 argued that “capitalising on the talents of diversity” is one of the five key management tasks facing

Australian business⁴. Events over the last decade have only added to the urgency of fully utilising the talents and human capital of women. The workforce is ageing, skills shortages are pressing and Australia faces increasing competition for worldwide markets. Research demonstrates that many women are becoming increasingly frustrated with hidebound organisations, and leaving the paid workforce to start their own businesses.

Clare Burton has summarised the research which makes the business case for women in management⁵. As the population becomes more diverse, it becomes more important to draw on the human capital of that diverse population, which also leads to organisational gains. Reputational gains flow from being an employer of choice for women, and diverse inputs into decision making transform organisational culture for the better. There is simply no better reason than organisational success to understand what women are seeking from employers. Perspectives Coaching has conducted a large and representative survey of what women in the contemporary work environment consider essential to their success. It is essential for organisational leaders to listen to the results.

The Perspectives Coaching survey is one of the first of its kind to be conducted in Australia, with responses from a statistically representative sample of 563 women across a broad range of industries working in professional and management positions.

1) Krautil, F. (2002) *Positioning your organisation as an employer of choice for women*, EOWA: Canberra, p. 5.

2) EOWA (2004), *EOWA Australian census of women in leadership*, EOWA: Canberra.

3) <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/3C58B52C04F3B325CA256F0E007C5C86?Open>

4) Karpin, D. (1995) *Enterprising Nation: Renewing Australia's managers to meet the challenge of the Asia-Pacific century: Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills*, AGPS: Canberra.

5) Burton, C. & Ryall, C. (1995) 'Managing for Diversity' in Karpin, D. (ed), *Enterprising Nation: Research Report (Volume 2)*, AGPS: Canberra.

The Perspectives Coaching survey is one of the first of its kind to be conducted in Australia, with responses from a statistically representative sample of 563 women across a broad range of industries working in professional and management positions.

KEY FINDINGS

Key findings of the survey are consistent with surveys done in the UK and Canada, and demonstrate that women consider multiple factors to be vital in achieving success for themselves and the organisations they work for. Respondents are overwhelmingly seeking rewarding work and work/life balance and job satisfaction are rated more highly as goals than financial reward. A minority of respondents are satisfied with the support for their professional development and career success from their employer; identifying needs for mentoring and coaching, management skills and diversity training and the fostering of networks as key inputs from employers. 41% of respondents consider that a flexible working environment is one of the three key drivers of personal and organisational achievement.

The most important finding of the research is the revelation that women and men have distinctively different understandings of both careers and success. Women perceive success much more relationally than men, and seek to balance their lives with the needs of others and of society, rather than believing they have arrived when they reach a certain rung on the ladder. These important findings suggest that women can gain self-esteem from understanding their own priorities, and also that organisations need to understand what women are seeking from work. It is highly significant that women's orientation to work is arguably better adapted to the demands of the new economy than the traditional male approach.

These findings are also consistent with a wide range of research in organisational studies. Flexibility needs to be understood as not just related to family commitments, but also as involving opportunities for learning and development and intrinsic rewards from work. As labour markets tighten, and product markets become more competitive in a fast changing business environment, unlocking the productivity of women employees becomes the key to business success. The Perspectives Coaching research is a vital message for business and public sector organisations to heed.

Women have a distinctive understanding of success and careers

Studies into whether women and men have different understandings of, and attitudes towards, career and success are extremely recent, and their important findings (which are consistent with this survey) have very significant implications both for organisations and for women themselves. Such research⁶ into differences between male and female careers has demonstrated that there are strongly contrasting patterns:

Women's careers are broader than those traditionally conceptualized by men where "men build careers while women compose lives" (Bateson, 1989, cited in Arthur et al., 1999)⁷.

6) O'Neil, D., Bilimoria, D. & Saatcioglu, A. (2004) 'Women's career types: attributions of satisfaction with career success' *Career Development International*, 9(5), pp. 478-500.

7) Pringle, J. & Dixon, K. (2003) 'Re-incarnating life in the careers of women' *Career Development International*, 8(6), pp. 291-300.

As Mainiero and Sullivan,
writing in the prestigious American journal *Academy of Management* put it⁸:

Despite great changes in social and workplace norms as well as advances in gender equity, we were surprised to find such dramatic differences between the careers of women and men throughout the research. In sharp contrast to men, the career histories of women are relational. Their career decisions were normally part of a larger and intricate web of interconnected people, issues and aspects that had to come together in a delicately balanced package. In our research, we saw women making decisions about their careers after considering the impact their decisions will have on others.

In other words, women unlike men who typically make decisions as isolated individuals, consider their relationships with their immediate circle and also broader social networks and indeed society itself as an integral part of their multiple paths towards success. Mainiero and Sullivan emphasise, as do other researchers in this area, that the conventional wisdom that women's careers progress differently from men's because of family and care responsibilities is only part of the story. More important is the theme of relationships (understood broadly) and the inter-relationship between career and other life goals. This has notable implications for organisations seeking to maximise the value and productivity that women bring as employees. Indeed, the failure of organisations to understand a different orientation women bring to success and work is the primary cause, they argue, of women leaving organisations to begin their own businesses. Organisational cultures can often be rigid and inflexible, and fail to challenge women to their full potential. However, as other research also demonstrates⁹, the flexibility and interconnectedness that women seek is not guaranteed by becoming an entrepreneur; as growing a business brings different constraints. This theme is sounded by some of the respondents to this survey, and trends extrapolated into the future suggest that women will move between self-employment and

organisations over their working lives, implying that understanding their attitudes towards success is vital for both organisations and for self-employed women themselves.

British researcher Maureen Woodd¹⁰ argues that women's distinctive understandings of success, work and careers actually prepare them better for the challenges facing postmodern organisations in the new economy than male understandings of hierarchy and achieved status. Building relationships, the ability to synthesise, flexibility and willingness to respond to challenges, and combining skills picked up from a variety of career choices are all highly consistent with the needs of business today.

A notable feature of the survey results, which may seem on first glance counter-intuitive given that the survey demonstrates that organisations need to do more to retain and grow women employees, is the general level of satisfaction respondents express with their degree of success to date. 91.3% of respondents feel successful, and 53.8% rate their level of success as high or very high (10.2%). This can be contrasted with significant percentages feeling dissatisfied with support from their employers (24%) and on the other hand, a minority of respondents (12%) being unsatisfied with their career success to date.

Women, Work and Success

8) Mainiero, L. & Sullivan, M. (2005) 'Kaleidoscope Careers: An alternative explanation for the 'opt-out' revolution', *Academy of Management Executive*, 19(1), pp. 106-123.

9) Winn, J. (2004) 'Entrepreneurship: Not an easy path to top management for women' *Women in Management Review*, 19(3), pp. 143-153.

10) Woodd, M. (2000) 'The move towards a different career pattern: are women better prepared than men for a modern career?' *Career Development International*, 5(2), pp. 99-105.

Nevertheless, the qualitative results of the survey – and also other quantitative results, in particular the question regarding the opportunities that can be provided by employers and the greater importance placed on work/life balance, self esteem and job satisfaction when compared to financial rewards – support research discussed above regarding the way women perceive success. Another significant contrast is between the 83.2% of respondents who saw passion and love for their occupation as among the top three contributing factors to their success, compared to 20.9% who nominated financial rewards and 18.6% who selected work achievements.

Management researcher Susan Dann, analysing a survey of women in the public sector conducted in 1995¹¹ found differences between subjective (self-perceived) success and objective success (measured by job title or remuneration). Women in her sample were more likely than men to feel subjectively successful, despite lower remuneration and lower representation in senior roles than men. Dann suggested that socialisation into attitudes towards work might account for much of this difference. However, Dann's research was conducted a decade ago, and the evidence suggests that women are becoming increasingly aware of the limitations they confront in work cultures which are still male dominated. It would be very wrong, therefore, to suggest that equitable and indeed equal remuneration in paid work is acceptable because women value other factors. The phenomenon discussed earlier of women "opting out" of corporate culture indicates that for many professional and managerial women, the time when they would rest content with inequality is long past. This is borne out from the qualitative data in this survey, particularly from respondents who have moved out of organisations into self-employment.

The theme of women being frustrated by a glass ceiling and by hierarchical organisational cultures

comes out interestingly in the qualitative and open-ended comments made to the question about what companies can offer women to facilitate their success. A number of respondents make comments similar to this observation, asking their employers:

"to listen to what I want - not what my manager says I want"

Many respondents indicate that they value the additional freedom that comes with being self-employed to access training, networking and development opportunities relevant to their own needs and contributory to their success. The clear implication of these remarks is that many organisations that employ the respondents are not currently providing targeted training opportunities, and to foster an organisational culture that contributes to the development of all employees. For instance, respondents suggest that their employers "(provide) lateral job opportunities to increase skill base", "promote job sharing at a management level", "new learning and challenging work", and "women mentors, only men exist". Another repeated theme is the lack of specific development plans and support for education and training which can lead to career progression. It is likely that these failures in succession planning (remembering that most respondents are managers or professionals) and structured development are not particular to the organisations for which respondents work, as similar results have been found for Australian organisations generally. As the results of the survey demonstrate repeatedly, though, such lacunae may particularly impact on women, who are more prone to leave organisations because of real or perceived difficulty in advancing their careers. Again, mentoring, and structured training and development, as well as enabling employees to use and build on their existing skills are vital for business to unlock the productive power of its human capital.

RELATIONAL AND HOLISTIC CAREERS

Survey respondents are saying that traditional views of careers as a progression up a hierarchical ladder are less salient for women than more holistic and less conventional understandings of career which place most value on learning new skills, adding value to the community, and building relationships with others. A survey respondent sums this up pithily:

“I don't consider the business awards I won as important as the change in social consciousness as a result of my invention and marketing scope.”

Another respondent says:

“Through the team spirit and often family philosophy that I had created within this group of people I feel that I have achieved success.”

And another:

“My view of success for me is less about position and more about feeling comfortable in my own skin.”

This woman strikes a note which is often repeated:

“My rating of success is dependent on how I have been able to help others and how I have been able to make some small difference to those who come in contact with my company. Success is also how I have been able to develop wisdom by learning more and more about my delusions and illusions, and connecting to what is sustainable compared to what is not sustainable.”

Many of the women who responded to the survey perceive a spiritual and social dimension to success, focussing on how their work touches others' lives, how it enables them to live their own dreams, and see financial rewards as important in less instrumental than relational terms. Again and again, respondents write movingly about providing for their children, and others perceive career status and remuneration as much more important for the opportunities for growth and freedom they provide.

For instance, when asked to select the top three factors leading to a feeling of success in their lives, respondents identified good relationships (51.8%) and work/life balance (45.7) well ahead of money (11.7%). Asked to nominate personal factors, relationships with partners and children, religion and spirituality, and giving back to the community featured prominently. In response to another question, respondents put family and friends (55.6%) and receiving love and support (43.3%) well ahead of such factors as academic achievement (6.9%), household management (22.4%) and being able to afford things (29.1%). Relational values and outcomes such as getting on with others (38.2%) and passion for one's occupation (82.3%) were similarly privileged over more mundane or instrumental inputs to work success.

WHAT DEFINES SUCCESS?

Definitions of success reflected these themes.

“Success is the satisfaction I get when I see the growth and development in those I have assisted. Success is being happy in my employment and having a balanced home and work life and a happy family.”

“Feeling fulfilment and balance with life and with work. Living true to my values. Being recognised by clients and industry colleagues for the contributions made in their life. Achieving goals set especially when they are big goals. Having a loving husband and family.”

“A sense of passion to achieve, belief in own abilities, open communication and life long learning. (You will never know it all)”.

The theme of balance recurred repeatedly in the open ended question about the definition of success.

If the traditional model of success measured it only in terms of salary and status, then the survey respondents are throwing down the gauntlet, and indicating both that they value opportunities for growth and the way that their work contributes positively both to significant others in their immediate orbit and to their broader social environment.

Management and leadership researcher Jane O’Leary conceptualises a less traditional view of career progression when she argues that subjective measures of career success such as job satisfaction outweigh more competitively constructed measures such as salary or job title¹². Survey respondents confirm this analysis:

“I have taken a deliberate life choice to step back from a management position I had in my previous role”.

O’Leary argues that women may prioritise personal relationships at one point in their career, and advancement at another, and that organisations which are able to understand this message will benefit. O’Leary also reinforces the point made by many of the survey’s respondents – being able to “work in a collegial, supportive and affirming organisational culture” can reframe women’s own self image of what constitutes success. O’Leary was writing in 1997, and the results of this survey in 2005 show that this rich model of success accurately captures what contemporary women want.

For instance, this respondent writes:

“In terms of standard perceptions of career success, I would rate myself medium due to tensions between work/life/family balance”

This comment, which is mirrored by several others, reminds us that there is a continuing tension between external or organisational measures of success and self-perceived success.

HOW CAN ORGANISATIONS RESPOND?

The ideal is a balance, which will benefit both organisations and individuals. O’Leary notes the impact that career interruptions due to family or care responsibilities can have on individuals. This respondent’s comments bear this familiar story out -

“Others would rate my success factor as High or Very High however, my rating comes from feeling that I am capable of much more. Not having reached my full capacity is due to family priorities.”

The key here is to retain staff who are capable of higher responsibilities and greater skill development and utilisation, and invest in them while providing a workplace which recognises the need for work/life balance and flexibility. In a tight labour market, skilled professionals need to be nurtured. Support for the findings of this survey also comes from research by Wood and Lindorff¹³ who found that women tended to attribute promotion to such factors as mentoring, opportunities for development, communication skills and integrity while men tended to cite experience. Wood and Lindorff correctly believe that organisations should take into account these sex differences in values and understanding of career success, rather than force women into a neutral (and thus traditionally male) mould.

In addition, and this is demonstrated by the responses of survey participants, organisations need to realise also that they cannot unilaterally determine the shape of careers. As other recent research¹⁴ also indicates, there has been a shift underway for some time in what individuals seek from their careers – success is not necessarily measured by organisational

benchmarks, but increasingly rather from individual growth and learning. Careers are reinvented by individuals in relationship with their own needs and the environment, and success is achieved through continuous learning, personal responsibility and the achievement of individual and social goals. Women have particularly adapted to this model of career success, and rather than the traditional view that women should adapt themselves to organisational expectations of management culture, the converse might now be the case.

Mainiero and Sullivan sum up what women are looking for from successful careers as “challenge and authenticity”. In the context both of skills shortages (which demographic factors will transform into a general labour shortage for organisations in the next decade) and the “brain drain” of women from the corporate world, these authors argue cogently that organisations need to go beyond lip service to flexibility and balance and understand the deep synergies between women’s values and orientations to success and a positive and productive organisational culture. They correctly point out that women are path blazers in a non-linear, relational approach to work, and that males of Generations X and Y are following in their wake. The issue goes beyond gender equity (though that in itself is a vital organisational value) and goes to organisational sustainability.

Respondents to the survey have their own suggestions as to what can best aid them in furthering their careers and adding value to the organisations they work for, which provide new confirmation of existing strategies suggested by management and

13) Wood, G. & Lindorff, M. (2001) ‘Sex differences in explanations for career progress’ *Women in Management Review*, 16: 4, pp 152-162.

14) McDonald, P., Brown, K. & Bradley, L. (2005) ‘Have traditional career paths given way to protean ones? Evidence from senior managers in the Australian public sector’ *Career Development International*, 10(2), pp. 109-129.

Respondents to the survey have their own suggestions as to what can best aid them in furthering their careers and adding value to the organisations they work for, which provide new confirmation of existing strategies suggested by management and organisational researchers. 44.7% would like their employers to offer them management training, which can be reinforced by addressing the concerns about targeted planning for skills and management development as a feature of training and development policy and succession planning. Related is the desire of 40.4% of respondents for networks to support development, building on the theme of the relational and social nature of women's approach to work.

Most importantly, 41.5% believe they would benefit from coaching opportunities, and 39.3% from mentoring programmes.

There is a large amount of research¹⁵ that suggests that mentoring and coaching are particularly important for women's career development. In the survey, 80.5% of respondents believed that having a mentor was important (51.8%) or very important (28.7%) to their success. Again, this is highly consistent with the other findings of the survey about the values women hold, their relational approach to work, and their outlook on careers. Evidence exists to suggest that female managers are particularly well suited to mentoring female employees. This, of course, can and does present a vicious circle for organisations, as women are currently under-represented in management. It is in this context that Perspectives Coaching can bring its unique and particular expertise to bear and add value above and beyond the research presented in this report.

APPENDIX 1: DEMOGRAPHICS

There were 563 self-selected respondents to the survey which was accessed through the Perspectives Coaching website www.perspectivescoaching.com.au. 98% of respondents were resident in Australia. 16.2% were self-employed, with 62.4% being employed full time. 9.7% were employed part time and 4.7% on contract. Occupation levels ranged from 8.8% CEOs through 41.9% in managerial positions, with 15.6% describing themselves as Consultants and 5.2% as entrepreneurs. Respondents worked in a wide range of industries. Ages ranged from 29.5% of respondents between 18 and 32 through 32.7% between 33 and 40, 21.6% 41 to 48 and 15.9% 49 and older.

APPENDIX 2: METHODOLOGY

The survey was designed by Perspectives Coaching and conducted via www.surveymonkey.com. Due to the limitations of the software, it was not possible to analyse results using SPSS. However, the findings have been carefully compared to those from existing literature by the consultant employed to analyse the data, and the sample size adds additional weight to their representativeness and generalisability. The methodological approach, given the nature of the data, involved an iterative analysis between qualitative data (coded using NVivo 2.0) and a broad literature search.

15) Linehan, M. & Walsh, J. (1999) 'Mentoring relationships and the female managerial career' *Career Development International*, 4(7), pp. 348-352.
Levesque, L., O'Neill, R., Nelson, T. & Dumas, C. (2005) Sex differences in the perceived importance of mentoring functions' *Career Development International*, 10(6/7), pp. 429-443.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Mark Bahnisch is a Brisbane based Sociologist who currently lectures at Griffith University, and has also taught at The University of Queensland and QUT. He has published widely, including internationally on management theory and the sociology of work. He also works as a Consultant, specialising in employment relations, research and data analysis and public policy. He has a long background of working with organisations on issues of workplace equity and has done consultancies in this area for private business, community sector organisations and the Queensland Government.

He can be contacted through emailing mbahnisch@gmail.com or by phoning 0421910542.