Women have undoubtedly begun to make progress in their struggle for equality in career progression. But there is still a long way to go say **Fiona Dent** and **Viki Holton**. Here they offer women a number of practical tools, ideas and suggestions that will contribute to the management of their career success

Working women: a path to success

> *I have been the biggest barrier to my career – doubting my own achievements and I was always questioning if I am good enough*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

The past 10 years illustrate just how much has changed for women in business. Diversity and gender issues are these days often discussed at board level, which certainly was not the case in the recent past. We also see signs that getting more women to board level as well as into the talent pipeline are increasingly perceived as business-relevant issues.

However, congratulations all round would be rather premature as challenges remain, not least the difficulties many women experience in reaching senior executive roles. The headlines (and articles) below illustrate a few examples of recent change and some of the remaining challenges:

"Only 14% of the top five leadership positions at S&P 500 companies in the USA are held by women"
Source: CNN Money analysis from 2015 data
http://money.cnn.com/2015/03/24/investing/female-ceo-pipeline-leadership/

"Women account for just 23% of board members of the largest publicly listed companies across the European Union (EU)"
Source: 2016 data from EU
http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-decision-making/index_en.htm

"The gender gap in European Business Schools: a leadership perspective."
Source: 2016 article in EFMD Global Focus *by Lynn Roseberry, Robyn Remke, Johan Klæsson and Thomas Holgersson*

"GSK makes Emma Walmsley most powerful woman in FTSE 100"
Source: https://twitter.com/guardian/status/778145805035266048

The final example, from the Twitter Feed (in September 2016) of the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, highlights the appointment of Emma Walmsley as chief executive at pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline. To be, or not to be, a female CEO still makes headline news and this indicates how many challenges remain.

And, this is not just in the UK business world, it would also be true across the rest of Europe, Canada, India, North America and Australia as well as in the Middle and Far East.

In our work at Ashridge we recently undertook a research study into the real-life issues for women in business today.

The survey (of around 1,400 women) and the interviews identified a range of enablers and barriers for women's career success. We found out that the main barriers that hold women back, which we call "derailers", are:

- Lack of confidence and self-belief
- Sacrificing career for children or other family members
- Lack of good childcare
- Unsupportive boss
- The "old boys" network
- Negative stereotyping of working mothers
- Ageism
- Being a square peg in a round hole
- Having to compromise your values
- Staying in one job or organisation for too long
- Blatant discrimination

We also identified the key enablers for women's careers, which we called "multipliers", including:

- Having a good boss
- Building a good network
- Developing good communication skills
- Working hard and with persistence
- Demonstrating energy and enthusiasm
- Having a career plan
- The power of having a mentor

Interestingly, some of these issues, especially the derailers, have been around and talked about by working women for many years. (See our previous article: How Women Can Navigate to Become Global Leaders, *Global Focus*, Issue 2 in 2012.)

In this article we would like to offer women a number of practical tools, ideas and suggestions that will contribute to the management of their career success. Our latest book –*How to Thrive and Survive As a Working Woman: The Coach Yourself Toolkit*, (Bloomsbury 2016) – elaborates on these and offers many additional ideas that will help working women. We suggest three main areas for focus – Your Organisation, Your Boss, Yourself – which we call a "Recipe For Success".

We believe the three areas illustrated (see Figure 1) are interconnected and should be aligned to ensure the greatest possible opportunities for effectiveness. Any working woman should focus on these when planning, managing and developing her career.

Let us examine each area in turn and identify some of the important levers for success.

Your Organisation

There is no doubt that the 21st century offers more choice than ever before for working women. However, it is also clear that many organisations are still not ready to offer complete parity to their female employees – the issue of equal opportunities, pay and conditions remains as alive today as it was in the past.

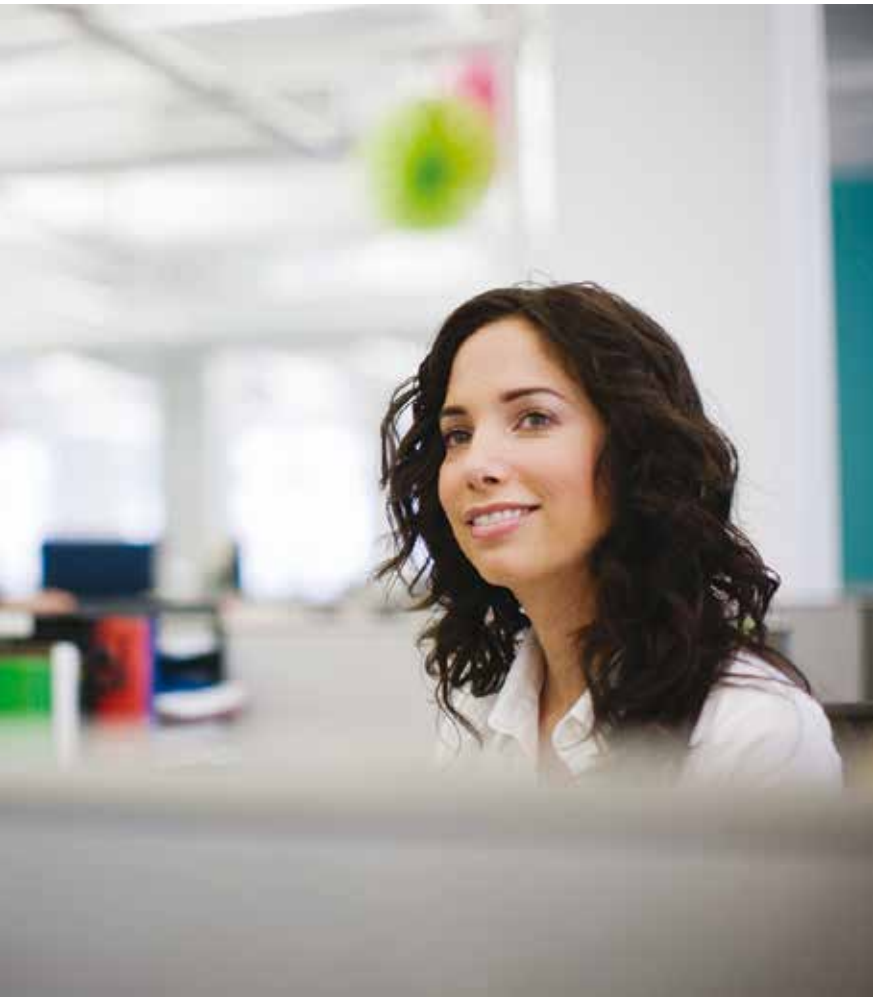
"Women remain underrepresented in the corporate pipeline. At every step, the representation of women declines, and does not appear to be the result of company-led attrition." *(McKinsey Report. Women in the Workplace 2016)*

So, what should you look for in an organisation to at least ensure you are joining a truly 'equal opportunity employer'?

First, look at the make-up of the board and the senior management team. What percentage of women hold senior roles? Higher than 35% is good news – yes, it is does seem low but it's better than many organisations.

> ***I realise now that early in my career I had some great mentors and people who supported me***
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

Figure 1:



> *I always had great support from my bosses who helped me to move in my career. They have stayed around as well as mentors throughout the following years*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

15%

One recent survey found that only 15% of companies review high-visibility projects by gender

Second, talk to people about development opportunities offered to staff – how many women:

- Attend external training courses?
- Attend internal training and leadership courses?
- Attend the big organisational conferences – as delegates as well as speakers and facilitators?
- Are offered secondments?
- Are offered overseas assignments?
- Have the opportunity to lead key assignments? (One recent survey found that only 15% of companies review high-visibility projects by gender.)

Getting a feel for these areas will give you an idea of the level of seriousness about women's careers in the organisation.

Third, identify the support mechanisms available for women. Is there an official women's network? Are women offered coaching or mentoring? And who are the main female role models in the organisation? What roles are they in? What managerial level do they operate at?

Your Boss

In our research many women told us their boss could provide a real career boost or, if they were not supportive, could create all sorts of barriers. So, think about the boss. Are they supportive? Do they challenge women in a positive way to go further and step up to the next challenge? Or is the boss someone who women cannot learn from and is maybe even holding people back? Does the boss act as a coach, mentor or sponsor development and progress?

Each of these roles is different, of course. As a coach, a boss would be developmentally focused, offering support and challenges with the skills to help people develop further than they might otherwise be capable of. As a mentor, a boss will share his/her experience and offer support and guidance. As a sponsor, the boss will endorse a person's capabilities and potential with others.

Each and any of these roles will be beneficial for an individual's career future. We truly believe it is important for working women to recognise that it is not only worthwhile to get on with the boss, to respect him or her and to feel you might be able to learn from them. But, also to find bosses that will provide challenging opportunities and actively encourage growth and development.

Yourself

There are no two ways about it. You, the individual, are the single most important person when it comes to managing your working life and career. No-one else will do it for you. So, make a plan.

Set career goals and think through how these might be achieved. Remember, plans and goals can and do change but without a plan you are simply wandering around aimlessly. We often suggest to women that they think about and plan for two or maybe even five years ahead. Setting time frames somehow makes planning easier in that you can actually focus on the steps ahead without things being too far in the future.

> *Target where you want to go and go for it – don't be shy and underestimate your abilities but manage your destiny in a more structured way. (Don't lose focus.)*
>
> SURVEY RESPONDENT

The second area that we suggest to women is to think about the impression you are having on others.

Awareness of and managing the impression you create will contribute towards reputational development and will help to build organisational and career credibility. Some of the other areas to work on that will help with impression creation are:

- Be confident in your ability
- Work smarter (and not just harder) and make sure you are delivering on time
- Speak up at meetings, make sure your views are heard
- Demonstrate persistence and determination at work
- Think strategically about your role, your relationships and your career.

Finally, step up by putting yourself forward for new opportunities, challenges and promotions. This not only makes people more aware of you but it will mean that you may well get the chance to take on new opportunities.

One additional capability that seems to be a general issue for 21st century working is being resilient. Almost all of us have experienced stress and pressure and yet we often under estimate the value of learning about resilience and how to cope well at such times. Resilience is a skill-set that can be learned and improved upon.

One of the women we talked to in our study has worked for more than 20 years in the service sector and describes the pressure of working at director level. Her views echo those of many of the other respondents and interviewees:

"There are not enough hours in the day for myself – or for my husband, who is an accountant. He starts his day with emails as soon as he gets up and so it goes all the way through the day. Our children are now teenage but I find it hard to understand how we managed to cope with this level of pressure when they were young. I always feel guilty as all the time I'm conscious of the work that's waiting for me. I'm busy all the time and my working life is pretty intense…"

While women can now make progress and create better career futures for themselves companies must also take responsibility. Some companies are doing great things but there are many more who simply "need to do better". Research has highlighted how important it is for organisations to create better policies and show more commitment to equality issues. Other studies have focused on individual issues.

The evidence from our study indicates that both companies and individuals need to be more focused, more strategic, and look at ways to provide practical and flexible solutions.

Women alone cannot solve all the issues that exist around equality. Companies need to take a far more active role and a short company audit is included in the box (see right) to help identify a few of the key questions.

The need to build high levels of resilience, to create a culture that values the manager as coach and an organisation that actively promotes diversity at all levels will generate more opportunities for women (and men) to personally grow and develop and to contribute to the success of their organisation. This is surely a "win-win" solution to meet the challenges and demands of the 21st century.

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A COMPANY AUDIT: SIX KEY QUESTIONS

Does your company:

1. Regularly hold (and sponsor) network meetings for women across the organisation?
2. Provide feedback and one-to-one career advice for women at all levels of the business?
3. Ensure every manager has the skills to act as a coach to help women broaden the key skills that will help to create a first class CV?
4. Enable women everywhere in the business to work flexibly? (Also for all working parents)
5. Judge men and women equally with regard to promotion, pay and bonus criteria?
6. Offer the possibility for part-time and flexible working to achieve career success?

In addition to the brief audit above, another very simple way to measure diversity and gender issues is to ask women working in the business the following questions:

- *How well is the company doing in terms of creating a 'women-friendly' working environment?*
- *What else should the company do in order to be a leader rather than a laggard in terms of women's issues?*
- *What support is available for working parents?*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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REFERENCES:

In the following books and article we would like to offer women a number of practical tools, ideas and suggestions that will contribute to the management of their career success:

How to Thrive and Survive As a Working Woman: The Coach Yourself Toolkit *(2016)* *Bloomsbury*

Women in the Workplace *(2016)* *McKinsey & Company*

How Women Can Navigate to Become Global Leaders *Dent, F. E. & Holton, V. (2012)* *EFMD* Global Focus