

GENDER

Why the Crisis Is Putting Companies at Risk of Losing Female Talent

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The Covid-19 crisis has reconfigured how we work, parent, and care for ourselves and our communities. It remains uncertain how a post-pandemic society will function, but already a consensus is emerging that the global pivot to working remotely will likely change how many companies think about face time and rigid work schedules.

Might the current revolution in how work gets done benefit women, who traditionally have been more likely to take advantage of flexible work arrangements? A recent paper by a group of economic experts argues yes, that the current situation will normalize remote and flexible work and will therefore make these arrangements available to a broader segment of working women. While we share the authors' hope, we aren't convinced that the sudden expansion of remote work will end up benefiting women.

As we've watched the coronavirus crisis unfold, we see many of the barriers that stymie women's careers and lead companies to underutilize and lose their female talent (many of which we explore in our forthcoming book, *Glass Half Broken: Shattering the Barriers that Still Hold Women Back at Work*) become magnified.

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We believe that many leaders may emerge from the crisis with a long-term talent problem if they don't incorporate some small but critical steps into their current practices. By addressing four key biases and barriers, you can prevent the careers of your women employees from becoming collateral damage during this crisis, and

set your company up to leverage their capabilities today and in the future.

We aren't suggesting that you shift focus from mission-critical activities; cash flow, employee safety, and negotiations with lenders and clients are rightly your priorities. And we acknowledge that many leaders in essential industries are grappling with a different set of management challenges as they try to run operations that can't be done from home. But for those who are managing employees who have transitioned to working from home, there are straightforward steps that you can take to win the loyalty of your women employees and keep your company from losing hard-won ground on gender inclusion.

Pay Extra Mind to the Motherhood Penalty

Parents are now managing round-the-clock childcare while trying to meet deadlines, keep connected to colleagues, and demonstrate their value. This has intensified the already-outsized burden shouldered by working mothers, as numerous personal accounts and analyses have outlined. Being seen in a caregiving role tends to boost men's reputation and elicit warmth from others but when women's caregiving is visible it triggers doubts about their capabilities. Women with children are viewed as less competent and less committed than women without children and men, including fathers.

In a typical workplace, women can and do deploy a variety of strategies to circumvent this bias. Over the years, numerous women have told us about not displaying family photos at the office or minimizing the information they share about their caregiving responsibilities. Setting aside questions about whether women with children should have to take such steps to safeguard their credibility (they shouldn't) or the extent to which they can (many, particularly lower earners with fewer childcare options, can't), it remains that when women step through the office door, they have some modicum of control over how to navigate this bias.

Now that home *is* the office, even these provisional strategies are no longer available. Children can burst into a room during an important meeting, audibly and/or visually triggering the bias. A call might have to be ended abruptly because a child needs

attention. It may not be possible to find a space free of reminders of parental status — children’s toys or artwork in the background, or interruptions from a spouse about a home-schooling issue.

Meanwhile, fathers may actually benefit when colleagues see evidence of their children (or the children themselves). There is a well-documented “fatherhood premium” when it comes to men’s earning power, as well as widespread acknowledgment that fathers tend to be more highly praised than mothers for caring for their children.

With your employees’ family status and family life now highly visible, it’s critical to be aware of these divergent biases toward fathers and mothers. As a leader, you can foster an environment where questioning women’s competence on the basis of their caregiving roles is not accepted. And leaders who themselves have children at home — whether they are a man or a woman — can be vocal and transparent about juggling their responsibilities and the importance of their family role. Now is not the time to encourage the ideal-worker norm — not only will you look out of touch and callous for expecting employees to put work first at this time, you will entrench the gender biases that cast women as inherently less competent and valuable.

Pare Down the Pressure

We’re all learning — sometimes to our pleasant surprise — just how much work can be done from home. This isn’t surprising to those who’ve researched virtual work; they’ve long known that people who work remotely are actually more productive than average. But it’s important to remember that none of the research conducted on virtual work was conducted during a time like this, and it doesn’t follow that the productivity gains are available under current conditions.

At a time of such uncertainty and strain, it’s tempting to lean on your people to crank out as much work as possible — especially if you’re projecting revenue shortfalls and negotiating with creditors. But not only will this approach likely alienate your

employees regardless of their gender or family situation, it is guaranteed to mean you undervalue and underrecognize women with children at home.

Pre-pandemic, women's careers were already vulnerable. Men in top management jobs are far more likely to have the support of a spouse who doesn't work, as we've seen in our own research on Harvard Business School alumni and with a global sample of executives. And in dual-career families, women's careers tend to take a backseat to their male partners', as we've observed in our own research as well as that of others. When push comes to shove, women step back from work — and what bigger shove could there be than the sudden and total disappearance of childcare options? Contrary to conventional wisdom, women's preference to ratchet back their careers is not the primary driver of highly educated women's decisions to quit their careers. Rather, they are pushed out by workplaces that devalue their contributions and dismiss their needs.

Companies are on the brink of pushing out waves of women if they don't acknowledge and accommodate the challenges faced by working parents. Doing so will benefit parents of all genders in your organization but is especially critical for women with young children.

Instead of relying on a level of time and effort that your employees are simply unable to give, you need to be ruthless about priorities and business needs. Identify what really matters, and ask people to devote their best effort, whatever that means. By setting reasonable expectations about the amount of time employees can be expected to spend on work, you'll get exponentially greater engagement.

Run Virtual Meetings Equitably

Right now, our computer screens *are* our workplaces, and women face the same patterns of exclusion they did in the office. Make sure that women have a seat at the virtual table. With pressure to make decisions as efficiently as possible, taking the time to ask whose voice needs to be heard could feel like a luxury. Your impulse might

be to huddle with smaller groups but this instinct will not serve you well. You're likely to find yourself looking at a gallery of faces very similar to your own — those you feel most comfortable with. We've heard from women who have found themselves unexpectedly left out of important calls, and who don't feel valued and now see their future at the company quite differently. Take the extra time to think about whether you are including everyone who should have input, and direct your reports who manage others to do the same.

It's well known that women's ideas are more likely to go unrecognized in meetings, and in a virtual setting it's even easier to glide over their contributions if no one is mindful of acknowledging them. As meetings get leaner, facilitators need to keep track of who participates and solicit input from those who've spoken less. And we all know that it can be alarmingly easy to lose focus during a video call and to miss what someone says. Again, pay careful attention to these moments. Who was asked to repeat themselves, and whose garbled remark was simply ignored?

Keep Digital Spaces Inclusive

Prior research has shown that men's networks benefit from tighter, more personal ties with work colleagues, while women's relationships with coworkers tend to be less close and more transactional. The virtual social environment is going to exacerbate this disparity, with women likely to be looped in only or primarily to formal, official channels of information.

In fact, virtual meetings open up a fresh new avenue of exclusion: the invisible side conversation. Managers can easily have chat in a different window right alongside the actual meeting, perhaps even coming up with plans that undermine group decisions or making inappropriate remarks about colleagues. Even if not actively discriminatory, these invisible conversations cement relationships and are impossible to break into. A woman tired of being left out of informal but important chats can't invite herself to the next discussion or ask a trusted colleague to clue her in if she doesn't even know they're happening. While you may not be able to completely

prevent this kind of behavior, you can make it known that you expect better from your team. Prior to meetings, remind people that they should be sharing their views with the full group and not carrying on side conversations that exclude others. And if you get wind of problematic comments and conversations, make it clear that these exchanges are unacceptable and merit serious consequences.

Other kinds of virtual interactions can also create barriers. Now that all our socializing is done online, coworkers might gather in special Slack channels, FaceTime happy hours, and other digital spaces. And excluding women from these virtual events, intentionally or not, is frictionless. There's no risk of being overheard talking about an outing, and, on the other side, no awkward realization that you've been left out. These types of private digital gatherings can widen the gulf between men's and women's workplace networks.

While you can't dictate what employees do with their online downtime, you can encourage your employees to be mindful about inclusion when it comes to team-building and social events. You can also model an inclusive approach by making sure you aren't spending more time informally chatting with certain people. And remind managers that their responsibility to foster an inclusive culture still stands.

A post-pandemic world will have winners and losers when it comes to female talent, and it's not by chance which team you'll find yourself on. Right now, of course, employees' basic well-being and safety is the paramount concern, but don't let gender inclusion fall to the wayside. You run the very real risk of a female talent drain, losing capable workers and leaders that you need to make it through the present moment and to create future success. Instead of standing by as women's careers become casualties of the crisis, you can cement your women employees' commitment and maximize their contributions. Not only will you be helping to maintain our collective progress toward gender equality, you'll be setting your business up to leverage its benefits in a future that will surely need it.

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