
What Makes for Inclusive Working Cultures?



By Benjamin Kessler , INSEAD Knowledge; Clarissa Cortland and Zoe Kinias , INSEAD; with Eliot Sherman , London Business School

Interventions designed to increase women’s cultural fit can also create a better working environment for everyone.

Gender imbalance in the workplace is not confined to the [gender pay gap](#) or number of women vs. men in senior leadership positions. It also has to do with subtler yet deeper cultural cues about who belongs and who doesn’t. For the most part, organisational cultures do not yet meet the needs of a gender-balanced workforce. Not only do [mental models](#) of brilliance and leadership mostly skew male, but policies and practices are also largely holdovers from an era when [male-dominated professional contexts](#) were unquestionably normative. Expected to “prove themselves” within a system that holds them to [double standards](#), women often justifiably feel set up to fail. As a result, too many women burn out or second-guess their own suitability for leadership roles. The underutilisation and departure of valuable female talent come at a heavy cost to companies.

The second annual Women at Work conference, held in March on INSEAD’s Asia campus in Singapore, featured a session of research talks titled

“Visibility & Fit”, which explored actions organisations can take to address this problem. The presenters’ research-based insights suggest that proactively developing gender balance is critical to organisations evolving with the times. It is also a priceless opportunity to nurture leaders in a way that benefits everyone, just when the race for top talent is intensifying globally.

Visual representation

Biased beliefs about what professional roles women fit are deeply embedded in decision making. Unconscious gender bias can affect our split-second sensory responses to another person.

UCLA Professor Kerri L. Johnson presented findings from her research on visual representation and gender fit. Johnson focused primarily on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, where stable and well-paid jobs are expected to be increasingly concentrated in the coming years. In this STEM context, women are dramatically underrepresented around the world.

When Johnson and her team showed study participants images of men and women and asked which were likely to be in a STEM career vs. non-STEM (or administrative assistants in STEM firms), men were assumed far more often to have STEM careers. This confirmed the prevalence of the assumption that STEM is a place for men.

Beyond this, there is a more surprising finding. When Johnson’s team displayed faces of men and women that ranged widely in gender typicality, or the extent to which they looked masculine or feminine, she found that the masculinity or femininity of the face significantly predicted perceived suitability for STEM *within* genders as well. More masculine-looking men were judged more likely to work and succeed in STEM than men with less masculine appearance. Women with very feminine faces were seen as less STEM-worthy than those with less feminine facial features.

For organisations, having a diverse group of **role models** – in terms of gender, appearance and occupational role – can revise people’s automatic assumptions and associations regarding gender and competence. There is robust research evidence that “changing exemplars changes the evaluations we make of other people”, Johnson said.

Improving quotas

Numerical representation is obviously crucial as well. Gender diversity in currently male-dominated fields such as STEM and top business management will eventually become normalised when it is more common. That is one argument for gender quotas, such as [Germany's](#) and [Malaysia's](#) requirements of 30 percent female representation on [supervisory boards](#) of public companies and California's mandate that women hold [at least 40 percent of directorships](#) on listed companies by 2021.

Through quotas, advocates hope to create opportunities for women aspiring to lead and also encourage women to aim higher than they otherwise would. However, Christa Nater, a PhD candidate at the University of Bern, has found that the way quotas work is hardly that simple.

Nater conducted a study with her collaborator and session discussant, Professor Sabine Sczesny, also from the University of Bern. In it, male and female management students read one of four different versions of mock job ads for leadership positions.

One ad didn't mention gender. Another described a policy of preferential hiring with a 40 percent gender quota. One ad explicitly invited "qualified women" to apply. A fourth ad mentioned preferential policies for "equally qualified women" with no quota. Only this last ad changed how women saw themselves in relation to the position advertised. The authors concluded that granting women preferential treatment in hiring works best when requirements other than gender are also emphasised. When women feel that their gender may simply be an additional asset on top of their skills and abilities, rather than (as is usually the case) a liability, they can be more motivated to strive for leadership positions.

The authors also noted that when women are made to feel that their gender constitutes the core of their advantage – as can be the danger with quotas – the encouragement effect in the study above was basically nil. Additional studies compared management students' leadership aspirations after reviewing a corporate website featuring a story about a merit-based woman leader, a quota-based woman leader (with and without later success), or no information about a female leader (control group). The merit-based description boosted women's interest in leadership positions relative to the control group, with no effect on the men. The quota description without later

success, on the other hand, did not increase women's aspiration, and reduced that of men. The quota effects were improved when the leader was subsequently successful in her role. Men's aspirations were not reduced and women aspirations were increased, despite the leader's initial selection based on a quota.

The answer, Nater said, is not to dispense with quotas, but rather to ensure that qualifications and performance are communicated as crucial selection criteria, especially when quotas or similar mandates are implemented. For example, one way to effectively signal the qualifications of women would be to explicitly communicate the use of "merit-based quotas".

Global mindsets

Fitting in is a fraught concept for women with working lives across multiple cultures. They have learned to understand and benefit from the challenges and opportunities of standing out in a cultural context. INSEAD Organisational Behaviour Emeritus Professor [Linda Brimm](#) has done years of research following professionals (of both genders) with hybrid cultural identities, whom she calls "[Global Cosmopolitans](#)".

Multinational employers can misunderstand these professionals and categorise them narrowly as mobile game pieces to be shifted around the global chessboard. But Brimm says they have much more than their mobility to offer organisations. They possess a problem-solving skillset and a change-ready mindset, derived from a long history of cross-cultural bridge-building.

Each move can feel like creating a new chapter in a life story, and this can involve a decision to return to a place called home. This choice can be particularly difficult for women, highlighting the difference between their global perspective and the local perspective back home. Brimm told the story of a woman with Korean heritage whose repatriation left her feeling like an anomaly, as an unmarried non-mother in her thirties. Yet the pull of family and passion to make a difference gave her the motivation to turn this challenge into an opportunity.

When they want to position themselves for high-level leadership, Global Cosmopolitans can count on their ability to effectively communicate [what they bring to the table](#). And leaders can enable dialogue with Global Cosmopolitans, value their difference and convey their value. Brimm says, "Organisations that confine executives by limiting their ability to see who

they are and who they can be will lose key players unless they are able to listen and learn.”

Working from home

As workplaces continue to evolve, the need for knowledge workers to come into the office every day is increasingly scrutinised. Yet a certain amount of conspicuous facetime is still considered essential for aspiring leaders. For women, who even in **relatively egalitarian contexts** are doing most of the management of the home, housework and childcare, this obligation creates constant tensions between work and family life.

Some organisations have tried to address the problem by introducing flexible working options, such as job sharing, compressed work-weeks and reduced working hours with pro-rated pay. But **research** shows that women (and it is almost solely women) who adopt flexi-work suffer significant career penalties for appearing to back away from work commitments. Evidence suggests working women are aware of this and often feel compelled to reject flexi-work as a consequence.

Professor Eliot Sherman of London Business School recently explored a potential alternative. Partnering with a life sciences company based in the U.K., he launched a four-week experiment whereby employees could work remotely as much as they wanted during randomly assigned weeks. Unlike formalised flexi-work, men and women (both parents and non-parents) chose to work remotely about two days per week. According to surveys completed by all employees after each week, working from home had no effect on the total number of hours worked, compared to in-office weeks. However, the vast majority of employees felt that they were more productive when they were allowed to work remotely at their discretion. This effect was largest for mothers, who also experienced a meaningful reduction in conflict between work and family demands.

According to employees that Sherman subsequently interviewed, working from home helped mainly by restoring time that would otherwise be spent commuting (many mothers’ commutes are lengthened by school pick-ups and drop-offs), avoiding the social distractions that are rife in office environments, and allowing people to catch up on sleep. These interviews also suggested that employees did not wish to work remotely for more than a few days per week, due to concerns about social isolation.

With broad appeal and especially positive impacts for working mothers, the success of discretionary remote working in Sherman's context suggests that solutions that improve gender balance can also improve working lives for everyone.

Interventions to explore

The above research points to some possible interventions for resolving conflicts between women's gender and working identities, so that they can fully contribute to their organisations and receive commensurate recognition. The big takeaway is that organisations would benefit by implementing interventions that target women's obstacles and concerns, **without over-emphasising gender** in ways that call attention to gender differences or solidify gender stereotypes.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/what-makes-inclusive-working-cultures>

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About the series

Gender Initiative

The **INSEAD Gender Initiative** integrates research, business and pedagogy to engage the full potential of both women and men.

Its community of gender researchers conduct cutting-edge research on the experiences and impact of women in business and society. The initiative builds relationships with organisations to enhance their commitment to gender balance and their ability to fulfil this goal. It further strives to create a pipeline of future business leaders who are passionate and equipped to drive gender balance within their existing and future organisations.

Its mission is to create and disseminate knowledge that advances women leaders and optimises their contributions within and beyond their organisations. The Gender Initiative strives to engage both men and women in this effort, inspiring all to take action.

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