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Developing High-Level Leaders in Hospitality: Advice for Retaining Female Talent

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Abstract

Based on interviews with twenty women hospitality leaders, this report explores what hospitality firms can do to facilitate the advancement of women into the ranks of top leadership. Drawing on the respondents' observations in semi-structured interviews, we argue that organizations would likely strengthen the retention of their professionals, especially female professionals, if top leaders make a deep commitment to reevaluate and potentially revise current processes and structures. This commitment includes refocusing on purposeful long-term career development that provides a sightline to the top, and ultimately creates more female role models in executive-level positions. Organizations would also benefit from offering autonomy over how work is completed, and designing infrastructures of support to assist professionals during mid-career stages. Hospitality firms that take tangible, consistent, and systemic action that is executed by motivated and supportive leaders will stand the best chance of retaining a valuable resource—their female professional talent—and benefiting from that expertise.

Keywords

hospitality, women, leadership, executive management

Disciplines

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Cornell Hospitality Report

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Advice for Retaining Female Talent

by Kate Walsh, Ph.D., Susan S. Fleming, Ph.D. and Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D.

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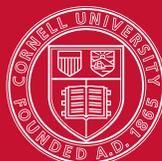
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on interviews with twenty women hospitality leaders, this report explores what hospitality firms can do to facilitate the advancement of women into the ranks of top leadership. Drawing on the respondents' observations in semi-structured interviews, we argue that organizations would likely strengthen the retention of their professionals, especially female professionals, if top leaders make a deep commitment to reevaluate and potentially revise current processes and structures. This commitment includes refocusing on purposeful long-term career development that provides a sightline to the top, and ultimately creates more female role models in executive-level positions. Organizations would also benefit from offering autonomy over how work is completed, and designing infrastructures of support to assist professionals during mid-career stages. Hospitality firms that take tangible, consistent, and systemic action that is executed by motivated and supportive leaders will stand the best chance of retaining a valuable resource—their female professional talent—and benefiting from that expertise.

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There has to be a commitment—a really deep commitment—on the part of the most senior people in the organization to give more than lip service to the idea that the human resource is the most precious thing. Everybody says it, everybody's mission statement, particularly in hospitality, is very clear about using words that capture that idea. Where the rubber meets the road is, okay, so what do you have in place that allows that to really happen? It's not about a whiz-bang thing. It's pretty fundamental.

Without a doubt, the hospitality industry is effectively leaving money on the table by not being more intentional in guiding talented women to advance to senior-level positions. In a companion *CHR Report*, we examined the career paths of a sample of twenty accomplished and successful women professionals currently working in the hospitality industry, both as corporate leaders and as entrepreneurs. Their comments demonstrated that their advancement was in large part due to their own drive, while their organizations played a mixed role in enabling, or in some cases undermining, their success. In this report, we present these industry leaders' assessment of the ways that hospitality organizations can help their most talented women build meaningful careers that can take them to top leadership roles in the C-suite. Our goal is to understand and identify ways that institutions can facilitate the career progression of more than half of the hospitality industry's professional workforce, who for reasons we discuss, often opt-out of their hospitality-based careers.

A Case for Change

The most crucial form of capital in today's service-based organizations is its human talent; developing and drawing upon this knowledge base is key to the vitality and longevity of the hospitality industry, and any company within it. With the growing labor shortage and aging workforce, organizations cannot underestimate the criticality of identifying and grooming their most promising talent for future leadership. Yet research shows that organizations are often falling short when it comes to developing and advancing female talent. This is evidenced by the many women who choose to leave their employers, especially at mid-career. These professionals' reasons for exiting are complex and numerous, but frequently include significant structural barriers to reaching the C-suite.¹ Professional women on average face slower upward mobility, earn lower wages than their male counterparts, and are overrepresented in positions lacking authority or autonomy.² Concurrent with limited advancement opportunities, women professionals often find they are asked to work in ways that make it impossible for them to meet their non-work obligations.³

This disconnect between the working needs of female professionals and the traditional hierarchies companies use to organize and reward their employees causes many women to choose other ways to build meaningful careers, increasingly as entrepreneurs and often outside of the industry.⁴ Research shows that as many as two-thirds of highly qualified women are rejecting corporate jobs for entrepreneurial endeavors or to simply focus on other roles in their lives.⁵ The resulting loss of professional talent is considerable. While women constitute over half of the students in many hospitality programs and occupy more than half of professional entry-level positions, their representation dwindles to around 15 percent at the executive level.⁶

¹ M. Clarke, "Advancing Women's Careers through Leadership Development Programs," *Employee Relations*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (2011), pp. 498-515.

² M.L. Huffman, P.N. Cohen, and J. Pearlman, "Engendering Change: Organizational Dynamics and Workplace Gender Desegregation, 1975-2005," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2010), pp. 255-277.

³ L.A. Mainiero and S.E. Sullivan, "Kaleidoscope Careers: An Alternate Explanation for the "Opt-out Revolution," *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 19, No. 1(2005), pp. 106-123.

⁴ E.F. Cabrera, "Protean Organizations: Reshaping Work and Careers to Retain Female Talent," *Career Development International*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2009), pp. 186-201; and G. Grady and A.M. McCarthy, "Work-life Integration: Experiences of Mid-career Professional Working Mothers," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (2008), pp. 599-622.

⁵ S.A. Hewlett, *Off-ramps and On-ramps* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2007).

⁶ R. Soares, J. Combopiano, A. Regis, Y. Shur, and R. Wong, "Catalyst Census: Fortune 500 Women Executive Officers," Catalyst, 2012.

You have to keep moving if you're young and smart and aggressive. You have to keep moving—not moving jobs, but moving up.

When women do occupy senior leadership roles, their organizations benefit in important ways. Greater representation of women in executive-level positions has been associated with higher sales revenue, relative profits, and stock performance.⁷ Moreover, organizations with three or more women on the board have been shown to be 18 to 69 percent more profitable than companies with male-only boards in the same industry.⁸ The presence of female senior leaders creates a virtuous cycle that includes a larger proportion of women, and thus professional talent, at lower levels.⁹ Because female leaders signal possibilities for advancement, younger professionals are more likely to emulate these top executives and want to follow similar paths.

All these findings suggest that hospitality organizations could benefit, and even gain advantage, from employing greater numbers of women in senior-level positions. The question is, how do organizations structure such fundamental and essential initiatives? To answer this question, we interviewed twenty top-level women in the hospitality in-

⁷ G. Desvaux, S. Devillard-Hoellinger, and M.C. Meaney, "A Business Case for Women," *McKinsey Quarterly*, Vol. 4 (2008), pp. 26-33; and C. Herring, "Does Diversity Pay?: Race, Gender, and the Business Case for Diversity," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (2009), pp. 208-224.

⁸ K. Pine, "Sheconomics: Why More Women on Boards Boosts Company Performance," *Significance*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2011), pp. 80-81.

⁹ C.E. Hirsh, "The Strength of Weak Enforcement: The Impact of Discrimination Charges, Legal Environments, and Organizational Conditions on Workplace Segregation," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (2009), pp. 245-271.

Interview protocol

1. Thinking of your career progression to date, what stands out for you as some significant milestones or achievements?
2. How have your aspirations changed over time?
3. What challenges specific to being a female professional in a predominantly male environment did you face early in your career? How have those challenges changed over your career? What are they now?
4. What do you see as the biggest challenges new graduates starting out face? Those mid-career?
5. What advice would you give to your 22-year-old self?
6. If you could create the ideal work setting for women to succeed, what would it look like?
7. What do you see as the state of the industry in paving the path for women leaders to make it to the executive level? Do you see the pipeline of rising women growing, contracting, or staying the same?
8. What advice would you provide your company, and the industry, to keep talent such as yourself?

dustry, as described next. This report is a companion piece to a previous *CHR Report* that summarizes the career perspectives of these respondents, including challenges they faced in their career journeys, ways they overcame these challenges, and advice they would provide to young professionals.¹⁰

Study Methodology

To explore how hospitality organizations can advance the careers of women, we conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty female executives in the hospitality industry, whom we identified through our knowledge of the industry and from suggestions by our respondents. Twelve of our twenty respondents held senior management positions (e.g., division president, executive VP of development, senior VP of human resources, vice president food and beverage, senior VP of operations, senior VP of sales and marketing, general manager) in publically traded, global hospitality corporations, as well as in four smaller hospitality firms, a food and beverage company, and an airline. The remaining eight participants were CEOs and founders of their own firms. All but two participants were in their 40s or older. Eighteen respondents were married, fifteen were mothers, and eighteen had spent their entire professional careers in the hospitality industry.

To uncover their insights and reflections, we conducted semi-structured interviews in person or by telephone that lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. (See Exhibit 1 for the interview protocol.) To facilitate the identification of central

concepts, we recorded and transcribed our interviews.¹¹ After a content analysis in which we noted where ideas converged along key themes, we substantiated our identified themes using Atlas.ti 7., a qualitative software tool designed to assist in analyzing large bodies of text.

Using the Atlas.ti word count function and coding process, we searched the 255-page transcript for each theme identified through our initial content analysis. The themes included flexibility, networking, risk taking, institutional programs, advancement opportunities, and work-family balance. This search enabled us to locate all quotations within the transcribed documents that used key word families. Thus, we were able to substantiate the presence of our identified themes and ensure that they were represented throughout our interviews. A review of the word counts also enabled us to uncover any ideas not captured through our initial content analysis. Thus, analyzing the highlighted word families strengthened the validity of the themes generated through our content analysis, and ensured that interviewee responses were accurately represented.

In the sections that follow, we share the themes that emerged from our interviews about what companies can do to develop and retain talented professionals such as our respondents.

Advice for Organizations

Inertia and the status quo. The heart and foundation for this study was a desire to uncover how the hospitality industry could fully tap into, develop, and realize the benefits

¹⁰ See: Kate Walsh, Susan S. Fleming, and Cathy A.ENZ, "Female Executives in Hospitality: Reflections on Career Journeys and Reaching the Top," *Cornell Hospitality Report*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2014), Cornell Center for Hospitality Research.

¹¹ Note that all three principal researchers conducted the interviews. We thought it essential to do so. In-person interviews were recorded with a recording device and phone interviews were recorded with the assistance of a toll-free conferencing and recording service.

of retaining more than half of its current and future professional workforce. Interestingly, however, when we asked our respondents what their companies could do to retain professionals, both men and women, the immediate reaction was often a long pause, suggesting that answers to this question are complex and multi-layered. At a basic level, these executives generally agreed that the industry can and should do more to promote the development of its female professionals. As one respondent commented:

I get upset when I think about it because I think there are so many organizations out there who are not harnessing what we can as companies, and it's just insane and we can't possibly think that we're looking after our customers that way if we're not looking after... if we're not using our resources better. So we've got to find a way to shift that and change the whole attitude... And one of the things is that at a more fundamental level, putting the programs in place and caring enough to put the programs in place and then monitoring and making sure they're effective and listening to the feedback that you're getting.

Despite recognizing the need and desire for organizations to facilitate change, it still was difficult for the professionals with whom we spoke to think of profound initiatives. This may be because the fabric of the industry is so tightly woven that to cut into it and alter it also means to reorganize how work is done. Further, these professionals, and other top leaders, had found ways to create successful careers within the current structure and thus questioning the status quo may not be as salient for them. One respondent reflected on this possibility:

Wow, this is going to come across as a little harsh. You ready? There are so many people that have worked so hard to get to the top for a really long time that are not going to want to upset the apple cart. Because in a sense you're saying one of the difficulties is when people have played the rules for a very long period of time and they've climbed to the top, then it's hard for them. They don't want to change the rules. It's like, 'I had to do this.'

Considering that eight of our twenty respondents had left corporate hospitality organizations to launch their own businesses, we could not help but wonder whether any one of them would have remained in their organizations had they been provided with greater opportunities, a better sightline to the top, or more autonomy and support for balancing the demands of their work and family lives. We wanted to learn more about this issue.

Fortunately, when prompted further, these executives offered important ideas about how organizations can facilitate the advancement of women into leadership positions. First and foremost, they told us that it is critical that commitment to female leadership development be driven

There are so many organizations out there who are not harnessing what we can as companies, and it's just insane and we can't possibly think that we're looking after our customers that way if we're...not using our resources better.

from the highest levels of an organization. Next, they offered a series of suggestions that we highlight below. These critical initiatives include: demonstrating a deep commitment to change, building role models from the top of the organization, promoting mentoring, acknowledging the value of a diverse workforce, offering schedule autonomy and control for mid-career professionals, creating a supportive infrastructure, and focusing on long-term career development. It is important to note that any one of the following ideas we present can certainly assist some professionals some of the time—and thus provide benefit to their organizations. Taken together though, they provide a point of leverage and distinction. That is, if companies incorporate these ideas into a fundamental shift in and commitment to how they develop their professional workforce, they can become *the* place for women professionals—and all professionals—to develop meaningful and satisfying careers.

Make Leadership Advancement a Central and Visible Priority

When we asked about what it takes to retain female professionals, our respondents noted that organizations must continually create growth opportunities and make sure that these opportunities are visible to their high potential talent. This includes making clear the potential career paths a professional could take, and initiating steps to implement related plans. Such as strategy would help ambitious professionals see their future steps, and set their strategy for taking

I think just in general, it's the same as it's always been, if the company is growing, and there's growth for you and you're still learning—once you go in every single day and you're not learning anything and you're young, that's just not good anymore.

on new challenges and growing within their organizations. As one professional summed it up,

... so you have to keep moving if you're young and smart and aggressive. You have to keep moving—not moving jobs but moving up.

One interviewee pointed out that working in a growing company often creates opportunities,

I think just in general, it's the same as it's always been, if the company is growing, and there's growth for you and you're still learning—once you go in every single day and you're not learning anything and you're young, that's just not good anymore.

Thus, providing growth and advancement opportunities is linked to being proactive and purposeful in identifying, developing, communicating, and implementing a path for successful advancement for high potential women. As one respondent commented,

When I was at company xxx, we had a lot of women in our group. We had a lot of senior women and there were women across the firm, but women were very, very underrepresented at the partnership level. And there really was never a conversation about what it takes to get there, what the path is going to be, they never really laid it out to the people that they should have been having in their eyesights. And all of a sudden when I resigned I was asked to give a lot of time because they didn't want to announce it and really what I found out was a lot of senior women had left around the same time I did. And then all of a sudden

these partners are all over me: "Oh, you've got a wonderful future here, let's lay out this path, and lay out that path." And I felt like saying "Well if you had done this while I was here maybe I wouldn't be walking out the door." And then it made it feel disingenuous to me that now they care about me because I'm leaving. And so it was interesting because I think that it's probably not uncommon from what I hear for other firms to do that. To have these great programs in place and things like that, but just not be active in terms of how they're implementing them to make sure that they're encouraging and developing women along the way to get to the most senior levels.

Fundamentally, committing to providing growth opportunities and career development plans and programs will only work if organizations demonstrate a consistent and high-level commitment to change, and back it up with tangible actions. As one respondent passionately explained:

Organizations have to look at walking the walk and not just putting out policies to check the box. And you know, my experience has been that some organizations like to check the box and they like to get on the cover of *Working Women* magazine and make sure their firm is featured in all this positive PR about women, but when it comes right down to it, they are not practicing what they're preaching. And a lot of them will put in place these great committees and initiatives and things like that, but not really carry through and make sure that those initiatives are effective and what they need to do in order to change and be flexible with what they're doing over time.

Another professional expanded on this theme, noting the lack of companies that are genuinely and consistently committed to advancing women into leadership positions:

There's plenty of women who don't have kids who still struggle. It's not just [mothers]...it's just the general bias in the workplace still. So I'd say I haven't seen an organization who had any sort of organized way of dealing with it, to be honest. They've just been more *ad hoc*. Sometimes they'd put pumping stations in bathrooms or allow more leave time, paternal leave time. I mean, you've seen all of those sorts of human resources benefits kind of things put in place. But as far as really trying to embrace women and do things to move women ahead, I can't come up with anything.

As part of this deep commitment to change, organizations must focus on reinforcing the sightline to the top through role models and mentors. We elaborate on this next.

Build Role Models from the Top of the Organization

Companies would benefit from providing role models at the top of their organizations, for both men and women. Doing so would encourage rising professionals to remain with an organization. As one respondent mentioned:

I think looking—especially for women—looking for ways to have great role models for them as they progress in their careers is important. If you go to an organization that doesn't have any senior women at its upper management levels, you're sending a pretty strong signal to people and so I think that firms really need to make sure that they're conscious of what they're trying to say and that they're honest. I think if you go to a private equity firm and you're going to be the only woman on the block, organizationally, you need to be able to say, 'Listen, we may not have had many women at the organization in the past, but here are ten things that we're going to be more open.'

A second professional commented,

I think [we need] more women as role models. You think it's sort of a token thing, but it really does embolden a lot of younger women to think, 'Yes, I can do this.' And I think it's important to have kind of the internal gumption to say if I saw this other senior executive woman and she could succeed and do that, then I could do that, too.

Respondents also told us that they found value from mentoring programs. This is consistent with research showing that mentoring can have significant positive benefits for individuals, including reducing stress, increasing job satisfaction, improving individual performance and increasing skills.¹² Mentoring can also decrease bias against those who are different. From an organization's point of view, mentoring can reinforce commitment, reduce turnover, enhance recruiting efforts, improve company performance, and increase knowledge transfer.¹³

However, to be valuable, such programs must be thoughtfully conceived, structured, and executed. As one respondent noted:

While there's nothing worse than going to a mentorship networking event and your mentor and you are tagged together and you're supposed to ask each other about your favorite whatever and your favorite hotel you've stayed in and all these icebreakers that are really superficial, when you actually need it, it's helpful.

For example, in a good mentoring program, mentors are individuals with a genuine interest in participating. They also commit sufficient time to the relationship, and demonstrate the ability to both listen and provide honest, practical, specific, and direct feedback. As a result, they can serve as

¹² *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research and Practice*, ed. B.R. Ragins and K.E. Kram, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).

¹³ *Ibid.*

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role models for their protégés.¹⁴ A second participant expanded on the idea of mentoring as a program that extends beyond the organization, and is more "industry-wide," noting:

I like the idea of a mentor program of sorts. I was always too intimidated to really seek out a mentor, but I do think that it'd be beneficial. Could it be something that's done through the school specifically with women? I'm not sure. Where it's almost like a support system, where you would have the ability to once a month have a conversation and [discuss] 'How's it going? What do you think?' just to sort of have a place to circle back to, because you'd think that it happens through human resources, but it generally doesn't. And again, the companies, do they really feel comfortable favoring one sex over the other? Officially they really can't. So what kind of support can we provide as an industry? Almost like a buddy system. I could see that helping.

To provide support and build these types of connections also means that organizations must systemically value the contributions and perspectives of all professionals, especially those at the top levels. This brings us to the third recom-

¹⁴ T.D. Allen, L.M. Finkelstein, and M.L. Poteet, *Designing Workplace Mentoring Programs: An Evidence-based Approach*, Vol. 19 (2009): Wiley.com; and B.R. Ragins, J.L. Cotton, and J.S. Miller, "Marginal Mentoring: The Effects of Type of Mentor, Quality of Relationship, and Program Design on Work and Career Attitudes," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (2000), pp. 1177-1194.

It's more about trying to encourage diversity in the executive teams of hotels, diversity in executive teams in corporate offices and boards, where just everywhere you look, wherever there's a locus of power, which is a board or executive committee or whatever, that locus of power has a diverse makeup. And it's just to push people to think in different ways that they don't naturally think.

mentation for developing leadership potential through sustained and meaningful change.

Recognize the Power Inherent in Diverse Perspectives

Our participants emphasized the power of diversity, with the recognition that diverse perspectives enhance the decision-making process. One of them summarized the benefits of a diverse executive team, explaining:

It's more about trying to encourage diversity in the executive teams of hotels, diversity in executive teams in corporate offices and boards, where just everywhere you look, wherever there's a locus of power, which is a board or executive committee or whatever, that locus of power has a diverse makeup. And it's just to push people to think in different ways that they don't naturally think. You know you get a bunch of old white guys and you put six of them together in a room, and they'll have some variation in the way they think, but they may not have the same breakout thinking and innovative thinking as if there's two or three old white guys and the other three are a Black guy and a woman and a Hispanic woman and a white woman or something. It just...it makes the molecules in the room move around in ways that are more productive and exciting and stimulates thought that wouldn't otherwise happen.

This same point was made by a second respondent, who told us:

I think you have to educate your leaders to understand the power of a diverse workforce, and I think there's a lot more

people could do in terms of that...and it's not teaching managers to be better managers towards their women team members, but it's teaching managers to be better managers for all staff, really.

The business case for diversity, particularly at the top of organizations, is well supported in the academic literature. As we noted at the outset, a diverse workforce has been shown to increase revenue, income, and stock price premiums,¹⁵ as well as enhance service capability and marketing efforts. Beyond sending positive signals to the wider industry, diverse perspectives enhance strategic problem-solving and decision-making capabilities.¹⁶ Thus, benefits accrue when organizations go beyond filling a single executive spot with a token representative. However, these benefits are moderated by the degree to which all executives are willing to adopt a truly collaborative framework and exchange accurate information in their discussions, which again emphasizes the deep commitment required to truly benefit from diversity.¹⁷

In addition to recommending that organizations tap into all forms of diversity, our respondents also emphasized that companies would benefit if they made a long-term commitment to their professionals through providing institutional support as they juggle responsibilities associated with increased leader roles, especially during their challenging mid-career years. This is usually the time when, as caregivers, men and women may need to adjust the ways in which they work. Respondents suggested two means by which organizations could retain their leadership talent through these tough mid-career years. The first is to offer such professionals autonomy and control over the ways in which they accomplish their jobs. The second is to create an infrastructure—both within and outside of the company—that would provide a sense of community and support for working professionals. We discuss each of these ideas in the next two sections.

Offer Autonomy and Control for Mid-Career Professionals

Respondents repeatedly told us that providing autonomy and control would facilitate a strong long-term work relationship between professionals and their organizations. This advice resonates with a stream of research that has found

¹⁵ A.M. Konrad, "Special-issue Introduction: Defining the Domain of Workplace Diversity Scholarship," *Group & Organization Management*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2003), pp. 4-17; and Q.M. Roberson and H.J. Park, "Examining the Link Between Diversity and Firm Performance: The Effects of Diversity Reputation and Leader Racial Diversity," *Group & Organization Management*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2007), pp. 548-568.

¹⁶ Roberson and Park, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ C. Boone and W. Hendriks, "Top Management Team Diversity and Firm Performance: Moderators of Functional-background and Locus-of-control Diversity," *Management Science*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2009), pp. 165-180.

that employees are less likely to leave when their employers can assist in facilitating or enhancing their non-work lives during the mid-career stage.¹⁸ Offering greater autonomy to individuals in how they integrate the different aspects of their lives is key to retaining mid-career professionals.¹⁹ This includes offering flexibility and simply conveying trust that the job would get done whether or not the person was in the office from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. Providing control and choice over their schedules enables professionals to be successful and productive, especially during their mid-career stages. As one respondent noted:

When it comes down to looking at what the policies are, I think you've got to be supportive of families...I think people can continue to be productive in a lot of different environments. And flexibility is something you have to earn over time. But when you get to the point that you earn it, there ought to be policies in place in a company that they can work with you to retain great talent as people move through different junctures in their lives. Whether it's having babies or taking time off for family, or even to pursue something else. I know a lot of the law firms have become more supportive of attorneys pursuing *pro bono* work or other things that may not be directly related to what they do, but it's related to their long-term satisfaction.

Another executive commented,

Sometimes it's just allowing enough flexibility in the way that the firm deals with people that allows a woman to stay over the course of her career and to be successful. You're not going to retain everyone 100 percent of the way, but it's having the adaptability to change over time.

A third respondent spoke about how to structure these types of autonomous programs, including reduced work schedules, in a way that is clear and fair. She told us:

The challenge we had was, how could we be paying these very valuable and high-performing individuals, while still meeting the business needs of the organization and the clients and being fair to the other people who were part of their work groups. So this was the set of filters we put in place. First of all, this person who's requesting [to work less hours], it has to be an outstanding performer, who's committed to staying with the company over the long term. And obviously, nobody signs a contract for the long term, but you know whether people are committed and you have that conversation with them and how they feel about the

¹⁸ E. Demerouti, M.C. Peeters, and B.I. van der Heijden, "Work-family Interface from a Life and Career Stage Perspective: The Role of Demands and Resources," *International Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (2012), pp. 241-258.

¹⁹ J.H. Greenhaus and G.N. Powell, "When Work and Family Are Allies: A Theory of Work-Family Enrichment," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006), pp. 72-92; and P. Moen, E. Kelly, and Q. Huang, "Work, Family and Life-course Fit: Does Control over Work Time Matter?," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 73, No. 3(2008), pp. 414-425.

You just have to treat people like grownups. ...I think offering some form of flexibility and treating people maturely, and if they can't manage it, then you have to address it, but I think that would be enormous for people—even men who have families and want to try to be there for something important with their family.

company and their performance and their potential. So this is a special thing. This is a very high-performing person with long-term involvement. And this is an agreement between the person and their manager. Their goals, if they're going to be working 80 percent for a year, and then back to 100 percent after that, the changes in their compensation, whatever, everything's written up. And the employee drafts it, the manager has to approve it, and the one-up manager from there has to approve it as well. It's viewed as a renewable one-year agreement and it got looked at again at ninety days.

One of our entrepreneurial respondents explained how offering autonomy to employees was a competitive advantage for her firm in attracting the best talent:

When I hire just a few people that have worked for me, I've said, "This is what I can give you and this is what I can't give you." I can't give them a huge base salary, but what I can give them is flexibility. I said, "I'd like you to be working pretty much during the 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday day, but you know when you schedule your own calls with your clients, your own interviews, your own meetings, and you have a doctor's appointment or you have a parent-teacher conference, that's fine. You don't have to ask me. You just go. You schedule around it. And if you have to work until 7:00 PM that night or you're coming in early because you're busy, then you just do it, or you look at your schedule when you're not busy and try to schedule your appointments then." So you just have to treat people like grownups. ...I think offering some form of flexibility and treating people maturely, and if they can't manage it, then you have to address it, but I think that would

Getting people through [mid-career] when they are high-potential employees is something that all the organizations that are having success with retention are really, really focusing on. And they're not just looking at women; they're looking at women and men. The thing that happens when you work with somebody through that kind of phase of their lives is you engender such loyalty and commitment.

be enormous for people—even men who have families and want to try to be there for something important with their family.

Yet for women, bias against flexibility and autonomy, and resulting skepticism about their commitment levels, continues to surface. This was noted by one senior-level respondent, who commented:

If a man comes in and says, 'You know what, I'm going to cut out a little bit early. I want to go watch my daughter play soccer.' Everyone says, 'Oh, great. Good for you. Family man, you know, really committed to his children, *et cetera*. Good guy.' A woman comes in and everyone would say 'Uh, well, I guess she's not really committed to work. Clearly her priorities aren't here.' [It's] a very different perspective.

This high-level executive went onto to say that she counsels women to not offer personal information that would cause others to form these sorts of judgments.

The benefits that organizations can reap from taking a long-term perspective on their employees' careers and allowing them to ramp up and ramp down when needed, may be vastly underestimated. One of our professionals mentioned how much the power to create her own schedule meant to her. She said,

These companies underestimate what all associates are willing to do. If you give them a little freedom and you trust them, they'll repay that with strong loyalty...I think that was really important for me that I was able to balance at that time in my career.

Another said,

Getting people through [mid-career] when they are high-potential employees is something that all the organizations that are having success with retention are really, really focusing on. And they're not just looking at women; they're looking at women and men. The thing that happens when you work with somebody through that kind of phase of their lives is you engender such loyalty and commitment. Because they recognize that you understand them, that you appreciate them and you respect their work ethic and the way they feel about the company and their clients and they're really stars to begin with, and then they somehow... as you say, it spirals upward.

This professional described this as, "The flexibility to move with the person as they develop over time." She was referring to the fact that organizations benefit when they can adjust to the needs of their professionals, as they work through mid-career challenges. She added that flexibility of this type was crucial to keeping talent from walking out the door. This idea is supported by research which has found that women tend to move through career stages defined by needing challenge early in their careers, balance during the mid-point, and authenticity (meaning performing work that is consistent with one's values) at the end.²⁰ Organizations that respond to these shifting needs will better retain their talent.²¹ In this regard, it's also important to create an infrastructure of support.

Create an Infrastructure of Support Both Within and Outside of the Organization

Our respondents also pointed to the need to create an infrastructure, both within and outside of the company, to provide a sense of community and support for working professionals. This built-in community could facilitate the relocation process, for example, and make it more attractive and easy for professionals to accept new assignments within their organizations. As explained by one of the professionals:

One thing that xxx company has done that I really admire is they've set up a support network for women moving into leadership positions, helping them find schools, helping them find doctors, helping them find resources that is typically...my husband didn't do that stuff. That was me... I've been focusing on these number twos, and it's not just female oriented but male and female, how can we continue to develop and train them, and we haven't taken on the personal side of support.

²⁰ Mainiero and Sullivan, *op.cit.*

²¹ S.E. Sullivan and L. Mainiero, Using the Kaleidoscope Career Model to Understand the Changing Patterns of Women's Careers: Designing HRD Programs that Attract and Retain Women," *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, Vol. 10, No. 1(2008), pp. 32-49.

Reflecting on a time when she transferred to a new city to take a general manager position, this executive commented that it would have been helpful if her company had provided her with support to settle her family into their new city. She (and the firm) would have benefited from help in taking care of her non-work needs so she could more quickly focus on her new position. However, the kind of structure that enables newly transferred executives to “hit the ground running” involves much more than the human resources department providing lists of day-care facilities, for example. Rather, being connected into her new community’s “parent network” would have enabled this executive to obtain the advice, camaraderie, and support all parents need when trying to uncover resources available for their families and in essence, “hook into” the network. Our respondent felt this idea represented “low-hanging fruit” for organizations.

This type of support is essential within the organization, as well. When professionals need to adjust their responsibilities and perhaps even take a career break for a period of time, respondents commented how providing a plan to do so would be beneficial for their retention. Part of this plan would include getting professionals back to their roles and responsibilities, when appropriate. This is similar to how expatriate assignments are organized, including repatriating professionals when they return to their primary positions or offices. As one professional commented,

At the end of the day it’s about how you create a community and use our resources in the best possible way. And as companies we’re just not doing that. So anything to help women get off and back on the track is good for everybody. And having a well-orchestrated plan for while she is out: Who’s going to take your responsibilities and how are we going to share the workload, and when are you going to—having very open and honest discussions about that. I think that any organization that has advanced leadership development training—that anyone can opt into—are good things. I think [it’s good] where organizations are sponsoring you to go back to school and are making advanced education available while you are working. Co-funding some of that, or funding entirely some of that with term agreements to follow. Making those types of things more readily available is very helpful.

Respondents identified what we see as an interesting and novel idea. If organizations can, ahead of time, provide a long-term preliminary plan for not only helping professionals work through work-family challenges, but also for when professionals’ non-work stressors have eased, they can generate a host of benefits. Doing so will likely increase the loyalty, commitment, and retention of these valuable employees. This brings us to our final point: the value of long-term career development.

Anything to help women get off and back on the track is good for everybody. And having a well-orchestrated plan for while she is out: Who’s going to take your responsibilities and how are we going to share the workload, and when are you going to—having very open and honest discussions about that. I think that any organization that has advanced leadership development training—that anyone can opt into—are good things.

Focus on Long-Term Career Development as Part of the Leader Succession Plan

Finally, and most important, the nuts and bolts of making leadership advancement an organizational priority is to focus on each professional’s development plan. A theme throughout all of the suggestions in this report is that companies benefit when they enable professionals to build meaningful, long-term careers. As professionals advance through various career phases, smart companies would continuously evaluate what their talent needs to sustain a rewarding in-house path. In line with the organization’s succession planning process and plan, respondents emphasized the importance of developing individualized career plans for all professionals. Respondents viewed assignments that provide learning and “stretching” opportunities, as signals of investments their organizations were making in them. In response, professionals’ commitment to their companies deepened, and their intentions to leave diminished. These executives viewed developing and committing to potential career paths as a win-win for both the professional and the organization. One respondent commented,

I think I would rather be part of an identified top-talent group than part of a women’s group, personally. I’d rather get help in that way rather than have the woman label as the reason for doing it.

A second executive simultaneously noted the importance of having the “right person in the right position” for

I'm a product of going to find talent that isn't traditional. But we're becoming a big bureaucratic company that may not want to take those risks. We're not transparent enough to say, back to the beginning of the career, here's what the potential is. I think it's making the possibilities more transparent, having the conversations as you're reaching into the organization to find these people.

her organization's succession plan and future vitality. She engages in ongoing dialogue with her young professionals to discuss their career plans, and how these plans can map onto the organization's needs. She commented that it is important to let young women professionals know they are valued and an essential part of a larger growth and development plan. She reflected:

It all starts with having the right people in the right roles. There's always the whole, "How do we get the best and the brightest into the organization?" I think you add that to the backdrop of the change that we're going through, and how do we make sure we have alignment on what the role is and where we're headed. We need that aligned so that we can make sure we get the right person in it, and that we're all kind of looking down the same path together. So that's a large part of it. We're on a pretty big growth trajectory right now. We need people. At the same time, there's a lot of change and ambiguity in the organization, so it's also about making sure that the people who are both solid and high potential players know that they're valued—that we're trying to cut out the noise for them to know that there are opportunities. And their opportunity may not look exactly the same as it does right now today, but there's opportunities, and that in times of change is when the opportunities really get interesting, and to not be scared of that.

A third respondent talked about the role of transparency, explaining:

I'm a product of going to find talent that isn't traditional. But we're becoming a big bureaucratic company that may

not want to take those risks. We're not transparent enough to say, back to the beginning of the career, here's what the potential is. I think it's making the possibilities more transparent, having the conversations as you're reaching into the organization to find these people.

Finally, pointing to the value of human capital in creating firm-based competitive advantage, a fourth interviewee discussed the value inherent in her organization's talent management process. She said:

We didn't want to lose those people. We understood how really in many ways lost we would be—people don't really understand what turnover is about in many cases. I think again, the accounting and consulting firms had the same problem that we did. If we lost a manager, it was like them losing somebody who had worked with an audit client for five to eight years. All that relationship equity. So there were very important business needs. And there were two or three business needs that drove all these practices I'm telling you about. First is that the real cost of turnover was extremely high. The second one was growth. Growth made institutional knowledge and experience even more valuable. And it made promotion from within very rewarding, not only for the individual, but for the organization. And the third was the diversity of the workforce. The achievement of bringing along so many talented people from the cultures where the new hotels were being opened was a tremendous asset to the company and recruiting business partners in those parts of the world and others, where you should show a track record of saying, "Look, you can go to your lender, you can go to your government,"—in many cases the people who were doing these investments wanted to create jobs and opportunities themselves, so they were very much of the same value system. And you could say, "You know, we're not just talking the game. Look at what happens here."

Call to Action

Most top leaders throughout the hospitality industry would likely agree that a leadership development and succession plan is essential to their organization's vitality, and we believe that most would concur that it makes good business sense to have both men and women be a part of this leadership plan. It is also likely that many organizations have already adopted some of the suggestions made here or at least have some related policies in place. Yet, when researching this topic, we were struck by how little companies have shifted their processes over the years. The classic work by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation*,²² written almost forty years ago, argued that organizations were caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy of hindering women's progression in ways that harm both women and

²² Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

their organizations. Since the book's introduction, research and experience have only furthered the argument. Yet, we also know that integration of women into top decision-making responsibilities can benefit every hospitality organization. Beyond applying their organizational knowledge, skills, and abilities to their positions, female talent brings unique perspectives and strong qualities that only improve decision making in the C-suite and on boards.

Despite knowing this, many hospitality organizations have failed to fully develop their high potential female leaders. More than half of new entrants into the industry are professionally educated women, but after encountering a host of constraints, including the nature of operations-based work, many of them leave the sector to create meaningful careers in other forms of work and in other industries. Further, a growing number of women simply refuse to conform to outdated hierarchies and cultures that do not fit the ways in which they wish to work and live.²³ This loss of talent—and failure to attract or retain future talent—could put our industry at a distinct and significant disadvantage.

Highlighting the compelling business case for advancing talented women, we end this paper with a call to action. We encourage those decision-makers wishing to provide their organizations with a distinct advantage over their competitors to reinvigorate their efforts to advance female professionals to top leadership roles and take advantage of this enormous resource. As a beginning point, we ask decision-makers to reflect on how their organization benefits from the insights and leadership of their current top female talent. To retain these leaders, and develop future ones, our interviewees stressed how crucial it is to make a substantial and

²³ Cabrera, *op.cit.*

deep long-term commitment to developing and promoting women professionals. This includes supporting professionals' needs as they move through various career-life stages and being open to reconsider how work is accomplished. These executives noted that this type of care and attention to their career and work-life needs would generate strong loyalty, commitment, and work output. While some had experienced savvy bosses who understand the value of this reciprocation, our respondents see no systemic focus on this concept at either the organizational or industry level.

Overall, the executives with whom we spoke recognized that achieving any meaningful change requires tangible, consistent, and systemic action, executed by motivated and supportive leaders. Thus, we also encourage decision-makers to take a close look at their belief systems, organization structures, and career development processes. While progressive policies and public relations initiatives are necessary, they are far from sufficient, and in fact, represent a hollow alternative to genuine dedication to the career development of women professionals. Nothing short of C-suite level commitment to increasing the number of senior women will enable hospitality organizations to attract and retain the best and the brightest. This commitment includes a thoughtful reevaluation of succession-planning programs and career development initiatives, a redesign of how work is organized and assessed, and a reconsideration of the types of support needed as professionals move through the phases of their careers. While none of these ideas is groundbreaking on its own, woven together, they have the potential to powerfully create sustained and distinct advantage. As one of our interviewees stated: "It's pretty fundamental," and yet, also so important. ■

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Publication Index

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2014 Reports

Vol. 14, No. 4 Female Executives in Hospitality: Reflections on Career Journeys and Reaching the Top, by Kate Walsh, Susan S. Fleming, and Cathy C. Enz

Vol. 14, No. 3 Compendium 2014

Vol. 14, No. 2 Using Economic Value Added (EVA) as a Barometer of Hotel Investment Performance, by Matthew J. Clayton, Ph.D., and Crocker H. Liu, Ph.D.

Vol. 14, No. 1 Assessing the Benefits of Reward Programs: A Recommended Approach and Case Study from the Lodging Industry, by Clay M. Voorhees, Ph.D., Michael McCall, Ph.D., and Bill Carroll, Ph.D.

2013 Reports

Vol. 13, No. 11 Can You Hear Me Now?: Earnings Surprises and Investor Distraction in the Hospitality Industry, by Pamela C. Moulton, Ph.D.

Vol. 13, No. 10 Hotel Sustainability: Financial Analysis Shines a Cautious Green Light, by Howard G. Chong, Ph.D., and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

Vol. 13 No. 9 Hotel Daily Deals: Insights from Asian Consumers, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D., and Chekitan S. Dev, Ph.D.

Vol. 13 No. 8 Tips Predict Restaurant Sales, by Michael Lynn, Ph.D., and Andrey Ukhov, Ph.D.

Vol. 13 No. 7 Social Media Use in the Restaurant Industry: A Work in Progress, by Abigail Needles and Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D.

Vol. 13 No. 6 Common Global and Local Drivers of RevPAR in Asian Cities, by Crocker H. Liu, Ph.D., Pamela C. Moulton, Ph.D., and Daniel C. Quan, Ph.D.

Vol. 13. No. 5 Network Exploitation Capability: Model Validation, by Gabriele Piccoli, Ph.D., William J. Carroll, Ph.D., and Paolo Torchio

Vol. 13, No. 4 Attitudes of Chinese Outbound Travelers: The Hotel Industry Welcomes a Growing Market, by Peng Liu, Ph.D., Qingqing Lin, Lingqiang Zhou, Ph.D., and Raj Chandnani

Vol. 13, No. 3 The Target Market Misapprehension: Lessons from Restaurant Duplication of Purchase Data, Michael Lynn, Ph.D.

Vol. 13 No. 2 Compendium 2013

Vol. 13 No. 1 2012 Annual Report

2013 Hospitality Tools

Vol. 4 No. 2 Does Your Website Meet Potential Customers' Needs? How to Conduct Usability Tests to Discover the Answer, by Daphne A. Jameson, Ph.D.

Vol. 4 No. 1 The Options Matrix Tool (OMT): A Strategic Decision-making Tool to Evaluate Decision Alternatives, by Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D., and Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D.

2013 Industry Perspectives

Vol. 3 No. 2 Lost in Translation: Cross-country Differences in Hotel Guest Satisfaction, by Gina Pingitore, Ph.D., Weihua Huang, Ph.D., and Stuart Greif, M.B.A.

Vol. 3 No. 1 Using Research to Determine the ROI of Product Enhancements: A Best Western Case Study, by Rick Garlick, Ph.D., and Joyce Schlentner

2013 Proceedings

Vol. 5 No. 6 Challenges in Contemporary Hospitality Branding, by Chekitan S. Dev

Vol. 5 No. 5 Emerging Trends in Restaurant Ownership and Management, by Benjamin Lawrence, Ph.D.

Vol. 5 No. 4 2012 Cornell Hospitality Research Summit: Toward Sustainable Hotel and Restaurant Operations, by Glenn Withiam

Vol. 5 No. 3 2012 Cornell Hospitality Research Summit: Hotel and Restaurant Strategy, Key Elements for Success, by Glenn Withiam

Vol. 5 No. 2 2012 Cornell Hospitality Research Summit: Building Service Excellence for Customer Satisfaction, by Glenn Withiam

Vol. 5, No. 1 2012 Cornell Hospitality Research Summit: Critical Issues for Industry and Educators, by Glenn Withiam

2012 Reports

Vol. 12 No. 16 Restaurant Daily Deals: The Operator Experience, by Joyce Wu, Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D., and Utpal Dholakia, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 15 The Impact of Social Media on Lodging Performance, by Chris K. Anderson, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 14 HR Branding How Human Resources Can Learn from Product and Service Branding to Improve Attraction, Selection, and Retention, by Derrick Kim and Michael Sturman, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 13 Service Scripting and Authenticity: Insights for the Hospitality Industry, by Liana Victorino, Ph.D., Alexander Bolinger, Ph.D., and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 12 Determining Materiality in Hotel Carbon Footprinting: What Counts and What Does Not, by Eric Ricaurte

Vol. 12 No. 11 Earnings Announcements in the Hospitality Industry: Do You Hear What I Say?, Pamela Moulton, Ph.D., and Di Wu

Vol. 12 No. 10 Optimizing Hotel Pricing: A New Approach to Hotel Reservations, by Peng Liu, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 9 The Contagion Effect: Understanding the Impact of Changes in Individual and Work-unit Satisfaction on Hospitality Industry Turnover, by Timothy Hinkin, Ph.D., Brooks Holtom, Ph.D., and Dong Liu, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 8 Saving the Bed from the Fed, Levon Goukasian, Ph.D., and Qingzhong Ma, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 7 The Ithaca Beer Company: A Case Study of the Application of the McKinsey 7-S Framework, by J. Bruce Tracey, Ph.D., and Brendon Blood

Vol. 12 No. 6 Strategic Revenue Management and the Role of Competitive Price Shifting, by Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D., Linda Canina, Ph.D., and Breffni Noone, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 5 Emerging Marketing Channels in Hospitality: A Global Study of Internet-Enabled Flash Sales and Private Sales, by Gabriele Piccoli, Ph.D., and Chekitan Devc, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 4 The Effect of Corporate Culture and Strategic Orientation on Financial Performance: An Analysis of South Korean Upscale and Luxury Hotels, by HyunJeong "Spring" Han, Ph.D., and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

Vol. 12 No. 3 The Role of Multi-Restaurant Reservation Sites in Restaurant Distribution Management, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D., and Katherine Kies

Vol. 12 No. 2 Compendium 2012

Vol. 12 No. 1 2011 Annual Report

2012 Tools

Vol. 3, No. 4 The Hotel Reservation Optimizer, by Peng Liu

Vol. 3 No. 3 Restaurant Table Optimizer, Version 2012, by Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D.

Vol. 3 No. 2 Telling Your Hotel's "Green" Story: Developing an Effective Communication Strategy to Convey Environmental Values, by Daphne A. Jameson, Ph.D., and Judi Brownell, Ph.D.

2011 Reports

Vol. 11 No. 22 Environmental Management Certification and Performance in the Hospitality Industry: A Comparative Analysis of ISO 14001 Hotels in Spain, by María-del-Val Segarra-Oña, Ph.D., Ángel Peiró-Signes, Ph.D., and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

Vol. 11 No. 21 A Comparison of the Performance of Independent and Franchise Hotels: The First Two Years of Operation, by Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D., and Linda Canina, Ph.D.

Vol. 11 No. 20 Restaurant Daily Deals: Customers' Responses to Social Couponing, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D., and Utpal Dholakia, Ph.D.

Vol. 11 No. 19 To Groupon or Not to Groupon: A Tour Operator's Dilemma, by Chekitan Dev, Ph.D., Laura Winter Falk, Ph.D., and Laure Mougeot Stroock

Vol. 11 No. 18 Network Exploitation Capability: Mapping the Electronic Maturity of Hospitality Enterprises, by Gabriele Piccoli, Ph.D., Bill Carroll, Ph.D., and Larry Hall

Vol. 11 No. 17 The Current State of Online Food Ordering in the U.S. Restaurant Industry, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D.

Vol. 11 No. 16 Unscrambling the Puzzling Matter of Online Consumer Ratings: An Exploratory Analysis, by Pradeep Racherla, Ph.D., Daniel Connolly, Ph.D., and Natasa Christodoulidou, Ph.D.

Vol. 11 No. 15 Designing a Self-healing Service System: An Integrative Model, by Robert Ford, Ph.D., and Michael Sturman, Ph.D.

Vol. 11 No. 14 Reversing the Green Backlash: Why Large Hospitality Companies Should Welcome Credibly Green Competitors, by Michael Giebelhausen, Ph.D., and HaeEun Helen Chun, Ph.D.

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