

Recruiting Women

By Paula Santonocito



Last fall, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported on a dramatic change in U.S. worker demographics: For the first time, women now account for nearly half, 49.9 percent, of the U.S. workforce.

While it might be assumed this is because more women, including those with young children, now work, another factor has contributed to the shift. From an employment standpoint, the U.S. recession impacted more men than women as male-dominated industries like construction, transportation, manufacturing, and wholesale trade lost large numbers of jobs, where female-dominated industries like health care, government, and education shed fewer positions.

The growth of the female workforce might seem like good news for women. Nevertheless, the reality is the median weekly earnings of full-time women employees is 80 percent of men's earnings.

Where Women Work

Part of it has to do with the jobs women hold.

A BLS list of the most prevalent occupations for employed women shows the top five job categories for women are still secretaries and administrative assistants; registered nurses; elementary and middle school teachers; cashiers; and retail salespersons.

But job choice is not the only issue contributing to the pay gap. Even women with MBAs in high-earnings professions lag behind men, according to a study conducted by Catalyst, an organization dedicated to advancing women in the workplace.

Catalyst finds women MBA grads make on average \$4,600 less in their initial jobs, and continue to be outpaced by men in rank and salary growth. According to the report based on the study, "Pipeline's Broken Promise," men are twice as likely as women to hold CEO or senior executives positions and less likely to be at lower levels, where women are overrepresented.

What accounts for these differences? The so-called mommy track apparently isn't a factor. Neither parenthood nor level of aspiration explains survey results. Catalyst

findings held when considering women and men without children as well as those who aspired to senior leadership positions.

Assessing Assumptions

So, why are women underrepresented in senior management positions, and in fields like engineering and technology, where the jobs pay well?

The problem may initially have to do with assumptions that recruiters, hiring managers, and others make about women's skills and qualifications. Later, those same assumptions affect advancement opportunities

Indeed, a new book, "Playing to Strength: Leveraging Gender at Work" by Alice Adams, explores how society has come to view the skills of men and women differently and how this perception infiltrates and harms the workplace.

Adams debunks long-held myths in her book, analyzing research to show that for 78 percent of measurable attributes there are little or no differences between men and women.

She also offers detailed strategies to help companies recruit, hire, and retain female workers.

Reaching Out

"Playing to Strength" includes a sample gender-inclusion plan for a male-majority workplace based on a plan that was actually implemented. Aimed largely at recruiting, the plan, attributed in the book to a fictitious manufacturing firm called Rack Inc., should be required reading for any organization targeting women candidates.

Adams focuses on key recruiting points. "The most basic initial message women should get is simple: You belong in this job," she writes. She then goes on to explain how to help women make the connection.

"Good visuals are the fastest way to convey the message and vault prospective female applicants over the first hurdle—the automatic perception that our jobs are reserved for men," Adams says.

Women need to "see" a good fit between themselves and the job. "Existing recruiting methods are not communicating well enough with women who have to have a picture of what the job is before they either turn away or take the next step," Adams says.

Specifics about the nature and rewards of the job and the personal qualities required to do it are also essential.

And there's more—much more. Adams provides specifics about what to include in recruiting material. One of the many noteworthy tips is to “highlight the future.” To this end, when an organization emphasizes training and advancement, along with salary, benefits, and length of employee tenure, the message resonates strongly with women, she says.

For the company hiring for nontraditional jobs or in an industry that is traditionally male-dominated, Adams suggests a web page to highlight women in the company. Using the fictitious company in her case study, Rack Inc., Adams recommends a page titled, “Women at Rack Inc.” The page need not be elaborate, but it should be friendly, informative, and easy to find, she says, indicating action photos of women on the job are helpful.

Other recommendations in “Playing to Strength” include where to recruit female candidates. Among the suggestions are websites and organizations for women.

Sprinting Forward

It's a strategy FurstPerson, a recruiting firm working with communications giant Sprint, has begun exploring.

The company receives a lot more applications from men for its over-the-phone tech support job openings, says TJ Miller, a recruiter for Sprint's technical support contact center in Oklahoma City.

With the goal of letting more women know about the positions, which offer medical, dental, vision, and a 401(k) plan; growth opportunity; a generous vacation package; and scheduling options based on a combination of customer service and attendance, Miller has begun exploring “where women go to look for a job.”

He contacted approximately 15 women-centric publications and organizations via email, introducing himself and explaining that he is designing a recruiting program specific to women. “I am interested in learning how I might be able to utilize your organization to assist me in this initiative by discussing how these job opportunities might be appealing to the members and visitors of your organization, and how we might be able to get visibility of the job postings to them,” Miller wrote.

A decision has not yet been made on how to proceed with advertising, but the response from the organizations Miller contacted has been positive. About 80 percent are interested, he says.

Delivering Equal Opportunity

Obviously, connecting with women is an essential step in the recruiting process, and it may require deviating from typical recruitment strategies.

Meanwhile, it is incumbent on the hiring organization to provide women with jobs they seek: positions that offer professional growth *and* earnings potential.

As part of its report, “Pipeline’s Broken Promise,” Catalyst shares insights and suggestions offered by CEOs and executives from major companies. Among their recommendations: “Collect and review salary growth metrics.”

Another, equally important piece of advice: “Don’t assume the playing field has been leveled.” Maybe because, as of yet, it hasn’t.