

The Business Monthly

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Bridging the Gender Gap Reduces Discrimination Lawsuits

by Trent Kittleman & Joan Athen

Most employers are aware that it is “unlawful to discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of his/her sex in regard to hiring, termination, promotion, compensation, job training, or any other term, condition or privilege of employment.”

It's the law.

It's also good business, as evidenced by numerous studies, including a 2004 survey of Fortune 500 companies (conducted by New York-based Catalyst Research), which reported that “the group of companies with the highest representation of women in their senior management teams had a 35 percent higher Return on Equity and a 34 percent higher Total Return to Shareholders than companies with the lowest women's representation.”

Still Under-Represented

The law and the measurable value of gender diversity are making a difference. Today, the number of women in management levels has risen, but progress is slow. Women are still significantly under-represented in upper management and on boards of directors in most major companies.

The lack of women at the highest levels can suggest that discrimination continues to thwart the progress of women. Moreover, when highly competent women see favorable assignments and promotions go to men who are less competent, it is not unreasonable for women to blame it on discrimination.

Their frustration is often expressed in lawsuits. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission web site reported that more than 23,000 sexual discrimination cases were filed in 2006. This is 2,000 fewer cases than earlier in the decade, but it is still high. These cases are a drain on the health and productivity of both the workers and businesses involved.

Another Explanation

If one delves below the surface and really examines the gender gaps, another explanation becomes apparent, particularly at the higher levels of corporate governance. Many of the experiences or situations that are labeled as “discrimination” actually arise from the different ways in which men and women communicate.

Think about author John Gray's popular *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* books. Gray created unprecedented awareness of the fact that men and women tend to communicate quite differently, and that the differences in their communication styles are often at the heart of personal relationship issues.

These differences are not limited to the home front. Communication differences are pervasive in the workplace. For instance, when men hear “no,” they think the opportunity is now up for negotiation and discussion; when women hear “no,” they think the door to further discussion is closed.

Consider what this difference means

when asking the boss for a raise or a high-profile assignment.

Tooting Your Own Horn

Indeed, one of the most significant differences is the way men and women communicate with their bosses about their performance at work. In their book, *Standing at the Crossroads: Next Steps for High-Achieving Women*, Marian N. Ruderman and Patricia J. Ohlott observed, “Women ... tend to believe the myth of meritocracy: If they just work hard and perform well, they will be rewarded.” Unfortunately, although effort, skill, ability and performance are indeed critical to career success, so is communicating this success to the boss. The pair noted that, “In a study of actual promotion decisions, we found that high-performing women who expected promotion often did not receive it until they lobbied for it.”

The November issue of the *Johns Hopkins Magazine* included a discussion of the university's lack of progress on achieving gender equity. University President William R. Brody noted that, when he taught an eight-week leadership class to 20 women, he became aware of the difference between how men and women view leadership. When he asked the women about their career aspirations, “They talked about productivity in their work and job satisfaction, but they weren't elbowing each other out of the way to become a university president or a dean. ... There seems to be a different focus, a different approach.”

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“Elbowing each other out of the way to become a university president or dean” may not be polite, and it certainly isn’t taught in Management 101. But when half the workforce is actively fighting their way up the ladder of success, the half that’s sitting by and politely waiting to be asked is at a serious disadvantage. Worst of all, the ones waiting to be recognized for their good work almost never know why they weren’t. And sometimes they file lawsuits.

What Can Businesses Do?

The first step towards a solution is to create awareness of the communications differences through a training

program that is eye-opening and non-judgmental. If people are unaware that the differences exist, nothing can be done about them. Business owners and managers should commit to proactively addressing the communication issues in their workplaces, just as individuals clamored for Gray’s books to address their personal relationship issues.

The training also will help men and women close the gap by recommending ways to speak the same “language.”

The second step is training women how to manage their careers. When women learn how to manage their

careers as well as they manage their work, getting out of their offices and onto the boss’s radar screen, companies that seek to eliminate or reduce discrimination suits and to reap the proven bottom-line benefits of gender diversification will have a greater pool of shining-star women to promote. And, women will feel less victimized by “discrimination” and more satisfied at work.

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