

Remote Work Is an Imperative for Women

BY MEG SULLIVAN

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Why is hybrid work still being questioned? Did we learn nothing during the pandemic?

The lack of acceptance around this new reality boggles the mind. In my opinion, remote work, especially for women, is one of the most significant advancements we've made in the workplace in decades. It demonstrates that businesses need to remain attuned to the needs of their team members for organizations to thrive and retain talent.

THE FLEXIBILITY FACTOR

In 2020, the pandemic resulted in many women having to step away from their jobs, as noted in an August 2, 2020 article on 19th News ("America's First Female Recession"). More than half of the working women who left the workforce at this time attributed their departure to childcare costs and kids being home from school. The same year, female unemployment reached double digits for the first time since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking women in the workplace, according to BLS Reports in March 2022 ("Women in the Labor Force: a Databook").

This outcome was a disaster for our workforce and for women's financial independence and wellness. In fact, as Ellevest revealed in October 2021, 49% of women said that their mental health has suffered at the hands of financial stress ("Money Stress Is Hurting Women's Overall Health"). It was also damaging to the U.S. economy since women control the majority of household spending and are the main influencers on how family income is spent. While the most recent statistics show that women in the past three years have recovered the loss of jobs from 2020, not all workers have had equal access to that changed workplace landscape, according to a September 2023 article on 19th News ("The Women's Recession Is Finally Over—but Not Everyone Has Recovered Equally"). Writer Chabeli Carrazana notes, "Black women, in particular, have recovered more

slowly considering how hard they were hit by job loss at the start of the pandemic." This is why flexibility is so important for everyone. When given the time and space to manage their lives, often filled with caretaking and household responsibilities, as well as their work, women perform and deliver with aplomb.

MATERNITY LEAVE

In my experience, this remains particularly true when women take maternity leave, something our entire society needs to celebrate and respect more. As women come back from maternity or personal leave, we need to offer both flexibility and opportunity. When companies or managers do this, women thrive. As a leader in the legal sector, I often promoted women who were on maternity leave or had just returned because of their extraordinary results and commitment. Working remotely is a mammoth motivator, and I can't imagine why anyone would pass over someone worthy of advancement or demote or fire them just because they had a baby, were on leave, or were working more from home. It's inequitable, unfair, and a waste of high-performing talent.

For new or less-experienced team members, remote work should have more structure. Scheduling regular check-ins as well as one-on-one face time with their supervisors is critical throughout their tenure. This kind of framework provides the direction and mentoring needed for team members to be successful and keeps their onboarding running smoothly beyond their first few weeks in a job.

THE BROKEN WORKPLACE

We've been hearing a lot about the "broken rung," referring to the ladder of advancement for women. Frankly, much of this seems to be focused on fixing women and not addressing

the real flaws that exist in the workplace itself. There is still an image of only one type of leader, which is a huge mistake in terms of organizational performance. There must be diversity of leadership—including women and especially women of color—with different approaches and ways of doing things and a variety of strengths to help a business succeed in today's complex environment.

For women, this is critical because we need role models to help us evolve, strengthen, and raise our voices and advance to more senior roles. To be clear, women are hugely talented with great skills and are ready to go. They haven't always been given the opportunities and space to shine. There's no need to fix women—what we need to do is make the right accommodations in the workplace that foster advancement for all.

COMPENSATION AND TITLE

Some studies have shown that women in particular, as Pew Research noted in April 2023 (“In a Growing Share of U.S. Marriages, Husbands and Wives Earn About the Same”), are concerned about remote work and compensation. But how is that relegated to women only? Every individual regardless of gender should care about receiving proper compensation for their work. And that compensation needs to be fair, gender agnostic, and equitable.

Women are also concerned about the importance of one's title, assuming that if responsibilities widen they should receive a more senior one. However, since hierarchical structures vary by organization, I believe team members should care more about compensation than the actual job title. After all, it's one's experience and responsibilities that sell you as a candidate for new roles down the line. Compensation explains your market value. Often throughout my career, I chose responsibility and compensation over title because the organizations I worked for weren't capable of keeping up with my ascent and ambition.

When I spoke to both recruiters and competitive firms about my personal market potential, they understood that given the

breadth of my contributions and responsibilities, I would need a different title and positioning than the one I was currently holding. My compensation also helped tell that story.



THE LEARNING GAP

To continue to rise, we all need to be continuous learners. Good leadership is a muscle that needs constant attention and exercise, yet the learning and development areas of many organizations have started to take a backseat in terms of priority. It's curious that many companies will spend time and money on training technical skills, but when it comes to developing their next group of leaders, which has a direct effect on their future, they give little attention at all.

Following an old model of promoting people because of their tenure or skill level is a mistake because neither has anything to do with being an effective leader. I once

reported to someone who was great with numbers, but when it came to emotional intelligence, serving as a role model, and overall innovativeness, he was lacking.

Many leadership skills need to be shown, taught, and nurtured. How can leaders be great communicators who possess emotional intelligence when they don't know what that is or it's not in their existing skill set? Women tend to excel at emotional intelligence but need other leadership skills, such as decision making, negotiating, navigating social and political situations, and strong communication, to succeed.

ROLE OF THE FEMALE MIDDLE MANAGER

When I think about the teams I've led and the large organizations I've worked for, I see the necessity of a layered workforce. Otherwise, you just can't get the work done in an orderly fashion. There's nothing worse than a manager having 35 direct reports; these managers can't do their job properly because they spend too much time on people management issues and not enough time on producing themselves. That's why the middle-manager role can be an important one for women looking to ascend the ladder.

Although corporate structures have gotten flatter and many middle managers have been squeezed out, I would argue that there's a place and a need for middle managers. If women were given the opportunity early in their career to hold a management role where they're starting to produce serious collective results as opposed to just being an individual contributor, they would be better prepared for bigger leadership opportunities.

Having a middle manager takes some pressure off senior leadership. Any more than eight direct reports is unwieldy. It's very hard to be truly helpful on career paths, provide good advice, direct people to thrive, and deliver results all at the same time. I'm not a fan of middle management just for the sake of having it, but I am a fan of using it as a steppingstone to further leadership.

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Senior leaders need to be accessible to everyone, even if they're not managing them. Your door needs to be open. People need to feel like they can talk to you about anything, should they have a concern or an idea. Sometimes when you have layers, approachability gets lost, and senior leadership is only focused on their direct reports. That's a mistake.

In my last corporate role, I would get out of my office, sit at a desk in the open plan, and work side by side with team members who didn't report directly to me. During COVID I made open coffee times available to anyone on the team to schedule themselves in for a virtual catch-up. Additionally, I made it a point to show up and participate in social gatherings of the team so I could get to know everyone personally.

VIRTUAL COLLABORATION

What we all learned during the pandemic was that it is possible to collaborate virtually. It is possible to work on projects, run innovation sessions, and manage teams effectively from afar. These new skills don't disappear. Everyone demonstrated during COVID that they could be productive, and there were few situations where it was impossible. There are, of course, healthcare and safety providers, and lab researchers, to name a few. However, lots of important work can be done, and done well, specific jobs where you need to be in a location, such as manufacturing, hospitality, virtually.

Although I am a fierce promoter of remote work and flexibility, there's nothing better than

getting together in person every now and again. The best way to build a relationship is through face-to-face interaction where we get a chance to understand each other better. If you're going to have people go into the office, why don't you all go in more or less at the same time? That creates its own sense of camaraderie. Also, it's important to set aside a little time for the personal. Think about how you get to know an individual and what's happening for the person that day. I like to start calls that way. The first five to 10 minutes of your call is about them as an individual versus whatever the job is at hand.

Working remotely and offering hybrid work environments are key to having a motivated and dynamic workforce. Women benefit dramatically from this kind of flexibility in their lives and will outperform others if given the room to produce in their own way. There seems to be an old leadership fear that we must go back to the way things were done before. Why can't we move forward with proven new models and up our game as leaders? If we are clear about expectations, define timelines, ensure virtual collaboration tools are in place, and communicate effectively, women will finally have a more equitable work environment given the demands on their time. We all win. AQ

Meg Sullivan is the founder and CEO of The Quorum Initiative, an organization that aims to empower executive women and provide the encouragement, support, and resources for them to reach higher, break down barriers, and blaze trails for generations of women to come.

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