Female talent: the factors that hold women back

Persistent biases prevent female talent from flourishing and turning the workplace into a more productive, flexible and creative environment.

November 1, 2013

Only a third of Spanish and Latin American companies have more women than men on their payroll. Although more than half of university graduates are women, less than 10 percent of the seats on boards of directors are filled by women. This percentage drops to between 1 and 2 percent when it comes to CEO positions at large companies.

Consequently, decisions are largely made from a male point of view, squandering the valuable leadership input of women.

A study by Mireia Las Heras, published by the International Center for Work and Family at IESE in collaboration with RRHH 365, explores the causes of this and recommends how companies can improve their performance in this regard.

The study reveals that a man and a woman, though equal professionally, are evaluated differently according to their gender, regardless of whether they have children or not.

When a woman is hired, her role is restricted to non-strategic areas or support staff. As such, women are relegated to positions below their professional qualification level.

Companies also fear the prospects of maternity, and women are excluded from informal contact networks, which are highly important for career development.

©IESE Business School

Recruitment process or discrimination process?

Recruitment processes are largely to blame for the glass ceiling. If even H.R. does not adhere to clearly established procedures, then what hope is there of objectivity in the recruitment process?

In recruiting processes for senior management positions, where decisions are predominantly made by men, the successful candidates are those with similar characteristics, normally men, even though they may not be the best fit for the position. This is because people attribute higher competence levels to people with qualities akin to their own.

Another circumstance that stunts women's chances of promotion in Spain and Latin America is that women there generally have the lion's share of the responsibility when it comes to housework and caring for dependents.

Measures to rectify the situation

Balancing the male-to-female ratio on boards of directors depends on the willingness of companies to do so. The author proposes the following measures.

Develop systematic processes for hiring, evaluating and promoting employees, and clearly define job responsibilities and the competencies required for each position. This will remove the biases introduced by those in charge of the recruitment process.

Foster corporate family responsibility, i.e., advocate policies that are conducive to a better balance of work and family for all employees. This includes:

- flexibility of hours and location, with the aim of furthering the integration of work/family conciliation for men and women.
- management systems that include family-related policies, such as health benefits and information about dependent care.
- training on issues related to work/life balance.
- informal practices for meetings, teamwork and work systems that promote flexibility and discourage a culture of presenteeism and low performance.

Finally, *guarantee diversity in decision-making teams*. If there is genuine diversity in evaluation and promotion committees, this will be reflected in the judgments made, which should be more just and equitable for all.

©IESE Business School

www.iese.edu/insight

©IESE Business School