

Women in Business 2022

Opening the door to diverse talent

#WomenInBusiness

Introduction

Grant Thornton's Women in Business report 2022:
How businesses can open the door to diverse talent

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Welcome to the 2022 report on our research into the position of women in senior management across the world, and the progress towards gender parity in leadership. Our [2021 Women in Business report](#) identified the window of opportunity that post-pandemic working practices could create for women to move into senior roles. In the wake of the pandemic, as economies slowly recover and businesses refine altered ways of working, that trend looks set to continue.

In our 2022 research, we see businesses taking deliberate, necessary action to create more inclusive working practices. They are prioritising employee engagement and opening the door to allow female talent access to senior positions in greater numbers than ever before.

"It is essential for companies to become more equal," says Anna Johnson, CEO of Grant Thornton Sweden. "It is a requirement for being attractive to both customers and employees. Gender equality is something we as leaders must prioritise every day, in every decision we make."

These proactive policies have resulted in an overall increase in the proportion of women in senior management around the globe, rising from 31% of top leadership positions in 2021 to 32% today. Over the last decade, we have seen that figure increase by 11 percentage points, up from 21% in 2012.

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Anna Johnson, CEO, Grant Thornton Sweden

Nine tenths (90%) of respondents to our research have at least one woman in the C-suite or equivalent, a figure that has been maintained since last year's report. Regionally, we have seen every area surveyed surpass the 30% tipping point needed to catalyse significant change¹, as explored in our 2021 research.

“These numbers are a reflection of an awakening by leaders of how important it is to have a diverse environment, and of the stronger efforts on their part to build a more inclusive culture,” says Kim Schmidt, global leader – leadership, people and culture at Grant Thornton International. “This has accelerated the creation of safe, more authentic environments for all employees over the last few years.”

A new perspective on work

Alongside ongoing efforts to improve and expand diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, the increase in the proportion of senior roles held by women may be due to better access to leadership opportunities thanks to altered working practices. Three-quarters (73%) of those surveyed by Grant Thornton believe changes in working practices due to Covid will benefit women's career paths in the long term. These changes include a redefinition of flexible working, and the introduction of hybrid location models.

“Any organisation that imposes inflexible ways of working is going to struggle,” warns Kim Schmidt. “The winners will be those organisations that are on the diversity and inclusion journey, that are remaining open to continuous changes and saying, ‘we're going to support people to work differently.’”

This progress in turn creates business benefits, not only by having more diverse leadership teams, but also against the backdrop of the war for talent. As world economies experience a state of flux and traditional business models are challenged in favour of more fluid structures, different skills are increasingly required. Organisations are having to compete for individuals with the abilities to lead and succeed in the new business landscape.

Our research shows that retaining existing talent and attracting new talent are among the top three factors driving businesses' engagement and inclusion activities, cited by 41% and 39% of respondents respectively.

Bridging the talent gap

Despite the opportunity to access more diverse talent through flexible working practices following the pandemic, the skills gap is not narrowing. Our International Business Report (IBR) research shows that 57% of mid-market organisations expect talent shortages to be a major constraint to their businesses over the next 12 months – the same percentage as last year³.

This ongoing issue has intensified in recent months due to the talent churn of the ‘great resignation’², stirred up by the movement of people re-evaluating their working lives and redrawing the patterns of their careers. Consequently, businesses need to work harder to create environments where their people can find purpose.

Part of this will involve conscious efforts to tailor working environments to individual employees, making it easier for them to balance work and home life, and remain with employers as they move through different life stages.

“The way people learn, the way people engage, and the way people interact in the work environment is unique to them. Having a formulaic approach can work for a lot of people, but it doesn't work for everyone,” points out Kim Schmidt. “Leaders need to understand that everybody is in a different position because they have different personal circumstances to deal with.”

The equality mindset

This change of perspective is being demonstrated across the mid-market, with 73% of businesses using new ways of working to create a more inclusive environment for female talent. Focusing on individuals' needs will allow them to access diverse skillsets and bring more women into senior roles to help combat the talent shortage.

“More people have realised that equal teams offer more perspectives, something highlighted during the pandemic, when companies' agendas have looked different,” believes Anna Johnson. “Many invisible structures and traditional networks are being torn down, which contributes to a more equal climate. This means that more women are more likely to take on more responsibility and step up to senior positions.”

The following report offers an in-depth look at our 2022 Women in Business data and global leadership trends. ■

1. <https://www.msci.com/www/research-paper/the-tipping-point-women-on/0538947986>

2. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/11/what-is-the-great-resignation-and-what-can-we-learn-from-it/>

3. <https://www.grantthornton.global/en/insights/Global-business-pulse/#war>

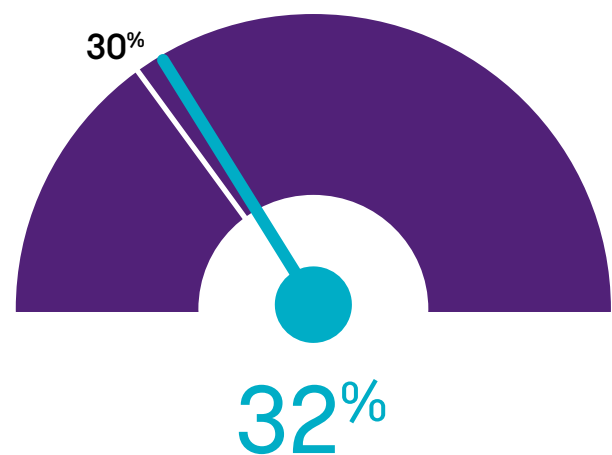
Global findings

No turning back

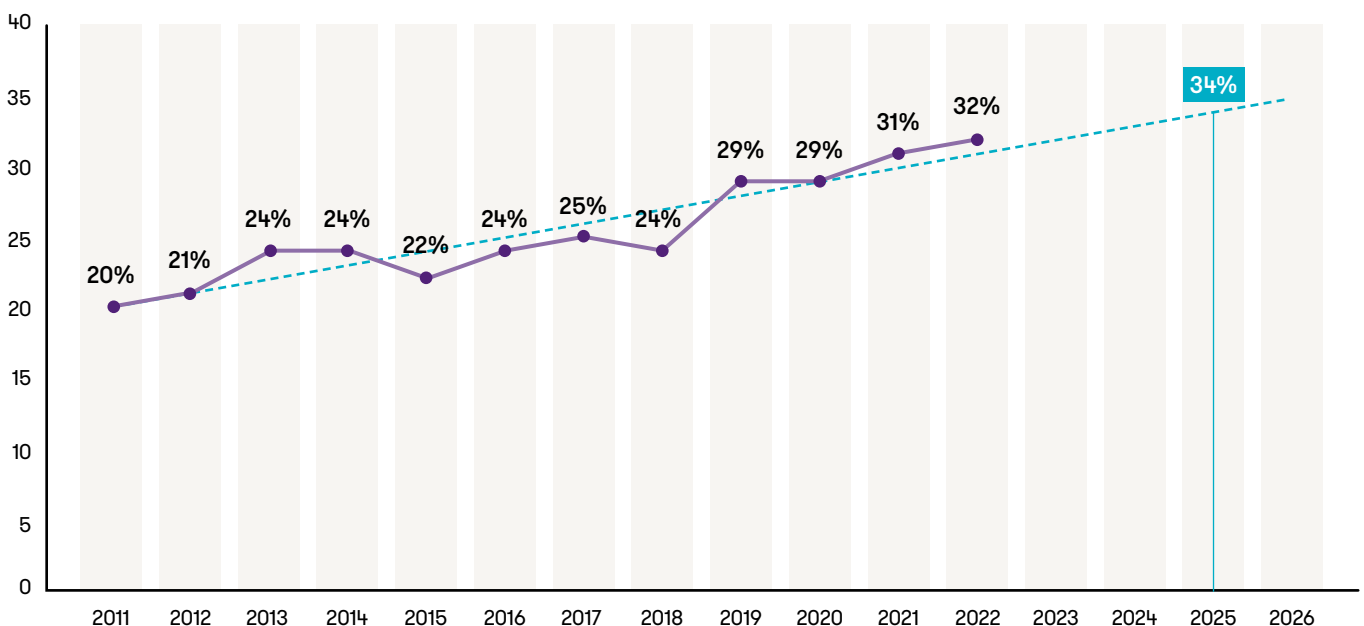
After two years of disruption caused by the coronavirus outbreak, it's heartening in 2022 to see an increase in the proportion of mid-market senior management positions held by women globally. While progress remains incremental, with a single percentage point improvement on 2021, positive momentum is to be celebrated when, following the pandemic, a levelling off or even backward step might have been anticipated in this volatile environment.

Numbers globally have remained above the 30% tipping point required to precipitate significant change for the second year in a row. We can therefore be optimistic that there is unlikely to be a significant reversal of the trend. However, while we see continued momentum towards

The proportion of women in senior management has increased from 31% to 32% in 2022



Proportion of women in senior management roles globally, 2011-2022



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gender parity, progress is largely linear, rather than showing the accelerated step change we expected to register once the 30% benchmark was passed.

This is no doubt due in part to coronavirus driving shifts in the business landscape and upheaval in the way that businesses run their operations. “The market and regulators are asking for faster change, but progress on gender diversity has been slowed by the impact of the pandemic,” points out Larissa Keijzer, regional head of EMEA and CIS – network capabilities at Grant Thornton International. “A lot of organisations deferred changes in senior management during Covid. That may have impacted the pace of change in these numbers, which means that we could see a bigger impact next year.”

Accelerating action

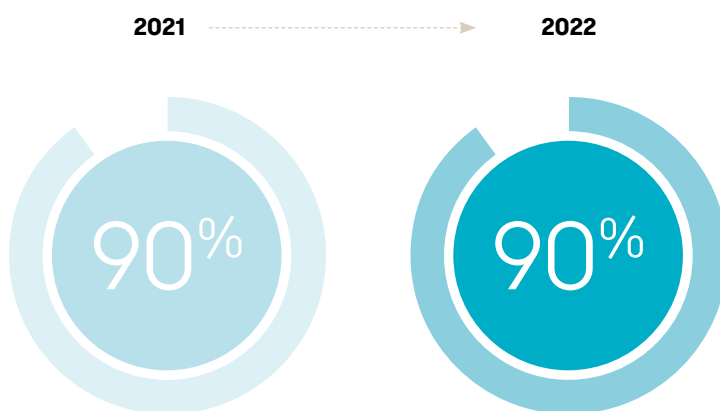
It does appear that the overall linear trend has steepened. Data collected by Grant Thornton in the 10 years to 2021 indicated that a 33% representation of women in senior management could be achieved by 2025, whereas the uplift in the 2022 data suggests that women could make up one-third of senior leadership roles sooner. If businesses continue their focus on diversity and inclusion, and the current trend continues, 2025 could see 34% of women in senior management positions globally.

The impact of Covid-19 is lessening due to the strengthening of the world’s medical and social defences. Meanwhile, businesses are increasingly resilient in the face of pandemic fallout. Combined with the forces of regulation and pressure on the global talent pool, we expect these factors to help progress towards gender parity quicken in coming years.

Open for opportunities

As new working models become embedded and greater flexibility in employment practices is accepted as the norm, the opportunities for uninterrupted female career progression will increase. Over two unsettled years, global numbers have remained consistently past the 30% tipping point which heralds significant progress towards gender parity. With 90% of businesses continuing to report at least one woman on their senior management team, we hope to see focused action by businesses driving increased female representation at senior management level.

“The numbers we are seeing currently might be the beginning stage of a significant change, rather than the tail end of previous progress,” suggests Grant Thornton International’s Kim Schmidt. “It could be that new people are just starting to move into senior roles. It will be fascinating to see what happens in 12 months after a full year of significant movement from the ‘great resignation’.” ■

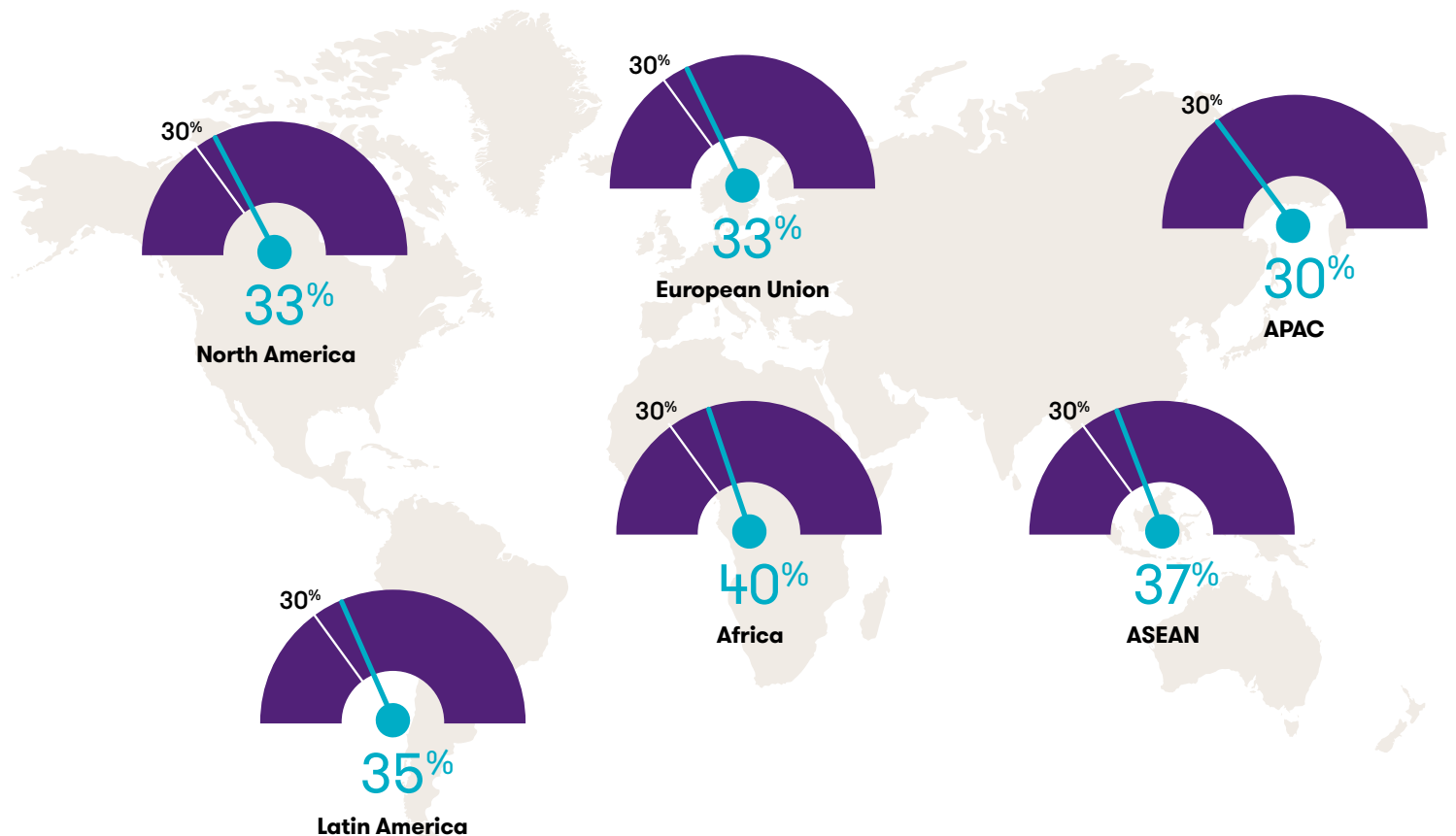


This proportion has been retained into 2022

of businesses had at least one woman in senior management in 2021

Regional variations

Regional proportion of leadership roles held by women in 2022, and position relative to the 30% tipping point



All regions hit the tipping point

Along with an overall rise in the percentage of senior roles held by women, we have seen all of our monitored regions perform positively against the tipping point benchmark, reaching or surpassing 30%. This should cement the trend towards gender parity across all regions.

The global increase is largely driven by improvements in Africa and APAC. Africa continues to represent a success story for female leaders, reaching 40% of overall senior roles, well above the worldwide average. This is an increase from 39% in 2021, and a significant step up from 30% in 2018.

“Alongside increased campaigning for inclusive and diversified culture in the workplace, female workers in the region have demonstrated the agility to adapt to flexible working, maximising the use of technology and innovation to become more successful in the workplace,” reports Ngozi Ogwo, managing partner/CEO, Grant Thornton Nigeria.

APAC, meanwhile, had generally experienced delayed growth compared to the rest of the world, with its developed countries in particular lagging behind global progress. In 2022, the region has closed the gap, moving closer to the positioning of other regions and reaching the tipping point of 30% of senior roles held by women – compared to 28% in 2021 and 23% in 2018.

This shift could be down to changing attitudes within businesses. Julia Newton-Howes, CEO of Investing in Women, an initiative of the Australian government which aims to promote workplace gender equality and the economic empowerment of women in South-East Asia, reports: “We have worked with a number of companies committed to workplace gender equality and helped build business coalitions of companies that want to use evidence-based approaches to create gender-equal workplaces. These companies are among the regional leaders on bringing more women into leadership.”

Female Entrepreneurs Fuelling Economic Growth In Saudi Arabia

Historically, women in Saudi Arabia have not pursued entrepreneurial ventures at the same rate as men. This is changing under Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy and reduce the nation's dependence on oil revenue and foreign labour. One way this is being achieved is by encouraging women to start their own businesses and enter the workforce.

17.7% of women in Saudi Arabia are now engaged in entrepreneurial activity, and this number is set to grow. In fact, women are starting businesses at a faster rate than men. Saudi Arabia now holds the third-highest share of female entrepreneurs globally. This is due in part to the government's efforts to support female entrepreneurship, including providing mentorship and training programs, as well as creating an environment that is conducive to business growth.

Key Policy Changes Impacting Female-led Entrepreneurialism

When Vision 2030 was first announced, it outlined an economic development strategy that aimed to increase female participation in the workforce to 20% by 2030. However, by 2020, this goal was already surpassed, when female workforce participation reached 33%.

Laws across the country continue to be realigned, with new reforms enabling a more inclusive and empowering environment. More recently we have seen increased participation of women in Government roles, with the country now on par with global statistics. Whilst further involvement across the Government sector is required, the exponential growth rate and ongoing commitment to address parity are reinforcing levers to continue this momentum.

Increased government investment in female education has had a significant impact on the status of women within the economy. There are now more women than men studying in Saudi universities and obtaining degrees. Thanks to these investments, the nation has also witnessed a steep increase in female literacy rates, which jumped from 92.7% in 2017 percent to 96% in 2021. This means that there is now a large pool of skilled female workers who are ready to enter the workforce.



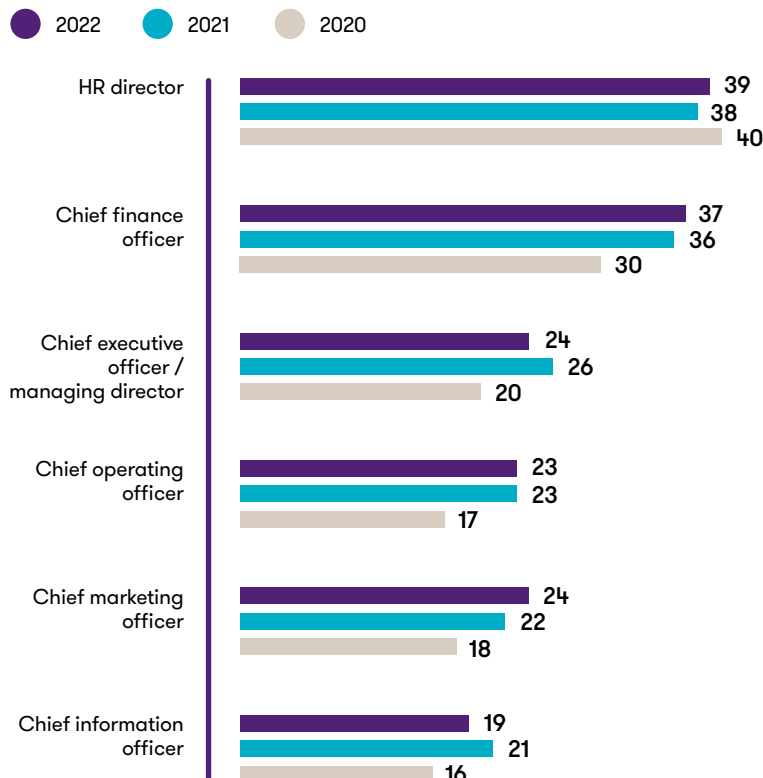
The Future Looks Bright for Women In Saudi Arabia

In the coming years, we can expect to see a growing demand for skilled labour, fuelled in part by the government's Saudization program. This initiative aims to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign labour and increase the participation of Saudi citizens in the workforce. As such, businesses are restricted in their ability to hire foreigners for certain roles, which is creating a demand for skilled Saudi workers. The pandemic has further fuelled this transition, by reducing the availability of the foreign workforce. Women are quickly stepping in to bridge this skill gap.

The rise of women-owned businesses and female workforce participation is having a positive impact on the Saudi economy. These businesses are creating jobs and contributing to the country's GDP. They are also playing a role in promoting economic gender equality and driving positive social change. Thanks to the policies being put in place by the government, the future is bright for women in Saudi Arabia.

Senior positions held

Positions held by women in senior management globally



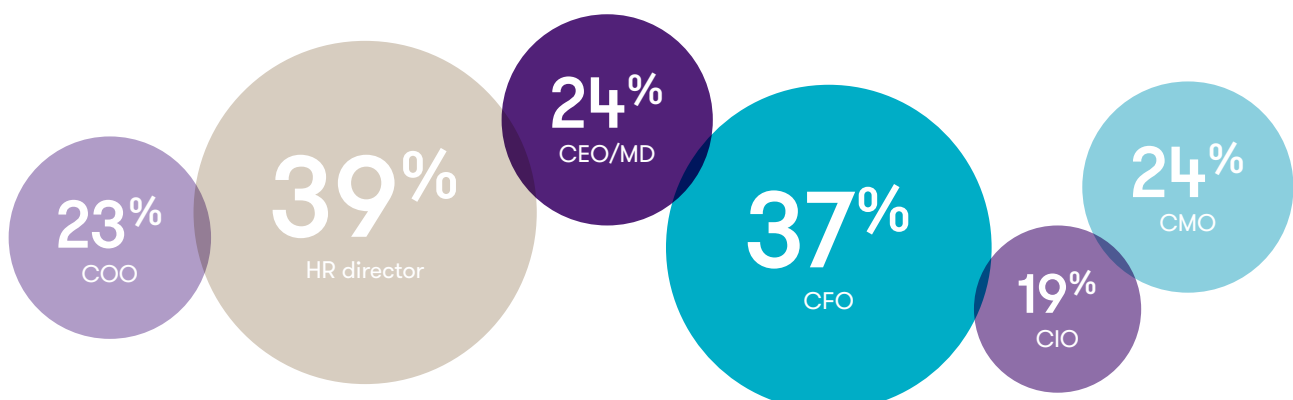
HR and finance roles dominate

In 2021, the global data showed a welcome upward shift in the number of senior and C-suite functions held by women that were more closely related to operations and overall strategic leadership. Increases in the proportion of female chief executive officers (CEOs) and managing directors (MDs); chief finance officers (CFOs); chief operating officers (COOs); and chief information officers (CIOs) were all observed. A simultaneous reduction in the numbers of women holding HR director positions was also seen. In most cases, this represented a consistent three-year trend. In 2022, for some roles, notably CFO and COO, this upward progress has continued, but in others there has been a degree of levelling off.

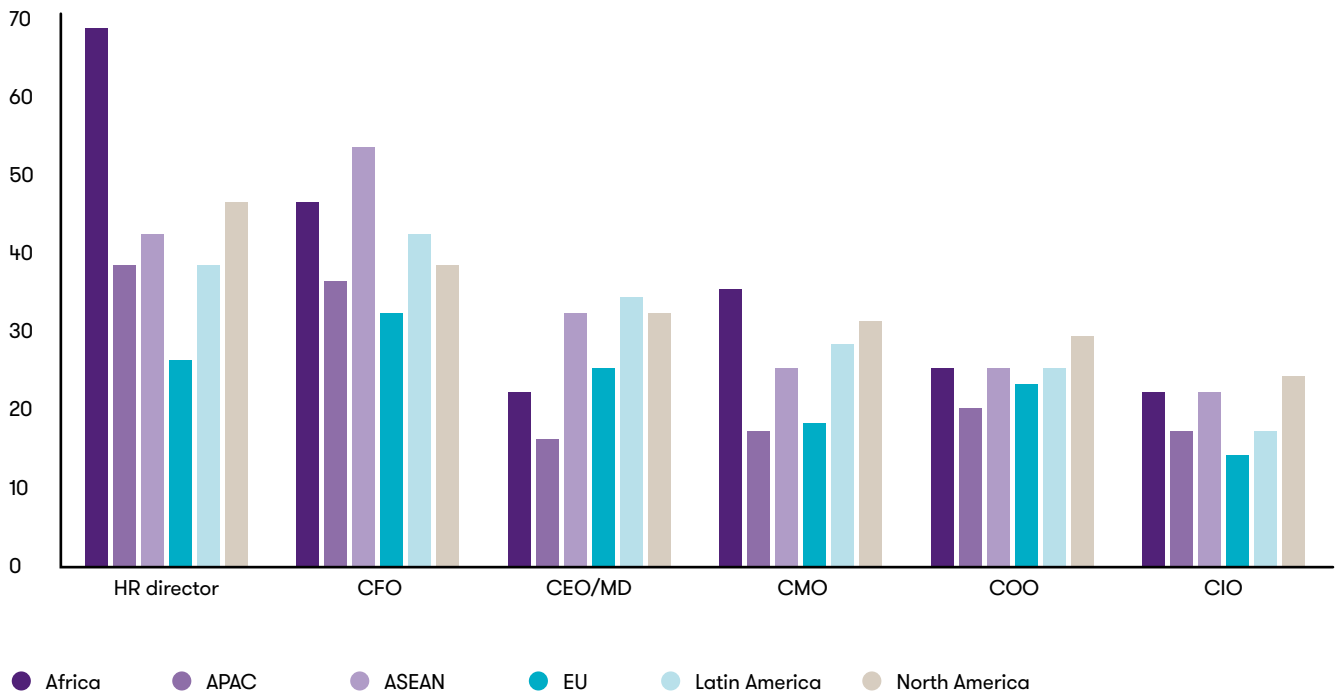
HR director is still the most widely held position for women, at 39%. However, CFO is now close behind at 37%, increasing from 30% in 2020 and 36% in 2021. In 2022, the increase in women in CMO positions continues, establishing two data points of growth, from 18% in 2020 to 24% in 2022.

Having seen significant rises in the proportion of women holding CEO/MD, CIO and COO positions in 2021, stabilisation has been the theme of 2022. CEO/MD remains around the one-quarter mark, dropping from 26% to 24%, though still well above the 2020 figure of one in five [20%]. Meanwhile,

Proportion of senior roles held by women globally in 2022



Roles held by women in senior management by region, 2022



COO has remained level at 23%, and CIO has dropped from 21% in 2021 to 19% in 2022.

It is worth noting that the nature of C-suite roles is changing, with a less siloed approach to areas of responsibility. “HR director, often a role held by women, used to be a very functional role, but with the war for talent, it will become a much more strategic one,” says Grant Thornton International’s Larissa Keijzer. “And once women are in a strategic role, they will not give it up.”

Female roles defined by culture and geography

Regionally, the story appears to be more nuanced than the overall global pattern suggests. While we’ve seen that Africa is ahead of the curve in employing female leaders, senior businesswomen in the region are commonly HR director (68% are female) or CMO (35%). These positions are still often perceived as more supporting, and less operational roles. Only 22% of African businesses report having a female CEO/MD.

APAC also lags behind in the proportion of CEO/MD roles held by women, at only 16%, while Latin America leads the way with 34% of their top jobs filled by females. ASEAN and North

America are doing better than the rest of the field in terms of female representation in CEO/MD roles at 32%.

The outlier in our 2022 reporting is CFO, the operational role in which female representation is strongest. This may be due to the growing diversity of routes into the accounting and finance professions, making them more accessible to female and minority applicants⁴. More than half (53%) of CFO positions in ASEAN are held by women, 46% in Africa, and 42% in Latin America. More traditional economies do less well in this area, however, with North America (38%) and the EU (32%) bringing up the rear.

Ultimately, we would hope to see an even spread of female talent across all senior positions. Then the concept of gender-specific skillsets and attributes will be abandoned, and individuals allowed to excel where their talents lie. “Although it is gratifying to see more women in strategy-related roles, we must have a spread throughout the organisation, not only in certain positions,” says Grant Thornton Sweden’s Anna Johnson. “Then we create real business value by adding different perspectives.” ■

⁴ https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKFwjoluyEzuP1AhXla8AKHdLFBq8QFnoECAQQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.accaglobal.com%2Fcontent%2Fdam%2FACCA_Global%2Fprofessional-insights%2FFutureReady2020s%2FJamieLyon.FutureCareersAccountancy2020s.fullreport.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3omlx053z_3ddNT5vKH7AK

Covid-19's impact on gender parity

Impact of Covid-19 on gender diversity

I believe it is still unclear what effect Covid-19 will have on women's career trajectories



We are using new ways of working to create a more inclusive environment for female talent



I expect new working practices to benefit women's career trajectories long-term



I believe new working practices have benefitted women during the pandemic



I have seen stakeholder pressure on my organisation to achieve and/or maintain gender balance increase as a result of Covid-19



● Strongly disagree ● Disagree ● Neither agree/disagree ● Agree ● Strongly agree

A small proportion of businesses responded with 'don't know' to these questions. These responses are not included on the above chart.

Headlines during the peak of the pandemic in 2020 speculated that women's career development might be set back 10 years⁵ by changes in the working environment. And indeed, the World Economic Forum (WEF) reports that between 2019 and 2021, 4.2% of female employment – 54 million jobs – was eliminated, versus 3% of men's⁶. Analysis by the New International Labour Organization also projected that while the number of men in employment was set to return to pre-pandemic levels, the figure for women was expected to be 13 million fewer than in 2019.

However, Grant Thornton's global research in 2021 established that, driven in part by the impact of the pandemic on working women, diversity and inclusion was front of mind for many mid-market businesses. Almost three-quarters (73%) felt that the pandemic could be a watershed for elevating women into senior management, believing that changes to the working environment would benefit women's career trajectories in the long term.

A promise fulfilled

The belief that Covid-enforced change could have a positive influence on gender diversity in the workplace not only persists into 2022, but is greater than in 2021. A year on, we see expectations playing out, both in women's more immediate experiences, and predictions for the future.

In 2022, 62% of businesses report seeing benefits for female employees from new working practices during the pandemic, while 73% now believe it will have a long-term benefit on their career trajectories – a significant increase on 2021's 69% – with 32% strongly agreeing with the statement.

"The traditional business model that encouraged individuals to spend their days and evenings at the office has had to adapt drastically throughout the pandemic," says Valérie Verdoni, senior director, IBC (cross-border business development and strategy), RCGT Canada. "Covid has allowed for more flexibility, but also changed the perception around work schedules. The idea of productivity is no longer driven by physical presence. It is now much more oriented towards deliverables and outputs. Assuming these working models remain after the pandemic, it's fair to assume this will open the door to many more leadership opportunities for women."

5. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/26/world/covid-women-childcare-equality.html>

6. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/covid-19-women-employment-gender-jobs/>



Covid-19 has inspired changes in typical work systems to better retain female talent by tailoring ways of working to individuals

When viewed through a gender lens, we see no great discrepancies between male and female respondents in their perception of the impact of Covid-19 on women's careers. However, a slightly higher proportion of women agreed to all beneficial working-practice related statements, suggesting positive anecdotal evidence. The largest disparity between the genders was over new working practices benefitting women during the pandemic, with 68% of women agreeing, compared to 62% of men. This is likely to be due to women's first-hand experience versus men's perception of the outcomes.

Flexible means flexible

The ongoing upwards progression in the proportion of women in senior roles evidenced in our data can in part be credited to different working practices in the wake of Covid-19. New attitudes to what flexible working looks like, and how effective it can be, are opening up opportunities for female advancement.

In the 2022 landscape, the pandemic has inspired changes in typical work systems to better retain female talent by tailoring ways of working to individuals. Recognising the possibilities of this trend, 73% of businesses say they are using new working practices to create a more inclusive environment for female talent.

"The most forward-thinking organisations will be looking at the positive things coming out of the pandemic, how people have engaged in their work environment, the flexible options," confirms Grant Thornton International's Kim Schmidt. "And we need to move away from this idea of flexibility as being about part-time work. We need a truly flexible way of thinking about work: when it's done, how it's done, and where it's done."

In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as well as opening the door to a broader range of talent at senior level, the pandemic has also created a greater demand for more diverse leadership to meet the challenges of the post-pandemic business landscape – specifically the attributes brought to the table by female leaders.

McKinsey's 2021 Women in the Workplace report found that female managers are consistently taking more action to support teams and check on their people's wellbeing than their male counterparts⁷, with senior females twice as likely to focus on D&I imperatives. These behaviours play into the current priorities of many organisations.

"Leadership styles have evolved throughout the pandemic to recognise the importance of mental health," points out Valérie Verdoni. "If anything, leaders have recognised that empathy and human connection are extremely beneficial in the long-term – fewer burnouts, more productivity, better retention."

7. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace#>

“Mid-market businesses see action on gender equality as a business imperative, rather than just ‘doing the right thing’, given increasing pressure from their employees and customers. Governments and policy makers also want business to do more to achieve gender parity. Being seen to act is now vital to be a sustainable business in the future.”

Peter Bodin, CEO, Grant Thornton International

The ESG agenda

Another side effect of the coronavirus pandemic has been to raise awareness of environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues, specifically governance around employee diversity. Stakeholder influence is an increasingly powerful force for change, and our research shows that 61% of businesses are receiving pressure from stakeholders to increase gender parity in the wake of Covid-19.

The rise of stakeholder capitalism as outlined by the World Economic Forum⁸ is placing greater emphasis on an economic model which, rather than optimising short-term profits to benefit shareholders, desires long-term value creation through meeting the needs of everyone with a stake in the company.

High-profile business leaders are espousing the cause. In his 2022 letter to CEOs, BlackRock chief executive Larry Fink states: “In today’s globally interconnected world, a company must create value for and be valued by its full range of stakeholders in order to deliver long-term value for its shareholders... The pandemic has turbocharged an evolution in the operating environment for virtually every company.”⁹

Peter Bodin, CEO of Grant Thornton International, concurs. “Mid-market businesses see action on gender equality as a business imperative, rather than just ‘doing the right thing’, given increasing pressure from their employees and customers. Governments and policy makers also want business to do more to achieve gender parity. Being seen to act is now vital to keep pace with competitors and to be a sustainable business in the future.”

A business’s stakeholders include its future female leaders. But although our data suggests a positive evolution in working practices for women, 62% of respondents believe that the ultimate effects of Covid-19 on women’s career trajectories are yet to be seen. It is therefore crucial that businesses maintain momentum, and don’t assume that there is a single working model that suits all employees.

No size fits all

Longer-term hybrid working models may present issues with visibility and access to leadership opportunities, and encourage disproportionate childcare responsibilities that negatively impact female leadership candidates. If some potential leaders choose to return to the office more regularly or full time, those working remotely may be less likely to be considered for promotion.

“If companies go back to purely face to face or to hybrid working, where some people dial in and others are in the office, and if men go back into the offices and see each other, and the women combine work and home roles and become less visible, we could get a reversed diversity trend,” suggests Grant Thornton International’s Larrisa Keijzer. “That’s a risk that leaders need to be mindful of.”

Some negative impacts of the pandemic on female leaders have already been felt. McKinsey’s 2021 Women in the Workplace report found that in North America, women have been experiencing greater levels of burnout than men, with 42% saying they were often or almost always burned out in 2021, compared to 35% of men. This is an increase on the 32% of women who were burned out in 2020 (versus 28% of men)¹⁰.

“It is undeniable that women’s physical and mental wellbeing has been affected, but the pandemic has also revealed another side of women – resilience – which is now considered a core value that all businesses must embody,” reflects Mai Sigue-Bisnar, partner, audit and assurance and advisory services, and head of markets group, P&A Grant Thornton in the Philippines. “This is where many female leaders excel, and this is what corporate management and employees can learn from women.” ■

8. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/klaus-schwab-on-what-is-stakeholder-capitalism-history-relevance/>

9. <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter>

10. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace#>

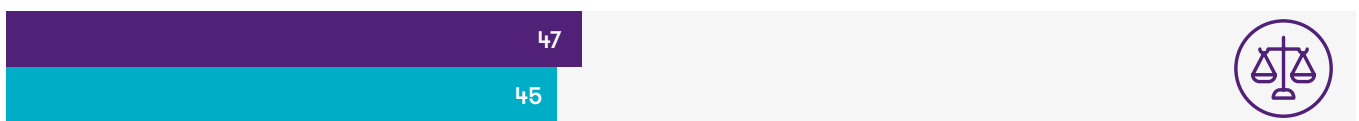


Inclusion actions driving gender diversity

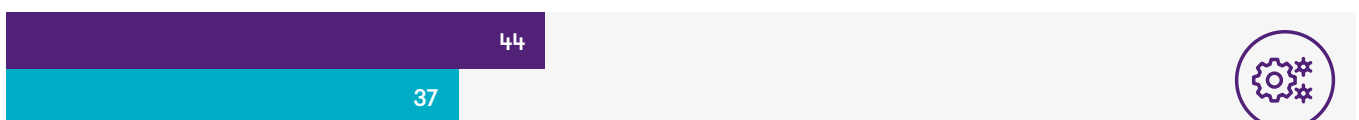
Actions being taken to ensure employee engagement and inclusion

● 2022 ● 2021

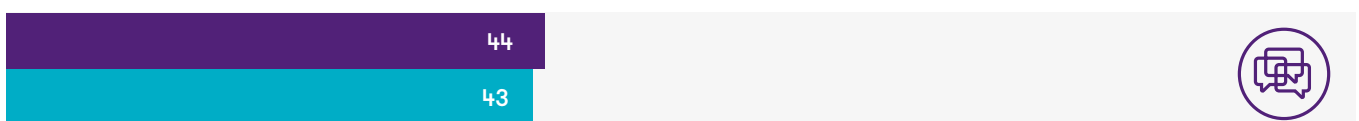
Promoting work-life balance and/or flexibility for employees



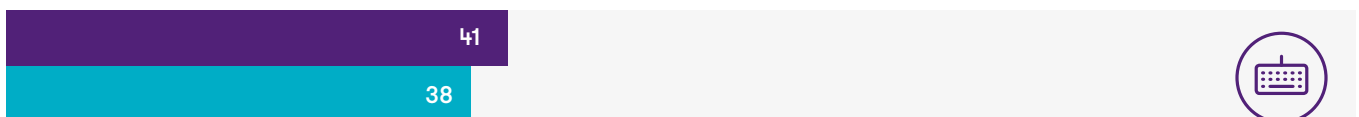
Instilling new working practices to better engage all employees including long term virtual and flexible working



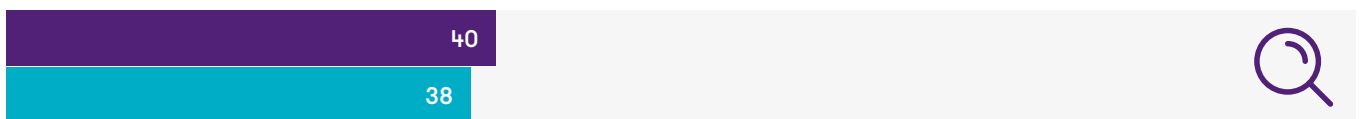
Creating an environment where all colleagues can speak up with ideas, issues and questions



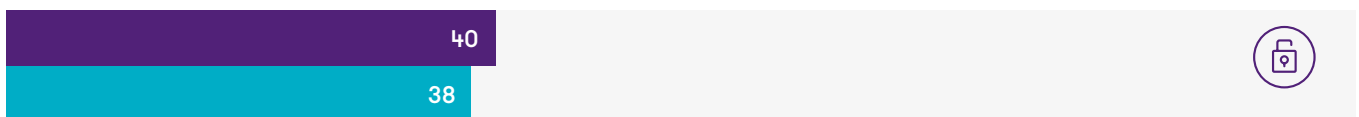
Adapting existing learning and development programmes to the changing environment eg by making them virtual



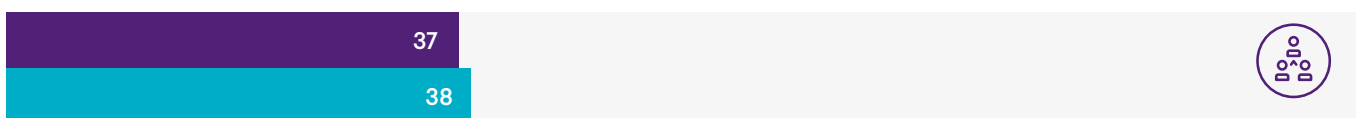
Paying careful attention to employees' individual working styles and adapting approaches accordingly



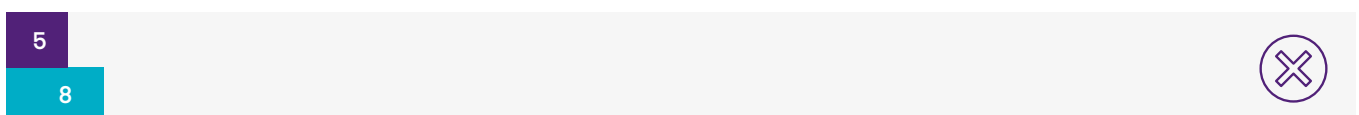
Encouraging and/or maintaining an open-door policy among middle and/or senior management



Encouraging senior management to act as role models/champions



No action taken





The number of businesses taking no action on engagement and inclusion measures has decreased from 8% to 5% since 2021

Covid-19: a catalyst for engagement

During the Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, firms across the world prioritised specific actions in order to ensure employee engagement and inclusion while staff were working remotely or in restricted environments. Following this initial reflex activity, it appears some firms are solidifying the different ways of working which came to the fore during the pandemic. These practices are in turn creating a more inclusive, flexible environment for female talent.

Significantly, the number of businesses taking no action at all on engagement and inclusion measures has decreased from 8% to 5% between 2021 and 2022. Meanwhile, the 95% of businesses that are taking deliberate steps to increase employee inclusion are focusing on cultural change, work-life balance and psychological safety.

We see increases in 2022 across all actions surveyed, compared to the previous year. Promoting work-life balance and flexibility for employees is the most popular activity, with 47% of companies taking part. Creating an environment where people can speak up with ideas, issues and questions remains in the top three, with 44% involvement.

“The most important asset a business can have in order to create an inclusive environment is leadership teams that share the company’s vision,” states Vassilis Kazas, managing partner at Grant Thornton Greece. “It is important for leaders to understand that inclusion is about ensuring that everyone’s voice is heard, opinions are considered, and opportunities are shared equally between work groups.”

A new entry to the top three actions this year is instilling new working practices to better engage employees, including long-term virtual and flexible working. This intention has seen a substantial increase, up to 44% from 37% in 2021. Adapting learning and development programmes to the changing working environment remains high on the list at 41%.

“Due to the disruption of traditional ways of working by this pandemic, there has been increased interest in and uptake of flexible work,” points out Julia Newton-Howes of Investing in Women. “There also appears to be increased access to and even preference for hybrid work, which seeks an optimal balance of remote and in-office or onsite work. Case studies by Investing in Women and their partners show that flexibility results in improved talent retention and organisational productivity, as well as enhanced worker wellbeing.”

Flexibility feeds the pipeline

It is reasonable to argue a correlation between more flexible working practices which allow individuals to work when and where they feel more effective, and the global increase in the proportion of women in senior roles.

“Flexible working has become the standard in the pandemic era and more female workers are taking advantage of the benefits to advance their careers,” says Ngozi Ogwo of Grant Thornton Nigeria. “Businesses are also adapting to virtual ways of working and deploying tools to track performance and communicate organisational values to keep their people connected. This has instilled confidence in female workers, assuring them that their behind-the-scenes efforts are tracked and duly compensated.”

By opening up new ways to access female talent and retain senior women in the business, organisations are creating a more inclusive, sustainable working environment. Going forward, this will be key to moving closer to gender parity in senior management.

“Flexibility must be prioritised within working models to ensure that we have, firstly, a healthier and happier workforce, but also that we reach different groups of people, including women,” says Sheree Atcheson, group VP of diversity and inclusion at business transformation agency Valtech, and advisory board member of Women Who Code. “Something really positive that could come out of the pandemic is that we recognise that the way we had things before was unproductive and uninclusive, and change it.”

By opening up new ways to access female talent and retain senior women, organisations are creating a more inclusive, sustainable working environment

Unsurprisingly, given the pressure on skills and ongoing competition for the best people, retaining existing talent and attracting prospective talent are high on the priority list

Factors driving employee inclusive and diversity policies



Motivations behind D&I actions

Businesses report an even spread across a variety of factors driving their inclusion and engagement policies. Unsurprisingly, given the pressure on skills and ongoing competition for the best people, retaining existing talent (41%) and attracting prospective talent (39%) are high on the list of priorities, falling in the top three.

“Having an inclusive workplace is a powerful recruiting tool. Female millennials look for employers with a strong record on diversity,” points out Monique Pisters, partner, international tax and International Business Centre director, Grant Thornton Netherlands.

And acquiring more female talent will support the goal of retaining people. “Our data suggests women change jobs less frequently than male counterparts and companies benefit from this longer retention,” adds Julia Newton-Howes.

Improving business outcomes through more diverse teams is the second most important motivation behind inclusion activity, at 40%. “Profitability is one of the benefits of having a more inclusive talent pool gender-wise,” says P&A Grant Thornton’s Mai Sique-Bisnar. “The recently published results of the Fortune 500 survey attest to this – those businesses with women on their senior management teams recorded impressive performance compared to those that weren’t so gender diverse.”

The reasons why organisations with greater gender diversity in senior management perform better has been explored by academics publishing in the *Academy of Management Journal*. They found three distinct trends around changes in firms’ strategic thinking after the appointment of female executives¹¹. Those firms became more open to change and less open to risk; they shifted focus from M&A to R&D; and female appointments had the greatest impact when women were well integrated into the management team.

Cross-border working, meanwhile, has yet to become a major force in engagement activity. Assembling the best team regardless of location is, at 30%, relatively less frequently noted than other engagement and inclusion motivators. This driver may start to increase in importance as new working practices make accessing global talent easier, and the skills crunch becomes more pressing.

“During Covid, we saw a lot more employees working in destinations other than their contractual employment location,” points out Monique Pisters. “As a result, cross-border remote working can be used as a feature of employment offers. That could provide businesses access to female talent from other countries.” ■

11. <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amj.2018.1039>

The diversity data

Measurement drives results

Measuring diversity data is one of the fundamental pillars of getting more women into senior management. It allows an organisation to evaluate its current position, obtain insights into where it is succeeding, identify specific gaps in female representation, find areas of opportunity to increase gender balance, and map employee career paths from interview to exit.

“Efforts towards workplace gender equality are more likely to be successful when they are evidence-based, underpinned by data, insights and analytics on people, policies, programmes and culture,” says Investing in Women’s Julia Newton-Howes. “It is important to collect and analyse data on a regular basis, for example through anonymous staff surveys or sex-disaggregated HR statistics.”

This is recognised by the businesses we surveyed in 2022, with 92% of respondents reporting that they track at least one diversity metric.

The predominant metric tracked in 2022 is gender equality pay, with 44% of businesses recording it – likely because many governments and industry bodies around the world require reporting on these figures. Employee perception of inclusion is the second most tracked metric, at 35% – interesting because it is a more intangible area, and harder for organisations to quantify than remuneration.

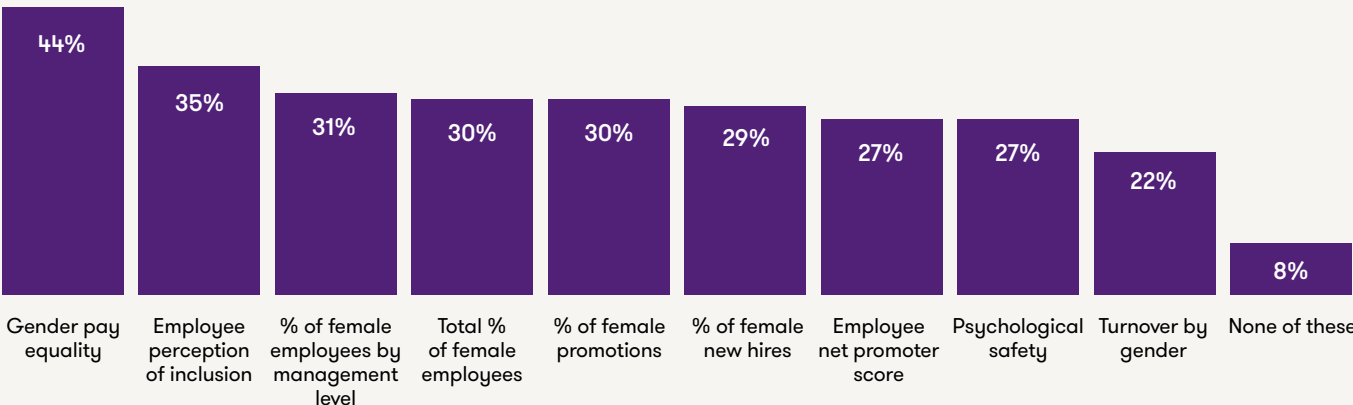
Of the other data tracked, we see that standard, first-order metrics capturing female representation within businesses remain constant, with no movement from 2020 figures on the number of companies recording them. The percentage of female employees at management level is tracked by 31% of organisations, and the total proportion of female employees is a recorded metric for 30%.

However, we note that second-level metrics relating to female progress and acquisition have increased in usage since 2020. This suggests greater adoption of measures which track the result of deliberate equality strategies, as they are related to female success within and access to businesses. It’s promising to note that as D&I initiatives become more entrenched, the metrics organisations adopt to track diversity evolve with them, towards measurement of more action-based outcomes.

The proportion of businesses tracking the percentage of female promotions has risen from 25% in 2020 to 30% in 2022, while those measuring the percentage of female new hires has increased from 26% to 29%.

“The first thing that businesses need to do is analyse the data to define where they’re at and where they want to go,” says Valtech’s Sheree Atcheson. “It’s easy to set a lofty goal of ‘we want to be better’, but you can’t hold yourself to account with a goal like that, so be specific on what you’re trying to achieve, and how, and when.” ■

The D&I metrics tracked by mid-market businesses in 2022





Accessing female talent

Combatting the talent crisis

The intensity of the war for the best people was building before Covid-19 made it critical. Gartner's 2019 Emerging Risks Survey identified talent shortage as the most pressing emerging global risk facing organisations, with 63% of respondents indicating it was a key concern¹².

The skills crisis didn't ease during the height of the pandemic, with Manpower reporting that 54% of companies globally experienced talent shortages in 2020¹³ – the highest figure in over a decade. And in 2021, Grant Thornton's IBR data showed that nearly 60% of businesses worldwide struggled to secure appropriate skillsets, as potential employees reassessed their career options, employment status, and attitudes toward flexible work.

Talent churn is rife, with the 'great resignation' seeing millions leaving their jobs. The US Bureau of Labor reported that an average of over 3.95 million workers quit each month in 2021, the largest figure since records began in 2000¹⁴. Meanwhile, in the UK January 2022 saw people resigning at the highest rate in 13 years.

This trend is particularly notable among female workers. McKinsey's 2021 Women in the Workplace report found that four in 10 women had considered leaving their company or switching jobs¹⁵.

And people are leaving for a reason. They are prioritising working for companies that share their sense of purpose. "Last year, Edelman's research found that around 20% of people are planning to leave their job at some point over the next year: the

¹². <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2019-01-17-gartner-survey-shows-global-talent-shortage-is-now-the-top-emerging-risk-facing-organizations>

¹³. https://www.manpowergroup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2019_TSS_Infographic-United_Kingdom.pdf

¹⁴. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/interactive-quits-level-by-year.aspx>

¹⁵. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace#>

‘great resignation’ is real,” warns Adrian Warr, CEO of South-East Asia and APAC head of employee experience, Edelman.

“One massive factor is burnout, but alongside that is purpose. Purpose is what people are seeking and they will leave if they lack it. It’s a defining factor in job selection. And belief-driven employees have cited equality as one of their main drivers. The ‘great resignation’ is going to force it up the agenda for businesses.”

Prioritising the 50%

In order to bridge the skills gap, and outstrip their rivals by employing the best people, the attraction and retention of female talent must be a focal strategy for businesses. In an increasingly competitive recruitment landscape, no organisation can afford for its hiring practices to alienate or overlook potential female candidates. This is reflected in our 2022 Women in Business research, which shows that retaining (41%) and attracting (39%) talent are two of the top drivers of engagement and inclusion measures.

“Female talent is hugely important in filling the skills gap, because 50% of the workforce is female,” points out Grant Thornton International’s Larissa Keijzer. “If you only look at the male part of it, you exclude a host of individuals with different skills. Having C-level women on boards will make an impact because you need role models to progress the careers of other women. Otherwise, they feel they don’t belong.”

Undervaluing half of the workforce when recruiting leaders is poor business sense. More so when that 50% delivers proven business outcomes. In a 2019 study published in Harvard Business Review, women in senior positions were rated in 360-degree reviews as highly competent in a range of key leadership characteristics¹⁶. These included taking the initiative, resilience, inspiring and motivating others, championing change and driving for results – all vital skills needed for agile, forward-looking businesses aiming to thrive in the post-pandemic economy.

“At least half of the problem is in retention rather than recruitment,” says Adrian Warr. “If you focus on the retention bit, you’ve got a few advantages. For a start, it’s way more under your control as you’ve got a captive audience. You can create a generation of relevant female role models and that helps attract the next generation. It starts to deal with the second problem if you fix the first.”

Changing the ways we work

New working practices can help drive further increases in senior level women, by opening up new ways to access female talent. Manpower’s research shows that flexibility and control over their working calendar ranks as the second highest priority (after remuneration) for workers of all ages, geographies and genders. In Jobvite’s 2021 Recruiter Nation survey, 44% of recruiters named working from home and flexible work hours as the most effective perks for attracting candidates¹⁷.

However, it’s important that businesses also recognise the potential for losing contact with employees through hybrid working practices. “Post-Covid, it is expected that working from home will be the new model for at least half the time. When people don’t come to the office a lot, there’s a risk they will lose their corporate identity – and that corporate identity is key to retention of employees, especially women,” says Monique Pisters of Grant Thornton Netherlands.

“After Covid, it is even more important to nurture the emotional connections between employees and their employer to ensure they remain with the company for the long term,” she adds. “Employees and especially women will not necessarily stay for the highest paycheque – they want to feel they belong somewhere, are respected and recognised.”

D&I drives acquisition

To access female talent, businesses must continue pushing their diversity and inclusion initiatives, and not just for the primary impact of bringing more varied talent into the business. A second-phase effect of D&I measures is that having a strong, transparent, well-articulated diversity agenda helps attract and retain purpose-led employees from all backgrounds who are looking to work for more inclusive companies.

“What is truly driving change is people’s increasing desire to work for companies that share the same values and principles,” says Grant Thornton Greece’s Vassilis Kazas. “Inclusive and innovative D&I policies make businesses much more attractive to potential talent who see a safe space where they can excel, while maintaining work-life balance and being assessed solely according to performance.”

In the 2021 Recruiter Nation research, half (49%) of recruiters report that jobseekers are inquiring about D&I initiatives – up 16% on 2020. And 44% see candidates turning down interviews or job offers due to lack of diversity in the employer’s workforce.

It’s also not enough to simply advertise D&I programmes. They need to be visibly effective. “The policies themselves aren’t what make the difference when it comes to attracting and retaining talent,” states Valérie Verdoni of RCGT Canada. “Having D&I policies won’t help win the competition for talent unless those policies permeate the culture.”

“A lot of organisations still believe candidates won’t see beyond the façade of what they promote on the marketplace. They need to give potential candidates more credit, especially in today’s competitive market conditions.” ■

16. <https://hbr.org/2019/06/research-women-score-higher-than-men-in-most-leadership-skills>

17. <https://www.jobvite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Jobvite-RecruiterNation-Report-WEB-2.pdf>

Conclusions

Two years after the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the full extent of its impact on the business landscape, the way organisations expect their employees to work, and resulting opportunities to increase gender equality is still unfolding.

There are positive signs that more flexible approaches to working practices may become embedded in many companies, but it will take time for these changes to solidify.

We can say with certainty, however, that there has been incremental improvement in the number of female senior managers worldwide. “After the disruption of the last two years, any upward movement is a positive,” insists Grant Thornton International’s Kim Schmidt. “Every year there’s been some progress, and it takes a huge amount of effort and cultural change to impact these numbers significantly. Now we will start to see continuous momentum, without backward movement.”

To date, our research suggests that the pandemic has generally had a positive impact on women’s careers and access to senior positions, with many respondents seeing beneficial developments in women’s immediate working environment and longer-term career paths.

“The rebalancing of roles that previously forced some women out of the workforce, especially at mid-management level, has made them more visible for senior positions, and also more ambitious,” confirms Larissa Keijzer of Grant Thornton International. “With greater flexibility, it has been easier for women to step up into senior management.”

However, it will take continued focus and dedicated action to ensure that these benefits translate into further growth in the proportion of female leaders worldwide. With many women deciding to move to new jobs in the aftermath of Covid-19, and choosing to attach themselves to organisations that align to their sense of purpose, companies need to be strategic in attracting female workers.

Organisations are recognising that female talent is an essential resource and vital to good business outcomes, and fundamental to bridging the skills gap. To retain that talent, organisations need to collaborate with employees to understand how they can remodel working setups to enable them to stay in the workforce, and reach equity in seniority.

“Businesses in the global mid-market are focused, agile and flexible, which allows them to take a lead when it comes to tackling the lack of gender balance in business leadership,” says Grant Thornton International’s Peter Bodin.

“The ability to identify, access and retain female talent for senior roles will help accelerate progress toward the ultimate goal of gender parity at the top table. If businesses focus on supporting their people as individuals and create flexible and inclusive environments that enable them to be their best, we



can seize the opportunity to rebalance business leadership for generations to come.”

These efforts need to be part of an overall, transparent strategy that permeates the organisation from the board down, with every colleague championing the business case. Measurement, accountability and building an inclusive culture are all central pillars in creating a [Blueprint for Action](#) to achieve gender balance in leadership.

“As a company today, you must integrate gender equality in all processes, and all leaders must work towards inclusion and diversity,” says Anna Johnson of Grant Thornton Sweden. “It must be part of the ongoing work – relying on standalone projects is not the solution. You need clear goals and transparency about where you are going and why. And everyone needs to contribute.”

As the drive to create more opportunities to engage with diverse talent accelerates across the globe, we would hope to see further increases in the numbers of women in senior management, and the proportion of leadership teams made up by women. With all global and regional figures hitting or surpassing the 30% tipping point, we are optimistic that this progress will continue. The door to opportunity is open.

“I am very optimistic because there are a lot of people who believe that significant change needs to happen,” concludes Kim Schmidt.

“Leaders, men and women, have passionately embraced the idea that diversity and inclusion, with a starting focus on gender, is critical for organisational success, whether it’s around attracting talent, innovation, or performance. Those leaders will drive the momentum.” ■

At Grant Thornton, we believe that diverse perspectives and inclusive cultures enable business to innovate and sustainably grow.

By tracking female representation in senior leadership over 18 years, and highlighting what still needs to be done, we aim to act as an agent for change in the drive to increase gender parity and inclusion in business.

Find out more at:
grantthornton.global/en/insights/diversity/

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Methodology

The Grant Thornton International Business Report (IBR) is the world's leading mid-market business survey, interviewing approximately 5,000 senior executives biannually in listed and privately held companies all over the world. Launched in 1992 in nine European countries, the report now surveys around 10,000 business leaders in 29 countries on an annual basis, providing insights on the economic and commercial issues affecting the growth prospects of companies globally.

The findings in this report are drawn from around 5,000 interviews and surveys conducted between October and December 2021 with chief executive officers, managing directors, chairs, and other senior decision-makers from all industry sectors in mid-market businesses in 29 countries. The definition of mid-market varies across the world: in mainland China, we interview businesses with USD 5 million to USD 500 million in revenue; in the United States, those with USD 100 million to USD 4 billion in annual revenues; in Europe, it is commonly those with 50 to 500 employees.

We have rounded the percentages and data points explored in this report to the nearest whole number. For this reason, some charts may not total 100%.



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