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# Increasing female representation in senior roles

## Pay equity recommendation sheet one

A low level of representation of women in senior roles can be a significant contributing factor in an organisation having a gender pay gap.

This pay equity 'recommendation sheet' assists organisations to identify and respond to workplace practices that may be barriers to the promotion and advancement of women.

## The importance of women in senior roles

Increasing the participation of women in senior roles within organisations should be seen as a business imperative. In an environment of increasing labour shortages, economic success may depend on attracting and retaining the skills of women and expanding the pool of talent available for leadership positions.

Increasing female representation in management also has inherent benefits in terms of fairness and equity. By increasing the representation of women in senior roles organisations can be seen as employers of choice by women and the wider community.

Senior women are also valuable role models and mentors to male and female staff aspiring to senior roles.

In organisations where there is limited access for women to senior roles, qualified and talented women are susceptible to approaches from rival organisations.

In this document the term 'senior roles' is used to describe positions with management or supervisory responsibilities, as well as roles that involve decision-making powers at senior levels.

## Is there a problem?

A pay equity audit will assist an organisation determine if there is a lack of representation of women in senior positions.

Any substantial lack of female representation at senior levels could be indicative of systemic barriers to women's progression. It is important to analyse the existing data to determine whether a lack of women at senior levels is explainable and justifiable, or whether it is a result of systemic barriers to advancement.



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## Possible causes

### *Lack of women at the 'feeder' levels of senior positions*

The clustering of women below a particular level may signify hard barriers limiting their progression. This sort of employment pattern could be caused by a number of factors.

Women may be leaving the organisation once they reach middle management level, due to either real or perceived lack of developmental opportunities. A lack of flexible work arrangements, and long hours associated with flexibility of senior management positions may discourage those women with the capacity or desire to progress from doing so.

### *Lack of access to part time employment at senior levels*

There is a commonly held belief that it is not appropriate for part time employment to be made available to managers and those at senior levels. Women are significantly over represented in part time employment and this needs to be considered when assessing workplace practices. Many women use part time employment to balance caring and work responsibilities and any workplace practices which significantly impact upon part time workers will have a disproportionate effect on women. An organisation that does not offer part time or job share arrangements at senior levels could be exercising unintentional gender bias and limiting the scope for women and men with caring responsibilities to progress.

### *Lack of promotional or developmental opportunities for women*

A lack of promotional opportunities for women will obviously result in their decreased participation at management levels. For example, there may be an implicit assumption that women, particularly those with caring responsibilities or those in part time employment, do not wish to become senior managers. There may also be impediments to progression among certain occupational groups. Where these occupational groups are predominantly female, this could be considered indirectly discriminatory.

A lack of promotional or developmental opportunities for women not only disadvantages individuals, but also results in a lack of participation and the inability of a large portion of the workforce to contribute in any meaningful way to an organisation. It is good business practice to facilitate the participation and contribution of all staff within an organisation.

### *Lack of networking opportunities or mentoring schemes for women*

The ability to progress a career often relies on informal networking and mentoring of aspiring managers early in their career. Often there is little in the way of a formal process to provide these opportunities. Thus, much of the mentoring and networking occurs on an informal basis.

When these types of opportunities are presented out of business hours, this restricts the ability of workers with caring responsibilities to participate. Women carry a disproportionate share of caring responsibilities, and so any networking opportunities that occur out of business hours without due consideration given to those with caring responsibilities limits their capacity to fully participate in the organisation.

## Actions and issues to address

There are a number of strategies employers can use to ensure that there is equal access to promotion and development opportunities within their organisation.

### *Visible Commitment of CEO and Executive to developing senior women*

Where there is public and visible commitment of the CEO and Executive to highlight and address barriers to women reaching senior levels, it is clear to all that this is a business

imperative. Where men at the most senior levels are seen to be mentoring women, providing them with opportunities and encouragement to develop further and celebrating their successes, it sends a message that the organisation is keen to capitalise on the talents of all its staff and reward them appropriately.

### *Accessible quality part time work at senior levels*

A genuine commitment to part time and job share arrangements at senior levels will open up the capacity for part time workers to seek promotion to management levels. This sort of flexibility opens up the pool of eligible workers and results in the appointment of the most suitable applicant. It also sends a message to staff that an organisation values its employees and is committed to ensuring equality of opportunity at all levels.

Access to quality part time work at senior levels will also assist organisations attract and retain mature age employees. Part time work provides flexible work choices to both men and women who may not wish to work full time. Organisations facing skills and labour shortages can offer part time work and other alternatives to retirement to retain skilled and experienced mature age employees.

### *Formal networking and mentoring schemes for women*

Mentoring can be important for career progression, and programs that encourage women to participate in mentoring will increase their opportunities for advancement. A mentoring scheme could target women at particular levels and provide them with the opportunity to develop skills in which they have previously had little experience. A formal mentoring scheme also sends a message to female employees that their ability to contribute to the organisation at all levels is valued.

### *Organisational change and modelling of behaviours*

The implicit and unspoken messages within an organisation can be very powerful. Where there are few examples of women at senior levels, limited access to part time employment at senior levels, or family friendly policies that are never utilised, these practices can be perceived as organisational norms, and discourage women from aspiring to senior positions within the organisation.

Workplace policies that express a commitment to equal opportunity or workplace diversity cannot be effective without a proactive management agenda that applies these policies in a real sense.

When managers model best practice behaviours, they help to develop a quality (or a more equitable) workplace culture that benefits all employees. Such behaviours may include encouraging appropriate women to apply for senior positions, actively supporting the use of family friendly policies, or accommodating requests for part time or job share arrangements. These practices demonstrate a commitment to staff regardless of level or caring responsibilities.

### *Change the nature of management positions*

There is a strong argument for changing the nature of management positions where this will encourage a greater number, and increase the quality, of applicants for these positions. Providing more flexibility within senior positions will make these roles more attractive for everyone. This can be achieved through encouraging a greater work life balance for everyone, including managers, and focusing on outputs and achievements rather than simply on hours worked. Setting reasonable targets, working reasonable hours and allocating reasonable workloads all contribute to making management positions appealing for a larger number of potential applicants.