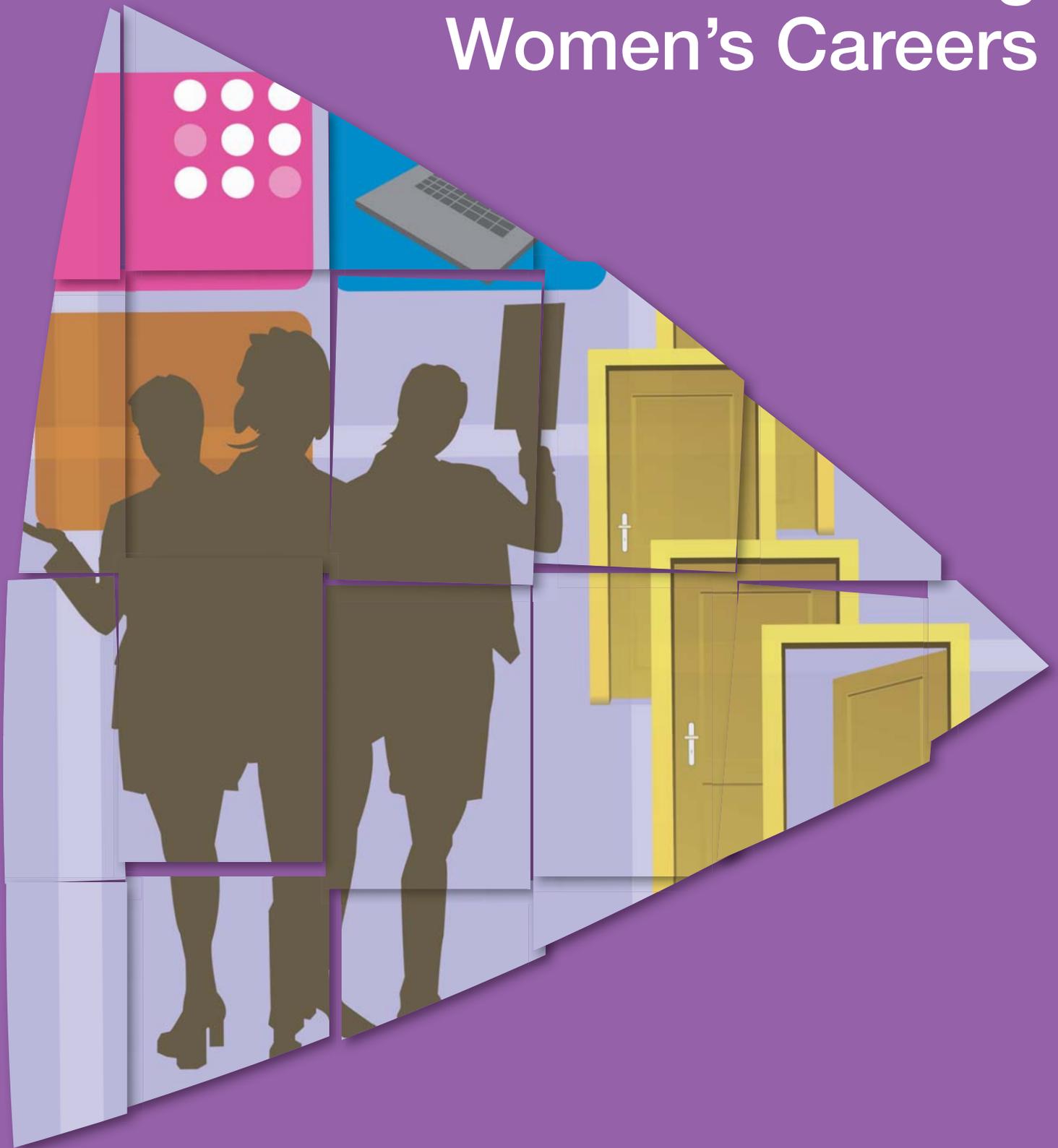


# Understanding Women's Careers



By Fiona Dent, Viki Holton and Jan Rabbetts

December 2011



**ASHRIDGE**

## **Acknowledgements**

This research would not have been possible without the survey data and the 20 in-depth interviews we conducted. We are grateful to all the women who took part and shared with us the highs and lows of their careers.

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# INTRODUCTION

In recent months there has been much written about women in business – specifically about the role and representation of women on boards. In our work at Ashridge we hear a lot about women’s experience in organisational life – some positive – but often stories of inequality and challenge in their day to day work. This, together with the current interest in women on boards, motivated us to explore the current landscape for women in business.

Our aim was to explore the current situation for women by focusing on women’s experiences of their day-to-day business life. We purposely chose to limit the research to **survey women only** and this may be regarded by some as biased; however, we believe that many of our findings could equally be attributed to men or women.

We explored a range of practical areas including:

- People who have been helped and supported in achieving their goals
- Career promoters and hindrances
- Critical incidents that have impacted on career development
- Leadership style
- Equality in relation to promotion and career success
- Work/life balance
- What you wished you’d known earlier in your career
- Advice for women about career choices
- Advice for organisations.

This brief paper summarises the quantitative results and highlights the key messages from the qualitative data. A more detailed review of our findings will appear in our book, *Women in Business: Navigating Career Success* which will be published by Palgrave in Spring 2012.

The research involved a self-completion survey which was completed by over 1400 women – 39% of whom were senior managers and a further 30% were either directors or chief executives. These women worked in the public, private and voluntary sectors, both nationally and internationally, and covered an age range from under 30 to over 60, with 45% of respondents who were between 41 to 50. In addition to the survey we also undertook 20 in depth interviews with senior women leaders, a few of whom are entrepreneurs who have built their own successful businesses, as well as a range of senior women in the public and private sectors.

## Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the many women who took part in our survey and to those who were interviewed for their invaluable help and contributions.



## FINDINGS

### People who support your career

We asked respondents and interviewees which group of people supported them both day to day and in their career development. Four groups of people stood out as major supporters for women – the boss, colleagues, family and friends. In addition to the qualitative data (see Table 1 overleaf) there were many stories about these people, in the main bosses and family, and the support they offered, both practical and emotional.

Typical stories included:

- A supportive boss who recognised their potential and encouraged them to take on challenging projects and push themselves forward
- Family support by way of a partner who acts as a sounding board or devil's advocate when necessary
- Family support with child care – there were many stories about this issue. Many were about supportive partners who share the load and some who have taken on full responsibility for child care
- External coaching relationships where the coach challenged the individual to move out of their comfort zone and aim higher
- Identifying an organisational sponsor, often a boss or senior manager, who acts as a mentor. The sponsorship role was highlighted on numerous occasions as being important because you need someone who looks after your interests and promotes your case with groups to whom you have no access.

**“When offered coaching, I made a particular request – I wanted someone at the level the company thought was my potential who was married with kids.”**

**“A coach and mentor are important but it's your line manager who is critical to your career.”**

Response	Count	Percent
Boss	1220	86.8%
Colleagues	1084	77.1%
Internal coach (a relationship based on developing your skills)	159	11.3%
External coach	462	32.9%
Internal mentor (a relationship with a more experienced role model)	413	29.4%
External mentor	277	19.7%
Family	976	69.4%
Friends	772	54.9%
Other	106	7.5%

Table 1 – People who support your career

## Career promoters

There were some interesting patterns that emerged in relation to the question “What has helped you achieve your career goals?” and these are illustrated below.



Career promoters

We clustered these promoters into eight different areas:

- Personal work attitude
- Supportive family and friends
- Organisational support
- Development and developmental relationships
- Self awareness
- Opportunity
- Networking and building relationships
- Positive working environment.

Many women recognised that their own attitude was largely the key to their success, especially in relation to their determination, self belief, self confidence, passion and resilience. In addition to this, having a well honed awareness of your own strengths, weaknesses, values, beliefs and career ambitions was also important. Support from different types of people for different reasons and at different times in your career was also highlighted – in particular the role of one’s family for the right encouragement as well as identifying and working with a good coach and or mentor to help achieve career success. Finding the right working environment which suits your own career ambitions and allows you to grow and thrive, together with a supportive and positive atmosphere, was also mentioned as important.

“I have never been much of a networker and I believe this issue has held me back.”

## Career barriers

We asked women to identify what had hindered their career success so far – the chart below summarises this.



Career barriers

“When an opportunity is offered, take it. Rather than thinking about five reasons why you can’t do something, think about why you can. Take opportunities and take controlled risks.”

By far the most common barriers mentioned were women’s own personal frailties and their commitments to family responsibilities. Many women also stated that while they have identified hindrances, some of these have been due to choices they had to make to accommodate other aspects of their life. In summary, we categorised the main hindrances into the following:

- Limiting beliefs (by the individual)
- Family issues
- Work colleagues
- Personal style and skills
- Lack of organisational support
- Gender issues
- Taking the wrong path
- Politics and bureaucracy.

## Leadership

We asked women about their approach to leadership and selected seven styles for questionnaire respondents to choose from, as well as giving them the option to add in other styles if appropriate. As can be seen from Table 2, by far the most common styles used are Participative and Situational. Quite a number of the women who responded to the questionnaire, as well as those we talked to during our interviews, discussed varying their style to suit the people and situation. They also felt that they drew upon a range of styles rather than relying on one particular approach.

<b>Participative</b> – you actively involve others in discussion and decision making.	396	28.3%
<b>Situational</b> – you vary your style to suit the situation.	377	26.9%
<b>Visionary</b> – you inspire others through your energy and commitment.	233	16.6%
<b>Transactional</b> – you give directions and expect them to be met.	13	0.9%
<b>Value based</b> – you lead based on strong personal values.	130	9.3%
<b>Intuitive</b> – a more instinctive approach where both people and the situation are considered; gut-feeling.	217	15.5%
<b>Hierarchical</b> – driven by level and status.	1	0.1%
<b>Other</b>	34	2.4%

Table 2 – Leadership styles

We asked women whether or not their leadership style was driven by their organisation's prevailing style – it is interesting to note that only 28% of respondents (see Table 3) felt this affected their approach to leadership. This leads us to surmise that women are fairly independent when selecting/developing their leadership style and tend to rely on what suits them rather than adhering to a particular organisational style.

Response	Count	Percent
Yes	389	27.9%
No	1007	72.1%

**Table 3 – Is your leadership style driven by your organisation?**

The next set of questions explored perceptions about the organisation's attitudes towards women. The responses to these questions seem to be affected by the prevailing gender mix at the senior levels in the respondents' organisation as well as the organisation's culture.

The main themes emerging were:

- Old-fashioned male views about the role of women, male dominated industry, persistence of old boys' network and predominantly male senior teams who recruit in their own like
- An expectation about style – where women are perceived as more accommodating and relationship focused which is not valued in certain cultures – while men are regarded as tougher, rational and output focused.
- Negative perceptions and judgements of assertive women where a woman who has drive and ambition is often regarded (by both men and women) as aggressive and dominating
- Work life balance issues – a culture of long hours with early morning meetings and late evening meetings which affects some women's ability to move into certain roles
- Women tend to be less pushy and demanding when it comes to promotion, bonus and salary
- A feeling that women have to work harder to get to senior levels
- A perception that men do not like being challenged by a senior woman, so appoint men rather than women

**“I think women are stereotyped more easily than men and, especially when in a leadership position, this perception will follow you around. So think carefully about the image you project early on!”**

**“I'm the only woman at senior management level and am deemed to be fluffy.”**

**“When women attempt to take a stand it can often be interpreted by men as being prissy or emotional which is very frustrating. While men are seen as being challenging and assertive.”**

- A perception that some women are not tough enough to cope at the top
- Certain industries were singled out for mention as still male dominated at the top – financial services, education, medicine and the Church.

Where women disagree with the statements, two positive themes predominate:

- A gender-balanced, or predominately female culture with women well represented in senior levels which encourages a more balanced approach
- Organisations where the focus is on performance and ability not gender.

Below are the quantitative results to three different questions about organisational attitudes towards women:

1. Do you agree men and women are judged differently in your organisation with regard to leadership style and behaviour?



49% of women felt they were judged differently with regard to their leadership style and behaviour.

2. Is it harder for women to succeed in your organisation compared to your male colleagues?



48% indicated that they felt it was harder for women to succeed in their organisation compared to male colleagues.

3. Are men and women judged equally with regard to promotion in your organisation?



56% felt that they were judged equally to men when it comes to promotion in their organisation.



## Work/life balance

Unsurprisingly, work life balance is of major importance to over 80% of the questionnaire respondents and most indicate they work to live rather than the other way around. However only 49% felt they had a good work/life balance.

Some of the main reasons for the lack of work/life balance:

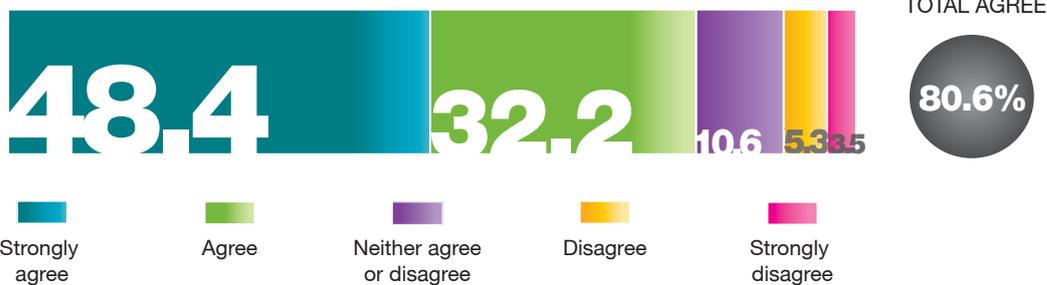
- Too much international travel
- Heavy workload
- Too much time at work, other activities suffer
- Technology: emails, BlackBerry, iPhone
- Juggling family responsibilities
- Commuting
- Long hours culture in the organisation
- New job, so in learning phase.

This suggests that there is work to be done both by individuals and organisations to continue the process of improving work/life balance.

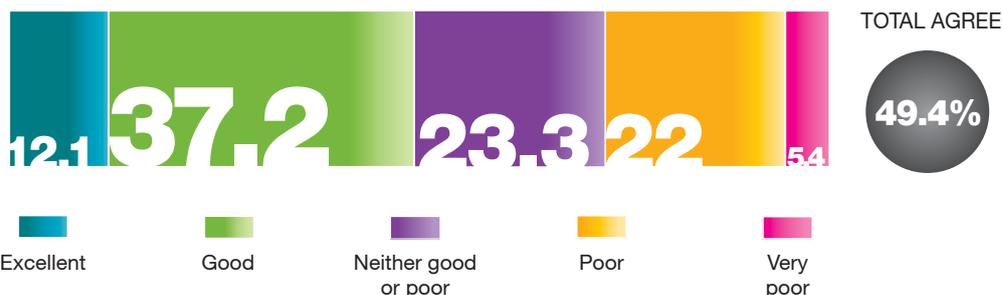
“The nature of the job and the travel make it harder to have children and a successful career without real sacrifice.”

“Early on in my career I worked longer hours; in retrospect I was probably less efficient.”

### Importance of a good work/life balance



### Quality of good work/life balance today



## Myers Briggs Type

We asked our respondents to indicate their 'best fit' (their perception of Myers Briggs Type (MBTI)) if they were aware of this, and 864 gave us this information.

The table below compares this data to the total Ashridge Data Set of 23,163 managers (men and women) who have completed the MBTI. The chart below indicates the pattern of scores for:

<b>ISTJ</b> 14.2% 10.8% 5.2%	<b>ISFJ</b> 1.6% 2.7% 2.0%	<b>INFJ</b> 0.9% 1.4% 3.0%	<b>INTJ</b> 7.2% 6.0% 10.2%
<b>ISTP</b> 3.8% 2.7% 1.9%	<b>ISFP</b> 0.6% 1.0% 0.7%	<b>INFP</b> 1.3% 1.7% 2.8%	<b>INTP</b> 5.6% 4.9% 4.3%
<b>ESTP</b> 5.9% 4.8% 2.5%	<b>ESFP</b> 1.1% 1.9% 2.2%	<b>ENFP</b> 3.6% 5.4% 9.8%	<b>ENTP</b> 11.3% 11.3% 14.0%
<b>ESTJ</b> 22.5% 20.7% 10.2%	<b>ESFJ</b> 2.8% 5.4% 5.3%	<b>ENFJ</b> 2.6% 4.6% 8.3%	<b>ENTJ</b> 15.1% 14.7% 17.6%

Table 4 – Myers Briggs Type table

### KEY

**Top line** – Ashridge total data set of both men and women

**Mid line** – Women only from the Ashridge data set

**Lower line** – The data collected from the women leaders' survey.



**“You should definitely take charge of your own career plan!”**

**“Make sure your choice fits your passion and the life you want to lead.”**

**“Go for a company that fits your aspirations.”**

**“Choose your job role, manager and organisation well. Research and speak to people already doing what it is you think you might like to do.”**

## IN SUMMARY:

### Advice for individuals

- Identify your career goals, ambitions and aspirations – be explicit. Remember you can adapt, develop and change these as your career progresses.
- Develop self-awareness of your major strengths, style, interests, values, beliefs and any areas you need to develop. Be open-minded to and welcoming of feedback from others to help you raise your self-awareness, confidence and self-belief.
- Be open-minded to opportunities when they arise and ensure you put yourself forward for appropriate key projects and assignments.
- Be conscious of the importance of relationships and networks. Make your networks work for you by being actively involved in both internal and external groups.
- Recognise the important role your boss can play in your career success. Finding a good boss is invaluable for developmental purposes.
- Proactively identify people who can help you develop – coaches, mentors and sponsors. Take every developmental opportunity offered to you and offer to develop others.
- Develop a plan and create your personal brand and a personal pitch to share with others when appropriate.
- Juggling the work/life balance is tough and needs careful planning. Recognise that there will be times when it feels imbalanced and others when you feel more in control. Find the strategies that work for you.

### Remember:

“You can have it all, just not all the time”.

## Advice for organisations

- Good HR policies, procedures and practices are all very well but it's the prevailing organisational attitude and culture that really makes the difference.
- Be aware of the gender mix at key career stages, on development programmes and when promoting people to senior positions to raise awareness of any potential gender bias.
- Be aware of the issues that block women's careers (e.g. work and family issues and who gets key challenge assignments) and make it harder for women to succeed in the organisation compared to male colleagues. Find ways to review and create flexible career planning and talent management programmes.
- Create an environment where women are able to identify (and change) policy and practice to create more equality.
- Provide women with opportunities for development, executive coaching and mentoring.
- Explore innovative approaches to the conundrum of managing complex roles in flexible ways.
- Change rarely happens unless committed to and led by the CEO (and senior executive team). Every organisation needs a diversity champion at board level.

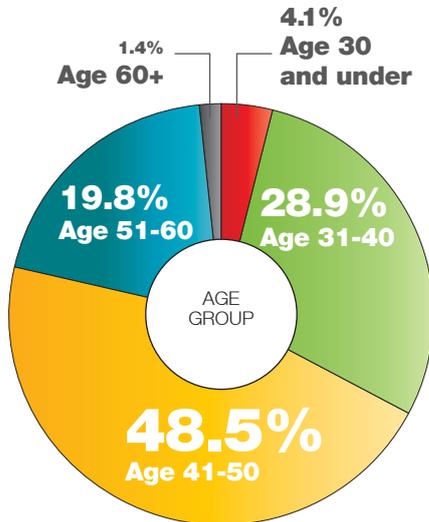
**“Stop imagining what women want. Ask them!”**

**“Expect that women behave differently, don't be surprised by it, enjoy the differences. Different styles are enriching not threatening.”**

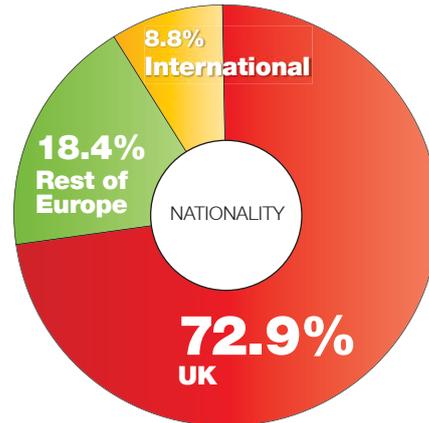
**“First test if your organisation is committed to improving the landscape for women, or is it only window dressing?”**

# THE DEMOGRAPHICS

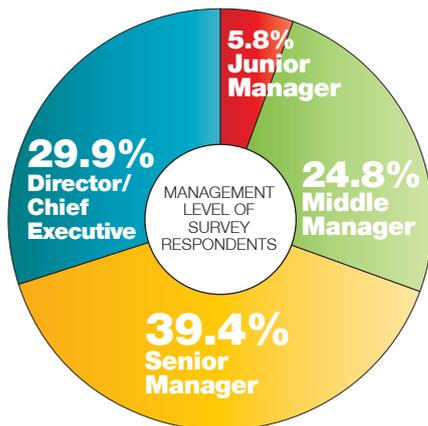
What is your age group (years)?



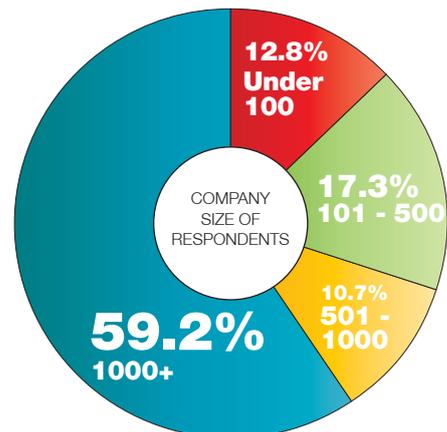
Nationality



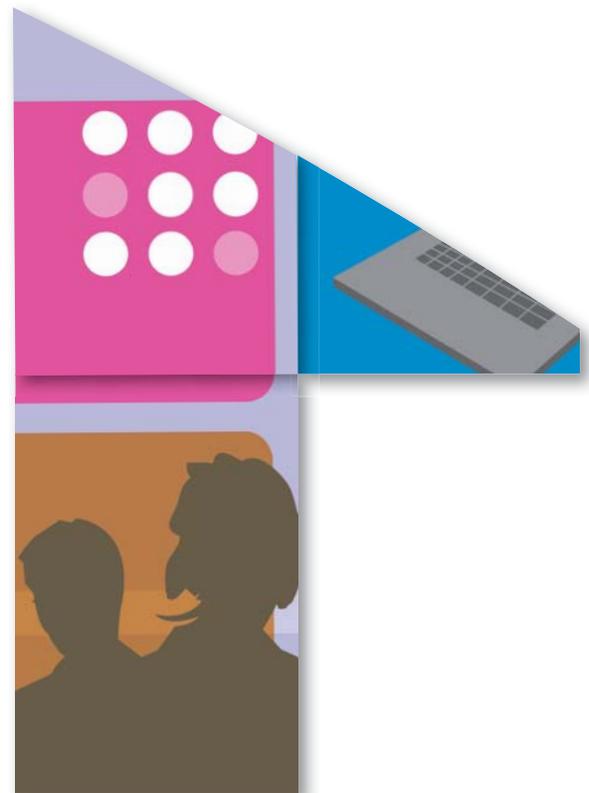
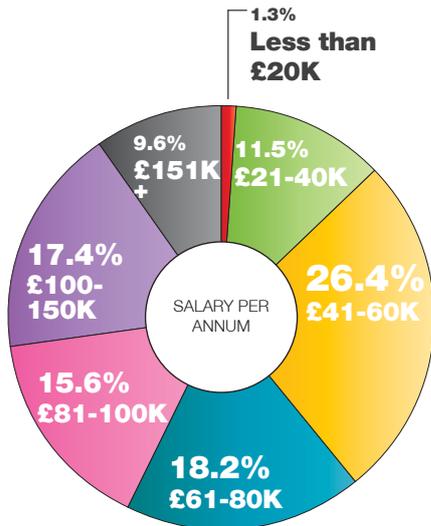
Organisational level



How many people are employed in total in your organisation (approximately)?



Please indicate your earnings level – salary and bonus



## Final reflections: Looking back at early career experiences

We asked the senior women leaders we interviewed to look back over their career and tell us what they wish they had known early on. The three comments below illustrate some of the key issues – and they may be helpful to women who are either mid-career or possibly just starting out.

*“What else did I wish I’d known earlier in my career? That I’m not indispensable I suppose, because there have been times in my career where I’ve wanted to do something and I’ve thought no, I can’t possibly take six weeks off over the summer to take my daughter away and have some real quality time with her. Looking back now I realise that I could easily have done that but I’ve missed the opportunity, so there are times when I’ve been at work more than actually I needed to be. You can let go sometimes and the organisation doesn’t fall over.”*

*“I wish I’d realised what I was doing was leading and also that the work I was involved with was special and really important in the medical field – it was something that not all others were doing. If I had recognised the significance of some of these early achievements, I could have had the opportunity to capitalise on them. This may also have led to greater confidence. I also wish I’d learned to ask people more – typically people are generous and willing to give something of themselves. My experience is that every time I’ve asked, I’ve had a positive experience, and I think that I’ve learned that the worst thing anyone can say is ‘No’.”*

*“I think if I had worked harder at my presentation skills earlier in my career this might have made a difference to me. I spent the first ten or 15 years working away at my tasks with little thought about how to make myself visible or thinking about how others saw me.”*

If you are interested in exploring this topic area further or would like to consider women's leadership programmes for yourself or coaching for your organisation, please contact:

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## Notes

## Notes

## About Ashridge

Ashridge is a leading international business school based in Hertfordshire, England. We work with individuals and organisations from around the world to build management capability and address individual and organisation development challenges. Our clients span the private, public and not-for-profit sectors.

Our activities include open and customised executive education programmes, organisation consulting, MBA, MSc, Doctoral and Diploma qualifications, applied research and virtual learning.

Ashridge is consistently ranked as one of the world's leading business schools. In the latest *Financial Times* ranking Ashridge was ranked in the top three in the UK for the fourth year running for customised executive education.



For more information about the book *Women in Business: Navigating Career Success*, please scan the QR code below.



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