

The Career Paradox for UK Women

An in-depth study across industry sectors exploring career support, the working environment and the talent pipeline.



Inspiring Women. Improving Business

Executive Summary

This report is an examination of the working environment for women and mothers and seeks to understand what organisations are doing to support female career progression. Based on research conducted among 1,000 professional women, it sets out to identify which are the best and worst sectors for women and working mothers, based on key factors such as female progression and retention, the amount of value and support received, and employer attitudes towards women and working mothers in general.

It also examines the current paradox of being a woman in the workplace whereby a large proportion (80%) say that they feel supported in their career; while at the same time many of those same women have experienced prejudice, been overlooked for promotion and held back by their gender. This paradox is also explored through the lens of a working mother.

The report demonstrates how current experiences could shape the future talent pipeline of senior level women. It puts forward suggestions as to how existing challenges can be overcome and measures introduced to reflect the support women and working mothers really need to succeed in their organisation.

Key findings include:

- 80% of women feel their employer is supportive of them.
- Conversely 44% say their gender has hindered their career (or will in the future) while 36% of women have experienced workplace prejudice.
- 12% of women have been passed over for promotion because of their gender.
- Accountancy is the best sector for working women, receiving the highest scores in more positive indicators than any other sector.
- Law, Education and Accountancy are the best sectors for working mothers.
- Advertising & Media and Engineering & Construction are the worst sectors for both women and working mothers.

What is clear is that while women may feel like they are being supported, there is a disconnect between this and the realities of their day-to-day working life. This paradox undermines much of the good work that many organisations are undertaking, highlighting the need for a healthier working culture and greater consistency in the implementation of good policy.

This research echoes Talking Talent's experiences of delivering consulting work for clients where, during the early stages of diagnostic work, women often offer up a very positive outlook on their work situation and feel a sense of loyalty to the organisation that belies the reality of their, or others', true experiences. This phenomenon warrants further examination because it is getting in the way of broader, more honest, debate and the ability to find potential solutions.

Arriving at a solution therefore requires both organisations and women themselves to be supported, and challenged, to address the reality that women and working mothers are facing.

Theories vs. Reality For Women in the Workplace

The landscape for professional women in the workplace is mixed with positive elements, as well as significant areas for improvement.

At first glance, the view is positive.

- The majority of women – 80% – view their employer as being supportive.
- More than seven in ten rate their employer positively for retaining and progressing female talent.
- 53% believe their employer values men and women equally in mid-level roles.

However, on closer inspection, there is a gap between women's overall impressions and the reality on the ground.

- 36% of women have experienced prejudice or discrimination in the workplace because of their gender.
- One third say that discrimination took the form of being looked over for promotion.
- 25% of women believe gender has hindered their career.
- 12% do not believe their employer values men and women equally at any level.

The results are striking; the majority of women feel supported in the workplace in theory but are experiencing prejudice or discrimination in large numbers in practice.

The Reality for Working Mothers

The situation is compounded by similar contradictions for working mothers. Despite several positives, there are a significant proportion of women for whom career progression has been hindered by their status as a working mum.

Positives

- 71% of women say their employer is supportive of working mothers.
- A third of employers offer a career break for women to have a child.
- 14% offer free or subsidised childcare.

Negatives

- 37% said being a working mother has hindered their career.
- A third had experienced workplace prejudice or discrimination because they were a mother.
- 37% of those said they have been passed over for promotion because of being a working mother.

The Cross-Sector Picture for Working Women

Going deeper into the results, by sector, we see a diverse range of experiences.

Accountancy is the best profession for women to work in.

This sector had the highest scores for more positive indicators than any other profession. For example, 94% of female accountants say their employer is supportive of women, the highest in the survey. They are also the most positive about their employer's ability to retain female talent, with 34% describing their employer as excellent in this regard. Female accountants also rate their profession highest on valuing everyone equally and offering everyone the same opportunities regardless of gender.

Despite these positive findings, 43% of female accountants have still experienced workplace prejudice and discrimination.

Law is also a strong performing sector

with 56% of female lawyers rating their industry highly in terms of offering career progression for women. They are also among the most likely to say women are valued equally at top level roles. 84% say they feel supported by their employer.

Despite this positivity, only 32% of female lawyers say men and women are valued equally in mid-level roles and this number declines further at more senior levels, dropping to 27% at board level. Almost half have faced prejudice and discrimination in the workplace.

One industry that exemplifies the paradox we've seen throughout is Financial Services.

Whilst 84% of women in this sector feel supported by their employer, and are well served by flexible working, a majority (56%), also say they have experienced prejudice and discrimination.

The main challenge seems to come as women seek to progress to the upper levels of an organisation. 53% felt their employer valued women and men equally at mid-level roles but this drops to just 16% at board level. Tellingly women in this sector are most likely to say female retention and progression would be improved by more senior women in their profession, and more coaching and advice for women.

Sally Bucknell, Director, Diversity & Inclusiveness UK&I provides insight into how EY is getting it right:

“At EY, we believe that sustainable change in our business will happen through the embedding of core principles of inclusiveness in all our processes and across our entire organisation, so that diversity and inclusion is a part of everything we do. A big part of this is our focus on building the skills of all our people at every level of the organisation to team and lead inclusively. This includes enabling a flexible working culture through behaviour change and implementing a policy of proportional promotions for gender and ethnicity. It also includes maternity coaching for all employees taking maternity, adoption or extended paternity leave and their line managers.”

The Cross-Sector Picture for Working Women

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Table one: best and worst sectors for support, retention and prejudice for working women

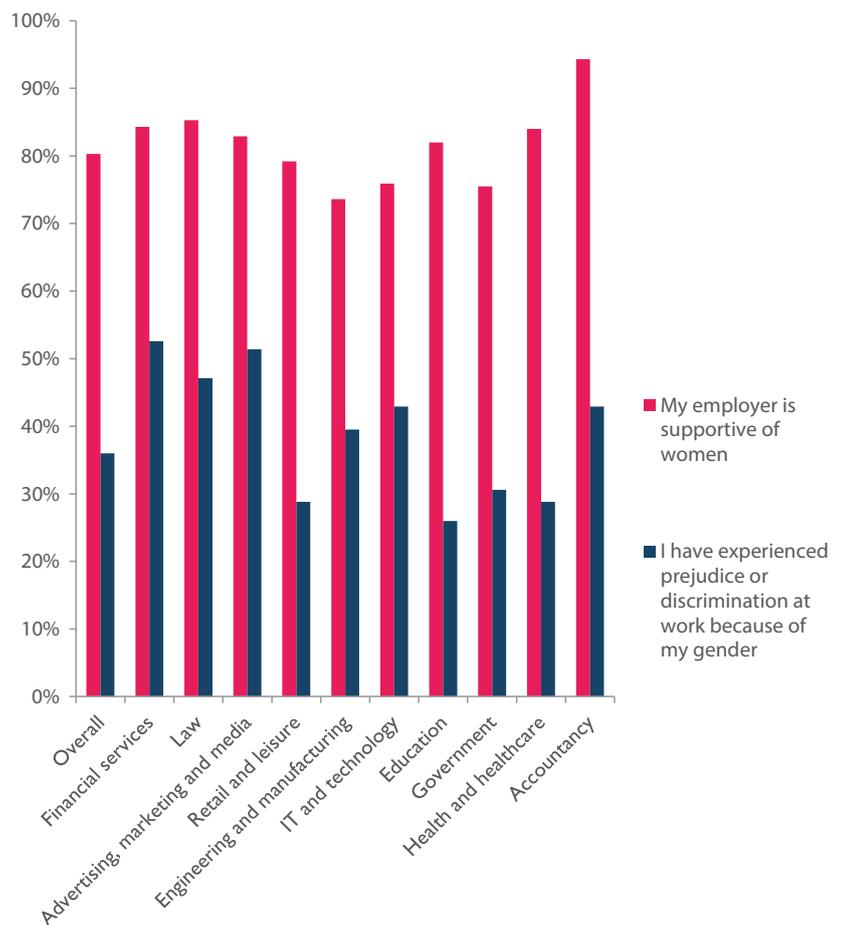
	Best Sector	Worst Sector
Retaining female talent	Accountancy	Engineering & Government
Progressing female talent	Law	Engineering
Experiencing prejudice	Education	Financial Services, Advertising & Media
Career progress enhanced by gender	Accountancy	Advertising & Media
Offering the same opportunities regardless of gender	Accountancy	Engineering

Whilst a majority of women in Advertising & Media feel supported, 51% have also faced prejudice and discrimination at work. They're also the least likely to say their gender has enhanced their progression. However, they are most likely to say men and women are equally valued in top level roles suggesting those that do make it to the senior ranks are valued when they get there.

Women in Engineering & Manufacturing are least likely to say they feel supported and are least positive about their employer's ability to retain female talent (11%). They are most likely to say their gender has hindered their career progress, with the majority citing a male dominated environment as a key reason. They rated their industry worst for valuing everyone regardless of gender and for offering the same opportunities to all.

Unlike Advertising & Media, there is no silver lining for most women in this sector. Significant change is clearly needed to attract and retain female talent.

Graph one: the career paradox for working women



The Cross-Sector Picture for Working Mothers

Very much in line with the overall findings for women, Law and Accountancy all ranked highly for working mothers, with Education also featuring as a strong sector.

Education is ranked the highest of all sectors for acceptance of the need for work-life balance; assessment based on performance rather than hours worked; support and understanding during maternity leave and attitudes to working mothers. Mothers in this sector also see the lowest level of workplace prejudice and discrimination (25% compared to 34% overall).

However, Education still saw the highest proportion of women who said the fact they have children or the expectation that they might has hindered their career progress.

Women in Law rate their profession highest for supporting working mothers with 29% describing it as excellent compared with an average of 14%. They also rated their profession highest on offering career progression and opportunities for working mothers.

Those in Accountancy rank their profession most highly for support and understanding, both during pregnancy and on the return to work, with a third saying being a working mother had actually enhanced their career progress.

Despite such encouraging signs, 39% in this sector still said they had experienced prejudice or discrimination in the workplace because they were a mother; suggesting such organisational support is let down by its day to day application and surrounding culture.

Table 2: Best and Worst Sectors for support, retention and prejudice for working mothers

	Best Sector	Worst Sector
Attitudes towards working mothers	Education	Advertising & Media
Prejudice & discrimination against working mothers	Education	Financial Services
Career progression and opportunities for working mothers	Law	Government
Support and understanding on return to work post maternity leave	Accountancy	Government

Nicola Wardell, Managing Partner (and working mother) from Grey London provides insight into the advertising industry:

“Grey London has realised that we, and the advertising industry as a whole, need to get better at looking after our working mums. Motherhood should not be seen as a roadblock to future progression – but in an industry that is legendary for it’s long hours, being networking dependant and wonderfully sociable, there is inevitably a conflict. We’d rather not be checking our BlackBerrys during bath time, but we also want to ensure we’re as ‘always on’ as the business demands.”

“We want our working mums to be well supported during this challenging time in their career, to be better able to manage this conflict. So we’re delighted to be launching the ‘Grey Mummies’ programme with Talking Talent’s coaching as its cornerstone.”

“The coaching will take place before, during and after maternity leave, with the aim of retaining and supporting our talented women and then helping them progress their careers in the months and years following. In addition, we have formalised more parent friendly socialising and ongoing practical support to enable Grey mums to make the most of what the agency has to offer. It’s been fabulous as a working mum myself to see such buy-in for this programme at the very highest level of our organisation.”

The Cross-Sector Picture for Working Mothers

Very much in line with the overall findings for women, Law and Accountancy all ranked highly for working mothers, with Education also featuring as a strong sector.

Advertising & Media rated their industry the worst for attitudes to flexible working, and acceptance of the need for work-life balance. 49% of women in this sector felt that being a working mother had hindered their career progress, despite a majority believing they were supported as working mothers.

As we saw for working women in general, **Financial Services** scores highly for prejudice and discrimination, showing the highest number of working mothers (49%) that said they had experienced prejudice and discrimination against working mothers.

40% of working mothers in **Government** were also likely to have experienced workplace prejudice. They also ranked their sector worst for support and understanding before, during, and after maternity leave, as well as for career progression for working mothers.

Case Study

Why setting boundaries is important for working mothers Partner at a leading global law firm

“I think people see you in the office and forget that you’re juggling things and have family commitments. You just have to keep reminding people. It’s all about communication, being organised and understanding the implications of the jobs and what you been asked to do.

“I’m really clear with my team that I can’t get into the office before 9am, so if they want to book any early morning meetings or calls, I always do it as a call from home. You have to be firm about what you can and can’t do. There was a suggestion made about working at the weekend, and I’m happy to do a couple of hours at the weekend from home, but I’m already compromising the time with my daughter, and I don’t want it to impact any more than it already does.

“Just having someone to ask the right questions helped me to engage properly with the necessary issues. Things like: what did I want to communicate? Who with? What were the expectations coming back into the business? We identified potential challenges and put in place a structure to make it happen. It was valuable to have someone who probed the responses I gave them.

“There are a number of things that I’ve continued to use. For example, thinking about what I want to be doing in my career and what I want to do with my daughter, and what do I need to make that work. It’s given me a thought process and a structure – a framework that can be re-applied when I need it.”

Addressing the Paradox

The women responding to this survey cite their organisation as being supportive of them and their careers, yet large numbers of them have experienced prejudice and have seen their career impacted simply by virtue of their gender.

So what is responsible for this gulf between theory and reality? Through their experience of coaching professional women, Talking Talent have identified the following reasons that explain why working women paint a positive picture of their professional progress – despite experiencing a significantly less supportive reality:

- There is a tendency for women to acknowledge that they are ok but that others in the organisation aren't. It's safer to acknowledge that there is a problem by identifying through others' experiences rather than their own.
- Women may feel an unconscious or conscious anxiety about highlighting the realities to senior management or leadership for fear of how those messages will be received and the potential negative impact on career prospects.
- Some will be held back by an ingrained sense of loyalty to their organisation. This loyalty may exist because individuals do not want to challenge or upset the power base that individuals feel they need to align with in order to progress. In most cases this will be senior management positions occupied by men, so to criticise that group is seen as detrimental to their progression.

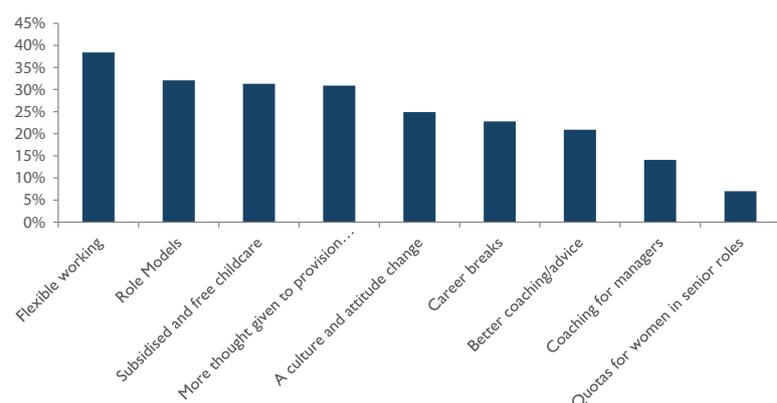
The results clearly indicate that while the majority of the management populations in these organisations are progressive, there are still some individuals with bias and prejudices. They also show that good policy and practice is not implemented consistently and that the working cultures do not unilaterally allow women to thrive. For far too many, the opposite is still true.

Employers need to consider whether their organisation is creating a culture that allows women to bring implicit or explicit barriers to their careers to attention without fear of damaging their careers or being seen as disloyal. Employees – including both men and women – who observe poor behaviour should feel free to feed this information back to the right people to be able to implement change from the ground level up as well as being promoted by senior management.

Once these issues are effectively vocalised within an organisation, what can be done to solve it?

With one in four women believing their gender has hindered their career progression, action is clearly needed. There is a significant need for attitudes and culture in the workplace to change but this takes time. Aside from this, respondents also identified the following more immediate solutions:

Graph Two: Support needed for working women



Flexible working is viewed as most vital to career progression, with 38% of working women in agreement. Role models (32%) and more thought given to provision for women and working mothers (31%) are also believed to play a vital role. While a culture and attitude change is more of a long-term change, this is important to a quarter of all working women.

Better coaching or advice for both working women (21%) and managers (14%) could make a more immediate difference between a career succeeding or stalling. The skills coaching can provide tally very strongly with the enablers identified by women as important to their career progress. These tend to relate more to how they assert and present themselves rather than the skills to do the job, as we saw in our Career Pinch Points research (2012).

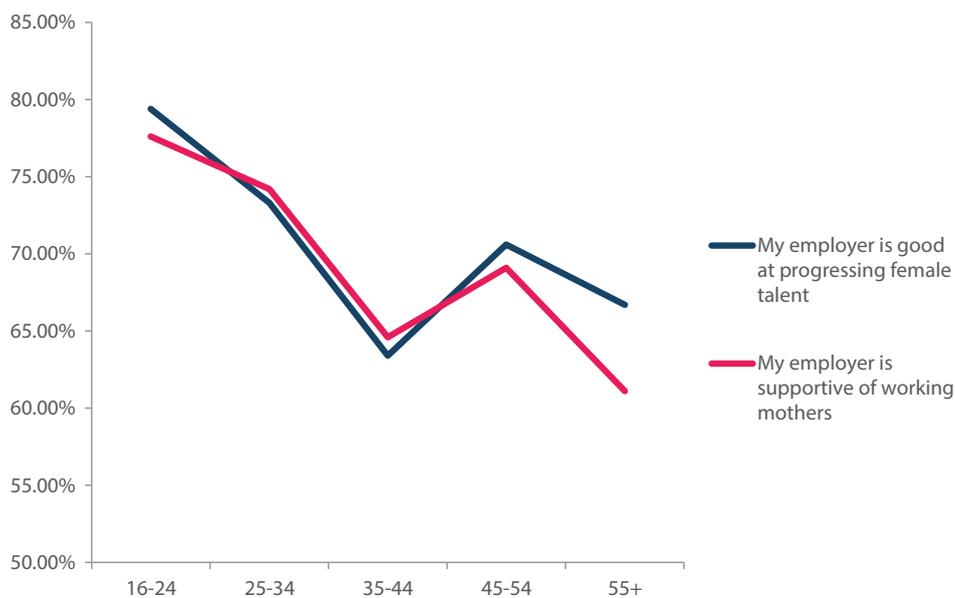
Bridging the Industry Gap

It is clear from the research that certain sectors are in stronger health than others when it comes to how they are looking after and progressing their female employees. There are pockets of real difference and although no one sector is failing completely, some sectors have undoubtedly fallen behind and significantly so. The difference between Manufacturing, for example, and Accountancy is stark.

How can those industries now take steps to make a difference to the role women have to play in their organisation?

The greatest impact that Talking Talent has been able to make over the past 9 years is when partnering with organisations who have built a specific female talent strategy as part of their broader organisational talent approach. This recognises the uniqueness of some of the challenges facing women, especially in male dominated environments, and seeks to address them in an inclusive manner. Inclusivity must mean that managers and senior management are fully integrated within the objectives of any programme and the ambitions of the employee. In doing so it offers the opportunity to build sustainable cultural change, make a real difference to the day-to-day environment and better align key stakeholders in the process. If that can be achieved then the astonishing discrimination figures shown in this report would surely reduce.

Table 3: Perceptions of female career progression through the age groups



It's critical that support is given at the right point in time.

As the graph above shows there is a clear timeframe where excellence needs to be achieved around flexible working, the maternity transition, support for working parents, and support for talent looking to break through the senior ranks. Currently that support is not being given when it matters most and accordingly women between the ages of 25-44 are not progressing and not staying with organisations in the numbers that they should be.

The spotlight on this age range, the potential future leaders of tomorrow, really must come into far sharper focus if a critical mass of talent is to progress through the middle ranks. The commercial impact of failing to do so is huge and the personal cost to so many women is the curtailing of a career that would otherwise have flourished. This is the heart of the female talent pipeline challenge and until greater support is given, when it matters most, women will remain underrepresented at the highest levels of UK business.

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