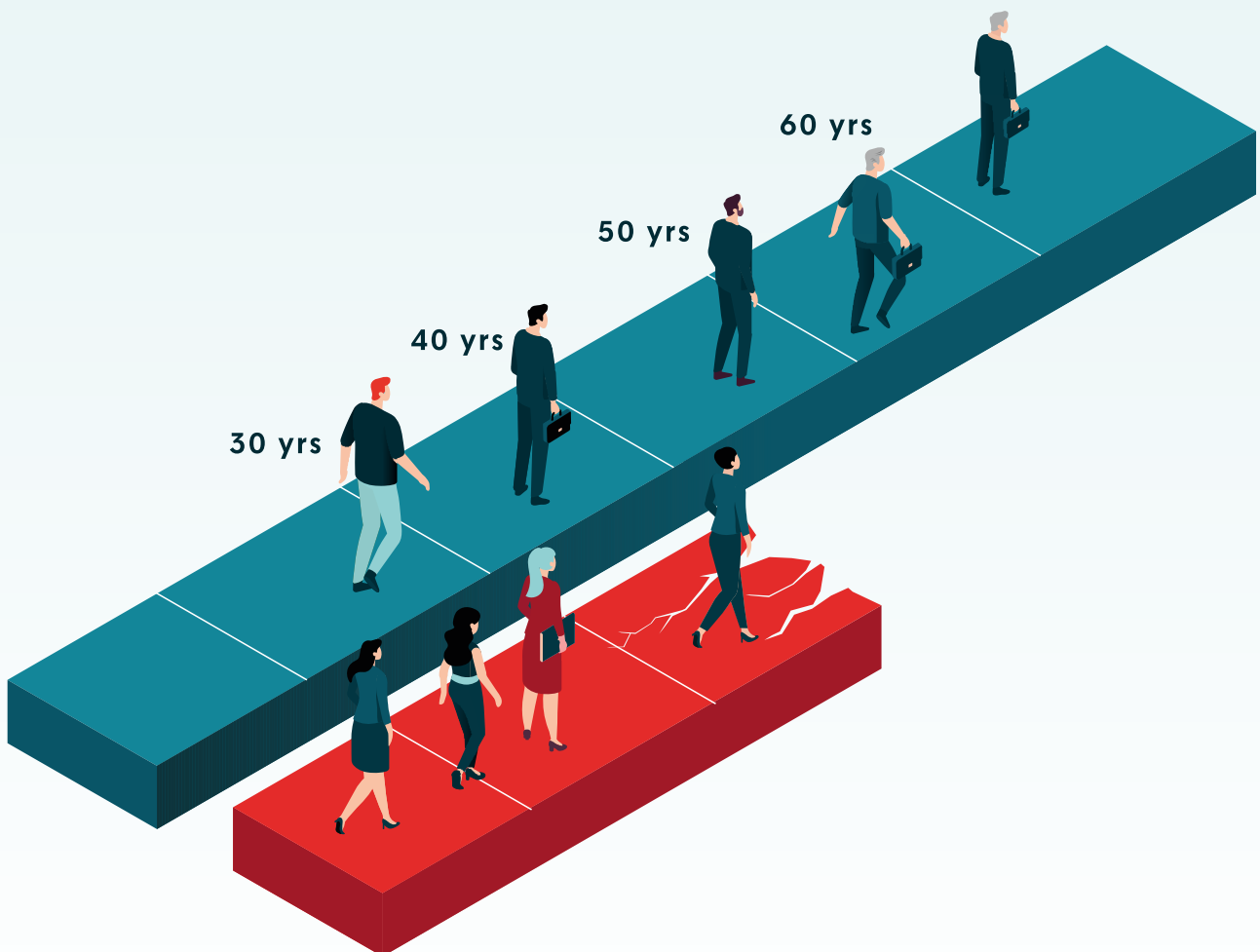


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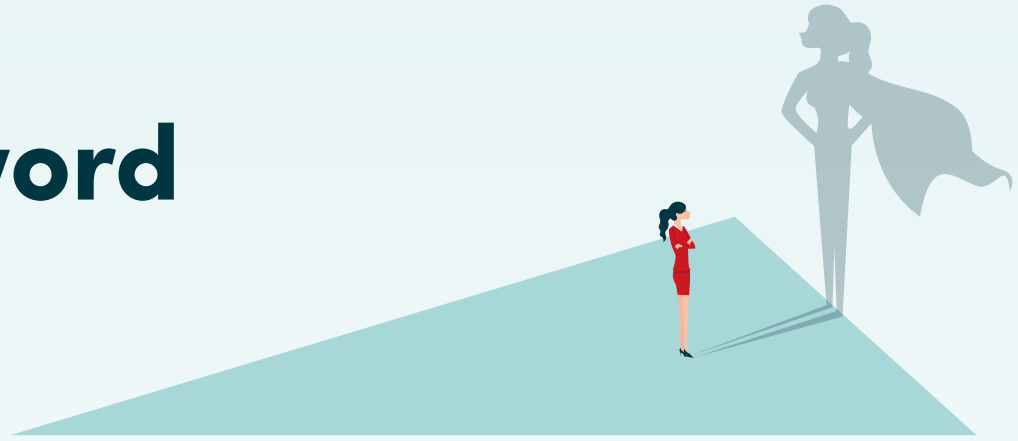


AMBITIOUS. QUALIFIED. OVERLOOKED!

REVEALING THE UNTAPPED TALENT POOL
OF WOMEN OVER 40



Foreword



Despite the imperative for diverse and inclusive leadership, Switzerland grapples with a significant scarcity of female leaders, a fact substantiated by Gender Intelligence Report 2023 figures. What if we challenged the conventional notion that most pivotal career steps must predominantly occur in the age group 31-40¹? Such a shift in perspective shines a light on a significant pool of qualified and ambitious female professionals who, until now, have remained invisible as viable candidates for leadership succession.

Although time and resources have been invested into initiatives aimed to strengthen the female leadership pipeline, there has been little progress¹. Many CEOs who prioritize gender diversity by establishing targets for the representation of women in leadership positions, advocating for diverse pools of candidates in senior roles, find themselves disappointed. It's time to enlarge the talent lens to include non-conventional career path cohorts: those having reduced paid work due to family duties between 31-40 and are ready to ramp up.

Having surpassed the age of 40, these women have a wealth of work experience, expertise, and a unique perspective shaped by their journeys. Recognizing and harnessing the potential of this often-overlooked talent pool presents a valuable opportunity for organizations to bolster their leadership ranks with diverse perspectives and talents.

The insights and conclusions presented in this whitepaper build on the extensive research conducted by Advance in collaboration with the Competence Centre for Diversity & Inclusion (CCDI-HSG) of the University of St.Gallen for the Gender Intelligence Report, and draw from the recent collaborative survey conducted by EY, CCDI-HSG and Advance. In this new research, we engaged with over 1,200 women to gather their personal experiences in the workplace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the authors of this whitepaper: Margit Vunder, Lucile Cotte, Isabelle Staiger, Paola Castillo Fuentes, Theresa Goop, Alkistis Petropaki, Priska Burkard and Alexandra Rhiner.



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Executive Summary

Despite their qualifications, expertise and ambition, women over 40 in Switzerland often find themselves overlooked in the workplace, facing barriers to career progression.

In our comprehensive survey engaging over 1,200 professional women in Switzerland across diverse sectors and management levels from non-management right up to upper and senior management, we aimed to explore the respondents' perspectives on their career ambitions and perceived opportunities. With 90% expressing a desire for (further) career advancement, age did not diminish their ambitions. Women have sustained drive throughout their professional journeys. Neither does parenthood impact women's ambition for career progression, which emphasizes the need for more opportunities.

However, among women in the age bracket 41–45, almost every second woman shows increasing dissatisfaction with her career advancement. The primary challenge identified is a lack of support, opportunities and career sponsorship, as cited by nearly 70% of the respondents. Furthermore, according to the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), over 9% of women at the age of 40–54 who currently work at less than 90% (of a standard Swiss full-time week) would like to work more and would be available to increase their work rate within three months².

Many organizations have implemented career and talent programs. What our survey reveals, is a striking gap when it comes to availability and accessibility of such programs to women in their forties. These findings suggest that there is a systematic bias that unintentionally excludes women over 40 who are equally driven to progress and who have surpassed the «rush hour of family life» – a fact which would position them ideally to ramp up their professional lives.

What can companies concretely do to change this?

Conduct a comprehensive assessment of your female talent pipeline: Make sure you know your pool of women 40+ who are qualified, ambitious, and willing to ramp up. Examine any potential blind spots. Consciously nominate candidates from this pool for career development programs and leadership initiatives, plus include line management in this process.

Thoroughly evaluate your promotion procedures: If age plays a role in evaluating promotable talent in your organization, expand the age span to include women 40+ and thereby seize the opportunity to increase your diverse leadership pipeline with highly motivated and qualified more senior talent.

Specifically include women 40+ in career sponsorship initiatives: Broaden the scope of your career sponsorship initiatives by encompassing women 40+. Foster an environment where women in specific are encouraged to apply for such programs, ensuring that the selection processes remain well-balanced regarding age and gender.



² www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/wirtschaftliche-soziale-situation-bevoelkerung/gleichstellung-frau-mann/erwerbstaetigkeit/unterbeschaeftigung.assetdetail.28245191.html

Recognizing and understanding ambitions

The inclination to advance in one's career remains unaffected by age or parental status. Women in the age bracket of 41-45 show a lower level of satisfaction concerning their current career trajectory.

Contrary to widespread beliefs, women's willingness to embrace leadership responsibilities and advance their career has been confirmed in the recently conducted survey by EY, CCDI-HSG and Advance. The survey involved over 1,200 women in Switzerland, representing 48 nationalities, with the majority being Swiss (62%). More than half of the participants (52%) are older than 40, 57% of the respondents are mothers and 86% work between 80% and 100%. The participants span across all industries and management levels.

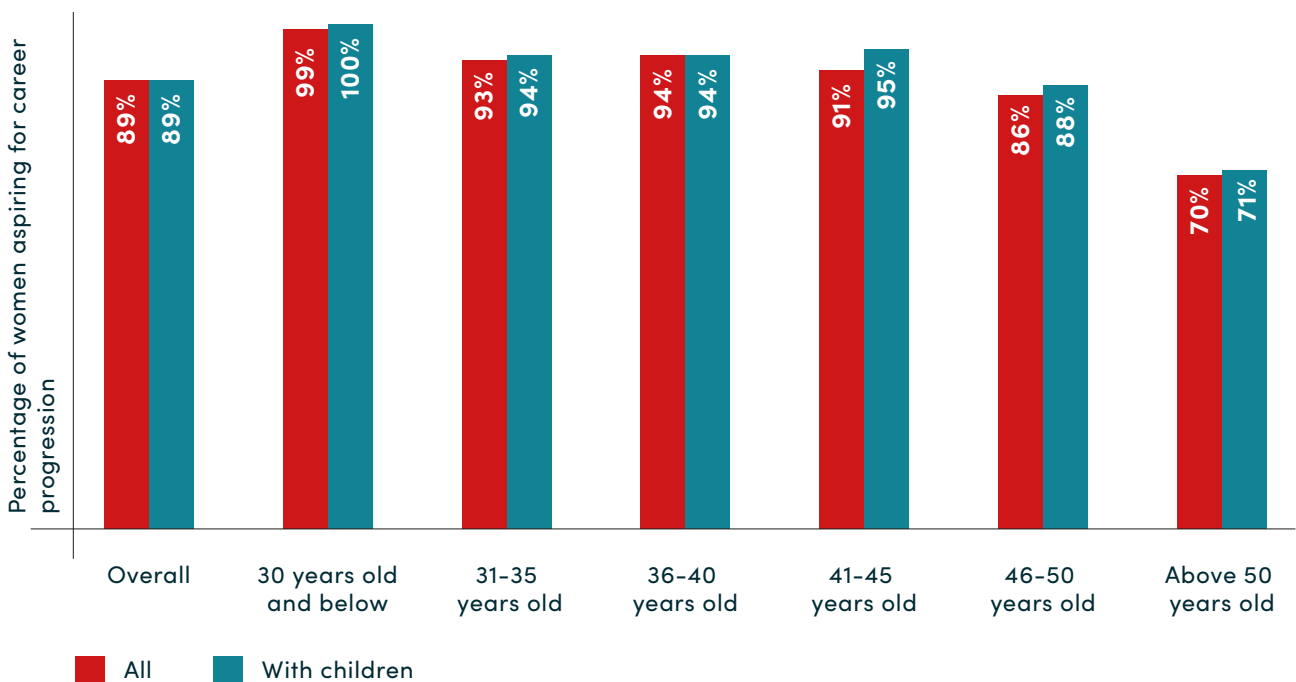
Ageless ambitions – women's determination for career advancement

Regardless of their age, women have a strong desire for career advancement. This contradicts the assumptions, particularly about women at childbearing age, suggesting they are not inclined to take on leadership responsibilities.

Having children doesn't affect women's ambition for career advancement. In the age bracket of 41-45, 95% of women with children seek career progression.

Figure 1

Willingness for career progression

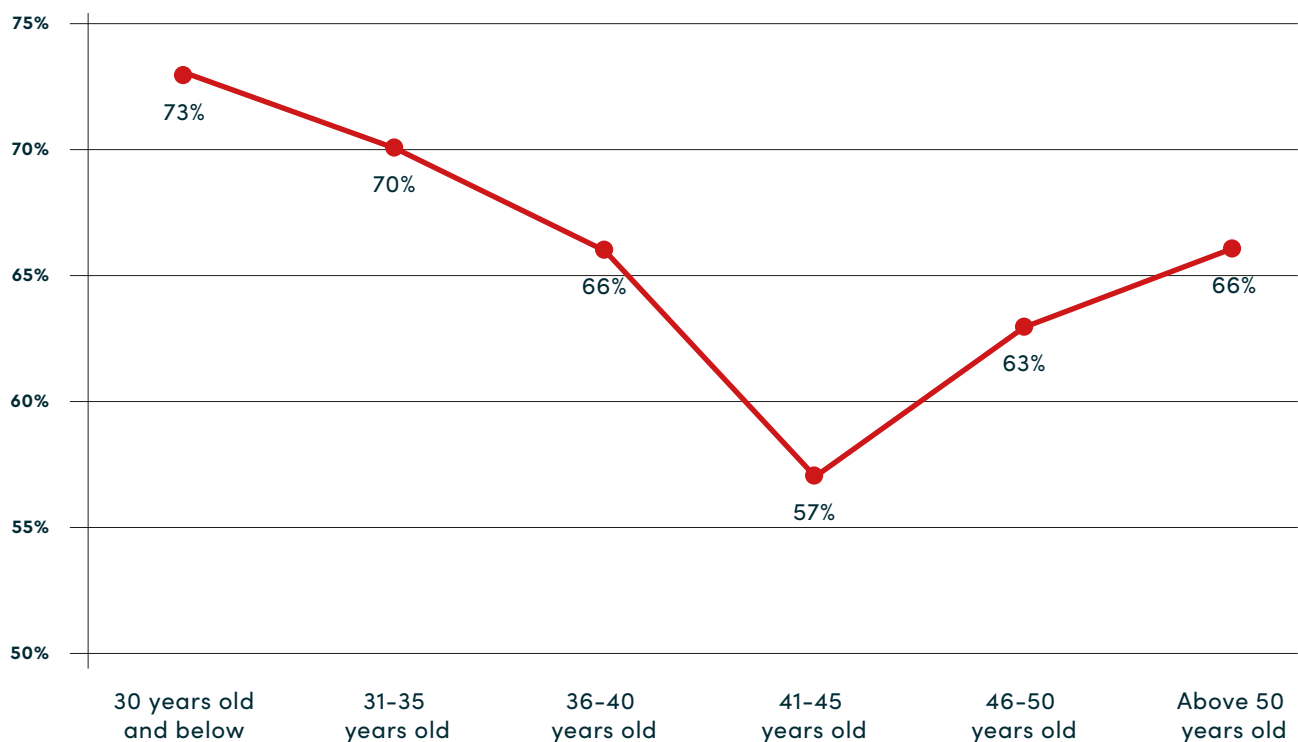


Female career satisfaction lowest for women at the age of 41-45

Whilst women overall want to advance in their career, a significant proportion, namely 57% of women at the age of 41-45, demonstrate the lowest level of satisfaction concerning their career progression. Participants indicate a lack of visibility and career advancement opportunities as reason for their dissatisfaction with their career trajectory. The data is supported by numerous statements in which women express that they do not feel seen nor considered for any promotion reaching their forties.

Figure 2

Percentage of respondents being very or moderately satisfied with their career progression



Source: Dedicated survey answered by over 1,200 professional women in Switzerland, 2024

«While men make most progression between 31-40, women are left out. I experienced the glass ceiling myself. Even though I have never stopped working while I had my child, and I am well educated.»

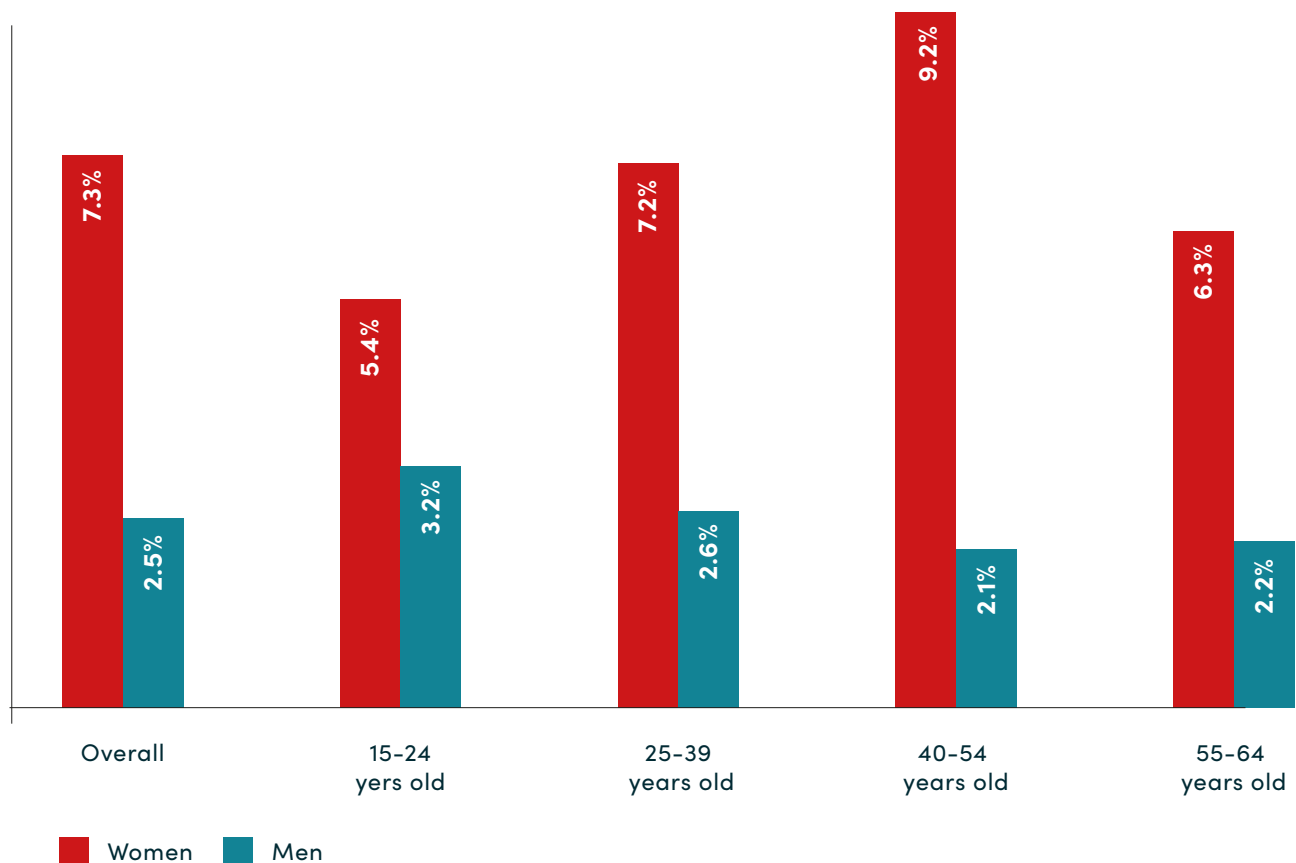
- Survey participant

Underemployment rate at a peak for women between 40-54

In the age bracket 41-45, where the survey respondents' satisfaction level is at its lowest, women's overall underemployment rate in Switzerland is at its peak. According to the Federal Statistical Office, 9.2% of women at the age of 40-54, who currently work at less than 90% (of a standard Swiss full-time week), would like to work more and would be available for increased hours of work within three months³. In the same age group, men's underemployment rate is only at 2.1%. This huge discrepancy needs urgent attention.

Figure 3

Underemployment in Switzerland in Q3/2023



Source: Federal Statistical Office (FSO) - Underemployed persons and underemployment rates

In other words, women in their forties are available, often very well qualified and interested in taking on more responsibilities to progress their career. So, what is the missing link?

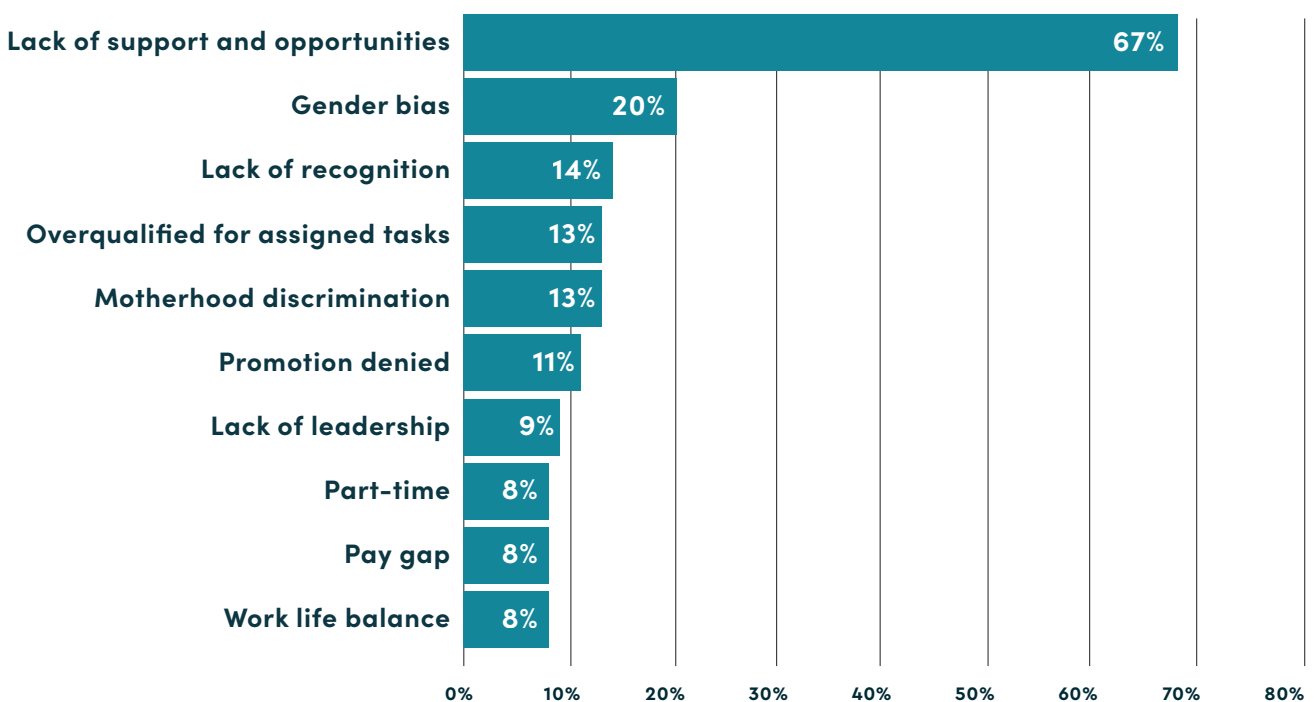
³ www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/wirtschaftliche-soziale-situation-bevoelkerung/gleichstellung-frau-mann/erwerbstaetigkeit/unterbeschaeftigung.assetdetail.28245191.html

Insufficient support and lack of opportunities

The Advance whitepaper «Climbing Higher»⁴ highlighted that the predominant reason for not being considered for promotion is the lack of support – support understood as having leaders who can open doors, know a younger talent’s track record and can recommend her or him for a promotion. The current survey further reinforces these findings, with nearly 70% of the respondents indicating that they do not receive the necessary support or opportunities to advance in their careers.

Figure 4

Most cited reasons for career progression dissatisfaction



Source: Dedicated survey answered by over 1,200 professional women in Switzerland, 2024



⁴ Advance whitepaper Climbing Higher in collaboration with McKinsey & Company (January 2023)

The unseen leaders

Efforts to boost women's presence in leadership are commendable, and the attention this topic has received is remarkable. Yet, the strategies aimed at developing and retaining female leaders across life events and changing deep-rooted patterns as well as behaviors appear less effective than anticipated.

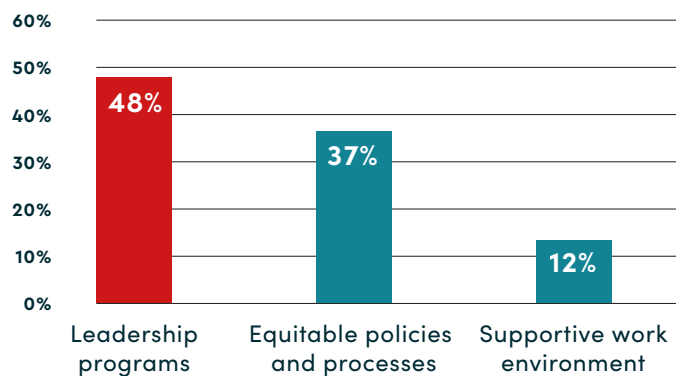
Leadership talents benefit most from one-on-one relationships

When assessing factors crucial to success, the category «leadership programs» emerged as the most critical one, cited by 48% of respondents. «Equitable policies and processes», including aspects such as more clarity, transparency, and fairness, as well as childcare support and family-friendly policies, followed with 37%. «Supportive work environment», including flexibility and inclusive leadership, was mentioned by 12% of participants.

Further exploration of the category «leadership programs» reveals that personalized one-on-one development opportunities are perceived as the key elements missing when asked what would really help. Mentorship was identified by 35%, career sponsorship by 24%, coaching by 23% and training and education by 18% of the respondents emphasizing the need for tailored support in professional growth and success.

Figure 5

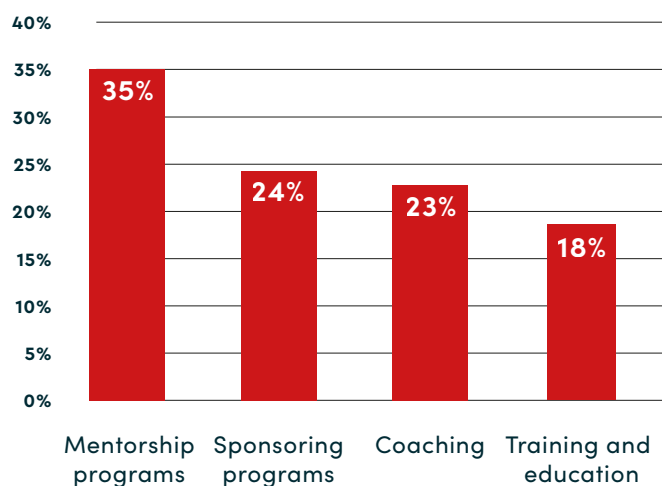
What would really help to progress



Source: Dedicated survey answered by over 1,200 professional women in Switzerland, 2024

Figure 6

Personalized one-on-one programs identified as key elements missing, especially for women over 40



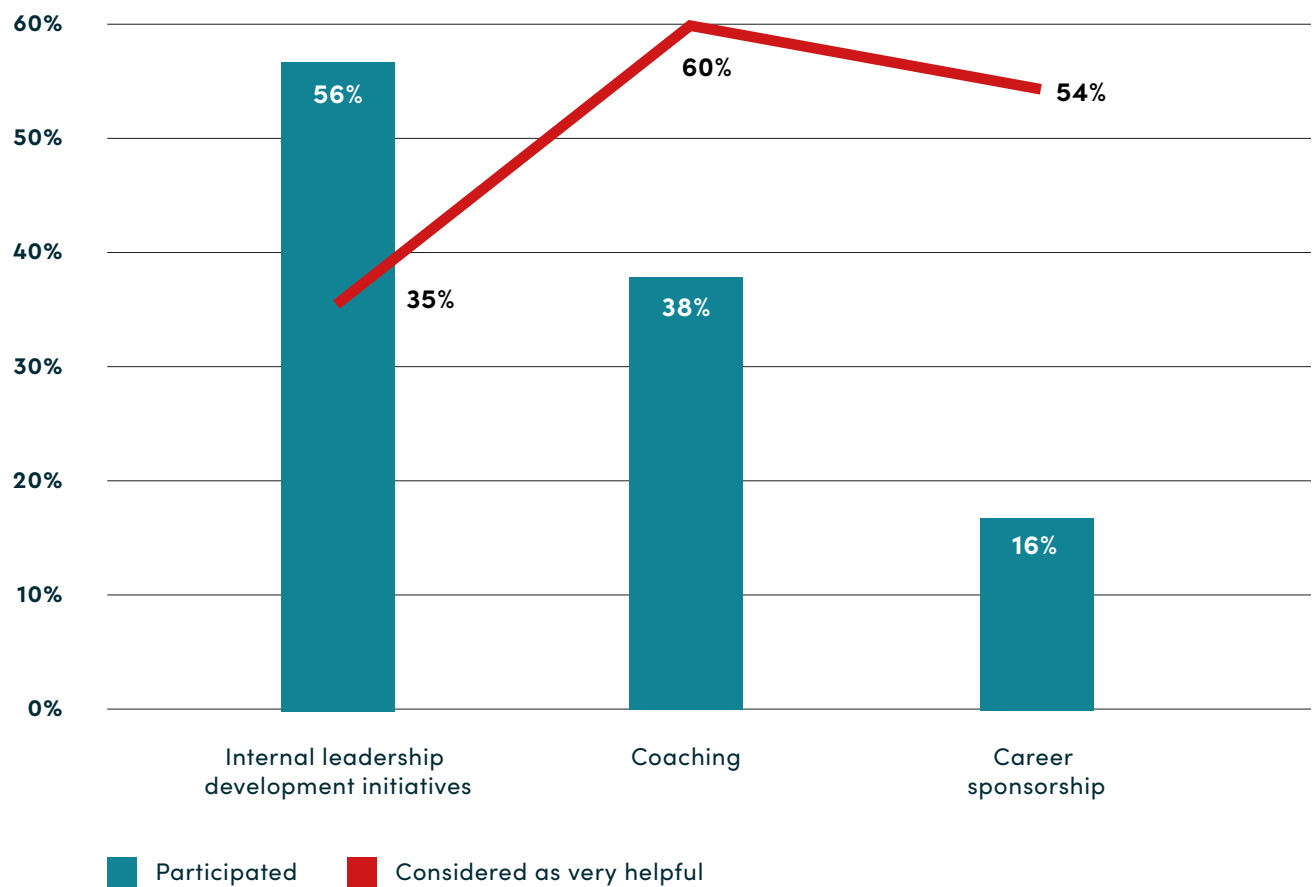
Source: Dedicated survey answered by over 1,200 professional women in Switzerland, 2024

Effectiveness vs. availability – enabling women with the right offer

Enabling women to progress in their career can be achieved by different approaches. Among these, internal leadership development initiatives, coaching and career sponsorships have been identified as the most prevalent initiatives as well as the most effective ones based on the data. Coaching is considered the most helpful program for women to progress, followed by career sponsorship. While over half of all respondents participated in internal leadership programs, these were perceived as less helpful than coaching and sponsorship.

Figure 7

Effectiveness vs. availability of leadership programs



Source: Dedicated survey answered by over 1,200 professional women in Switzerland, 2024

Missing the mark: Talent programs expose critical gaps and unintended biases

Despite the efforts to offer trainings, leadership development programs and support structures aimed at advancing women's careers, a significant obstacle remains and hinders the career progression of many female talents. Numerous initiatives unintentionally discriminate against women who do not fit the conventional leadership talent cohorts, specifically those not falling within certain age brackets for particular career steps may find themselves virtually unnoticed by such initiatives.

The majority of organizations have implemented leadership development and career progression programs, and the awareness level is substantial. 81% of respondents above 41 years old acknowledge the existence of such initiatives within their respective workplace. However, the disparity lies in accessibility and participation rates, as only half of the women have actively engaged in these programs.

Women face barriers such as seat limitations (sometimes even gender-specific) in leadership programs as well as non-selection as reasons for their absence, underscoring the challenges confronted by those who do not conform to the conventional leadership talent profile.

The silent impact of gender disparities in leadership

The repercussions of the challenges faced by the «unseen leaders» are profound, exerting a pervasive influence on both individual career trajectories and organizational dynamics.

The challenges faced by the «unseen leaders» suggest a missed opportunity for organizations to tap into a diverse pool of talent. This hinders individual career aspirations and impedes collective progress towards more inclusive and effective leadership. Recognizing and supporting the «unseen leaders» could significantly contribute to reshaping the future landscape of leadership within organizations.



Changing the lens on leadership

Leveraging the promising talent pool of women over 40 demands widening the scope and consciously seeking beyond the conventional talent cohorts that made their pivotal career steps within the traditional linear career model between 31–40.

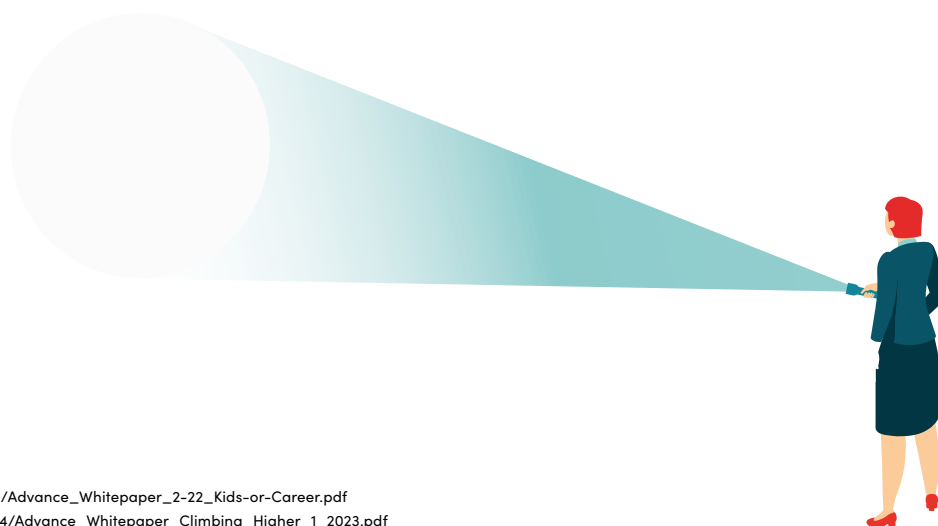
The need to retain women in the workplace has been widely recognized in today's day and age. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize efforts that ensure their visibility and recognition. Especially after the main caregiving phase is over, many women would like to boost their career again, but are considerably dissatisfied with the low level of opportunities they currently face.

What factors influence the lens on leadership? Three key considerations emerge: Firstly, shifting the focus to recognize overlooked women leaders. Secondly, amplifying support structures like coaching and sponsorship, known to significantly foster women's career advancement. Lastly, prioritizing the development of a comprehensive flexible work environment tailored to diverse needs to ensure that female talents can remain active in the workplace at high enough percentages to ramp up with ease once the «rush hours of life» have passed. While this third aspect has been covered in two previous Advance whitepapers «Kids or Career»⁵ and «Climbing Higher»⁶, this edition focuses more on the first two levers.

Unlocking future leadership potential

To better harness the vast potential of future leaders within a company, it is imperative to debias the identification process behind the selection. Ensuring that leadership programs are gender- and age-inclusive rather than gender- and age-exclusive and welcoming a diverse range of talents enables organizations to unlock more potential.

Adopting such an approach will enhance visibility of less conventional talent within the talent pool and open doors to discovering exceptional rising stars who might otherwise go unnoticed. In addition, fostering an inclusive culture and talent development will contribute to the overall success and innovation of an organization.



⁵ weadvance.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Advance_Whitepaper_2-22_Kids-or-Career.pdf

⁶ weadvance.ch/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Advance_Whitepaper_Climbing_Higher_1_2023.pdf

Increase personalized development offerings for ambitious women 40+

Clearly, personalized development programs, including coaching, mentoring, and sponsorship, play integral roles in advancing women's careers and nurturing their leadership potential. Each of these programs offers unique benefits that complement and enhance one another when offered in combination.

Coaching provides individuals with a platform to gain clarity about their purpose and sense of self, helping them to understand their strengths and areas for growth. Mentoring, on the other hand, offers practical advice and guidance on how to achieve goals aligned with their purpose. In case of company internal mentoring, it also establishes the foundation of trust that can grow into sponsorship⁷. In accelerating leadership growth, sponsorship plays a pivotal role by providing access to influential networks and opening doors to new opportunities.

The survey results indicate that organizations should prioritize improving the effectiveness of their current programs while expanding their offerings to include coaching, mentoring and career sponsorship for ambitious women over 40 – a talent cohort that may not fit the conventional «career steps per age group»-model, yet is highly motivated and promising.

7 «What' the difference between a mentor and a sponsor», J. Omadeke, HBR October 2021

Promotion process and blind spots – concrete measures to unlock «hidden» potential

Changing the lens to unlock the female leadership potential in your company requires targeted measures and adjustments in your promotion and talent identification processes. Based on the insights elaborated above, these are concrete recommendations:

▶ **Conduct a comprehensive assessment of your female talent pipeline**

Who within your organization is seen as talent? Make sure you know your pool of women 40+ who are qualified, ambitious, and willing to ramp up. Examine any potential blind spots. Consciously nominate candidates from this pool for career development programs and leadership initiatives, plus include line management in this process. Engage in open discussions with part-time employees to ascertain their interest in expanding their roles and responsibilities by increasing their working percentage.

▶ **Thoroughly evaluate your promotion procedures**

When are promotions typically conferred within your organizational framework? Do promotions disproportionately favor employees aged between 30 and 40? If age plays a role in evaluating promotable talent in your organization, expand the age span to include women 40+ and thereby seize the opportunity to increase your diverse leadership pipeline with highly motivated and qualified senior talent.

▶ **Institute sponsorship initiatives tailored for women aged over 40**

Do your current sponsorship programs exhibit inclusivity? Are you conscious of the individuals nominated for participation? Broaden the scope of your career sponsorship initiatives by encompassing women 40+. Foster an environment where women in specific are encouraged to apply for such programs, ensuring that the selection processes remain well-balanced regarding age and gender.



About Advance

Advance is the leading business association for gender equality in Switzerland, a network over 140 Swiss-based companies committed to increasing the share of women in management.

It's a proven fact that gender-mixed teams perform better, are more innovative and likely to generate more profit.

With a concrete program, Advance supports companies to turn diversity into a competitive advantage. Because a gender-equal and inclusive workplace is a win-win for all genders, business and society.

Find out more here
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Layout, Design & Illustrations
Wildfactory
www.wildfactory.ch

Publication: March 2024