

IBM Study Finds Advancing Women is Not a Top Priority for 70 Percent of Global Organizations Surveyed

Bold action can help reverse the shrinking leadership pipeline

ARMONK, N.Y., March 8, 2021 /PRNewswire/ -- A new IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV) (NYSE: [IBM](#)) study reveals that despite heightened awareness of the challenges facing women in the workplace driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, gender equity is still not a top priority for 70 percent of global businesses, according to business professionals surveyed. The study also shares the actions that can help drive bold and sustainable change in business, with learnings from companies who rank gender inclusivity as a top business priority.

The global study "[Women, leadership, and missed opportunities](#)," which follows similar research published in 2019, also shows that gender equity may be at a crossroads, with the leadership pipeline for women shrinking. Fewer women surveyed hold senior vice president, vice president, director and manager roles in 2021 than they did in 2019.

"The data show that many women leaders are experiencing challenges at this moment. If these issues are not addressed more deeply than in prior years, there is a risk of progress backsliding further," said Bridget van Kralingen, senior vice president, global markets, IBM and senior executive sponsor of the IBM Women's Community. "We should seize creative solutions now and redouble our efforts to make meaningful, lasting change that can help all women reach their full potential."

In addition, the study indicates employees surveyed feel fatigue and waning optimism over ineffective programmatic efforts to address gender equity. Only 62% of women surveyed (down 9 percentage points from 2019) and 60% of men surveyed (down 7 percentage points from 2019) expect their organization will significantly improve gender parity over the next five years.

More programs don't mean more progress

According to the study, more organizations are instituting more programs to help improve gender equity and inclusion compared to 2019, like gender-blind job screenings and parental leave for women. However, the study suggests that has not translated to better outcomes in part because mindsets and cultures have not changed enough alongside the programs.

Compared to 2019, for example, fewer survey respondents from repeat* organizations agreed that senior executives openly challenge gender-biased behaviors and language.

The "First Mover" advantage

The study identified a group (11%) of survey respondents referred to as "First Movers" who designate the advancement of women as a formal business priority, view gender-inclusivity as a driver of financial performance and are highly motivated to take action. First Movers self-reported stronger financial performance – as much as a 61% higher mean rate of revenue growth compared to the mean reported by other organizations

in our study – as well as stronger innovation and stronger customer and employee satisfaction.

A roadmap for sustainable progress

According to the study, there are specific, bold steps organizations can take, following the example of First Movers, to help accelerate progress in gender equity in the workplace.

- **Pair bold thinking with big commitments.** For example, make gender equity a top five formal business priority, and create pathways for women to re-enter the workforce. IBM offers a six-month paid 'returnship' for technical professionals who have been out of the workforce for 12 months, which provides training, access to tools and technology, mentorship and work assignments on technical projects that are matched to their expertise.
- **Apply specific crisis-related interventions.** For example, additional benefits like backup childcare support and access to mental health resources can be key. Other recent IBV [research](#) found that the best performing CEOs say they are committed to supporting the wellbeing of their employees, even at the cost of profitability or budget.
- **Create a culture of intention, and insist on making room.** Focus on empathetic leadership and enabling middle managers to be advocates for positive cultural change. People leaders can intentionally champion inclusive team cultures, with flexibility aligned to individuals' personal and professional needs, and set accountability into business and individual goals to sponsor the future pipeline of women leaders.
- **Use technology to accelerate performance.** Organizations can use technologies like AI to help reduce bias in the candidate screening process, provide cloud-based digital tools for communication and feedback to surface what's working and what's not in supporting women in the workplace, and invest in collaborative tools and teaming practices that allow women and men to engage effectively in physical and remote environments even after the pandemic abates.

Methodology

The global [study](#), conducted by the IBM Institute for Business Value in cooperation with Oxford Economics, surveyed more than 2,600 executives, middle managers and professionals—an equal number of women and men—across 10 industries and nine geographic regions. It follows a 2019 [study](#) that surveyed 2,300 respondents representing the same range of roles, industries and regions to allow for longitudinal analysis.

*Repeat organizations refers to organizations who had survey respondents in 2019 as well as 2021's studies.

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