



Advancing Women in Tech-Intensive Industries

Transforming Organizational Cultures

Women working in tech-intensive industries—both in technical and business roles—face an uphill battle to advance.

Impact of Organizational Culture on Recruiting and Retaining Top Female Talent

Women working in tech-intensive industries—both in technical and business roles—face an uphill battle to advance. The masculine culture cultivated and reinforced in these industries is often cited as a root cause of this gender gap.¹ Women throughout these organizations can be made to feel like they don't belong; for instance, they may be subjected to innuendo and sexist humor in the workplace.² Women report that they don't often feel safe speaking up and have a very difficult time having their voices heard.³ In order to cope, women frequently find that they have to “act like one of the boys” and accept gender discrimination.⁴

These non-inclusive environments impact women across the organization, both in technical and business roles. Catalyst's report *High Potentials in Tech-Intensive Industries: The Gender Divide in Business Roles* shows that women in industries such as high tech, oil and gas, and chemical and energy are more likely than men to start at lower levels, report feeling like an outsider in the workplace, lack female role models, experience vague evaluation criteria, and leave to join organizations outside tech-intensive industries.⁵ Even in high-growth and dynamic economies such as India, despite a promising equal start in their first jobs in which they have equally high aspirations and comparable salaries, women in tech-intensive industries soon trail men in terms of earnings and development opportunities.⁶

Closing the Gender Gap in Tech-Intensive Industries Is Good for Business

Research has shown that gender diversity is critical to innovation⁷ and maximizing the bottom line.⁸ Tech-intensive industries are heavily male-dominated, even in business roles, so attracting women from the start is already an uphill battle.⁹ Once women are working in these industries, organizations must remain motivated to retain them. If these women take their talents to another industry, it is not only extremely difficult to get them back into a tech-intensive industry, but it also creates costly turnover for organizations.



Audience for This Tool

This tool is for human resource (HR) practitioners, diversity and inclusion (D&I) practitioners, and business leaders in tech-intensive organizations just beginning their diversity journey. It is also geared to those who have made some progress recruiting, advancing, and retaining women but would like to take their efforts to the next level.

Purpose of This Tool

The attrition of women from tech-intensive organizations is not inevitable.¹⁰ It is possible to transform the culture of a male-dominated organization through concerted effort.¹¹ Through the use of organizational self-assessments, examples of corporate practices, and suggestions for how to take action, this tool will help your organization:

- Assess the unique facets of your own **organizational culture** to identify areas for improvement.
- Evaluate your current **recruitment, advancement, and retention** strategies for women.
- Transform your culture by suggesting **concrete strategies** to close the gender gap.
- Become an **employer of choice** for high-potential women throughout the pipeline.

Engaging Senior Leadership

While grass-roots efforts to transform an organizational culture and make it more inclusive of women can be effective in certain areas, support from senior leadership is critical for making progress across the entire organization. The following strategies suggested for improving the recruitment, advancement, and retention of women depend

on support from senior leaders. HR and D&I practitioners should engage the senior leaders in their organizations, highlight the business case for improving the representation of women, and gain their support for taking the measures suggested in this tool.



MYTH BUSTING: THE BARRIERS WOMEN FACE IN TECH-INTENSIVE INDUSTRY BUSINESS ROLES

The findings in the report *High Potentials in Tech-Intensive Industries: The Gender Divide in Business Roles*, part of Catalyst's longitudinal research series on high-potential employees, busted several pervasive myths behind the barriers women in these male-dominated industries experience. These are important lessons for organizations that want to maximize their talent pool and become employers of choice for women throughout the pipeline.¹²

Tech-intensive industries primarily struggle with recruiting and retaining women in *technical* roles. The gender gap does not extend to *business* roles in these industries.

◀ MYTH
FACT ▶

Women seeking business roles are significantly less likely to opt to work in tech-intensive industries. Of the women who do go to work in a tech-intensive industry, they are more likely than men to leave the industry.

Only women working in technical roles in tech-intensive industries face barriers to advancement.

◀ MYTH
FACT ▶

Women working in business roles are outsiders in tech-intensive industries and face significant barriers to advancement, including the absence of female role models and vague evaluation criteria.

Women across industries are equally likely to lack female role models to pave their way to the top.

◀ MYTH
FACT ▶

Women in tech-intensive industries are significantly less likely to have a female supervisor than women working in other industries, and subsequently, have even fewer female role models.



Measuring the Representation of Women in Your Organization

Before you can develop a strategy aimed at improving the recruitment, development, and retention of top female talent in your organization, it is essential to understand your organization's unique situation:

- How diverse is your current employee pool?
- Who are you currently developing and advancing?
- Who is more likely to leave your organization, and why?

The Catalyst [Vital Signs](#) toolkit will help you answer these questions and gain a better understanding of the gaps in recruitment, development, and retention of women at every level within your organization. Focus in particular on completing the Vital Signs tool [Guide to Telling Your Story With Data](#). This step-by-step guide will help you ask the right questions of your workforce data and will give you a clear picture of your current talent strengths and gaps. When you have completed this process, you will have a solid understanding of where gender gaps exist in your organization as well as what areas require focus as you complete the rest of this tool.

Recruitment—Attracting Top Female Talent from the Start

Now that you have identified where gender gaps exist in your organization, the first step is to transform your recruitment practices.¹³

GENDER GAP IN TECH-INTENSIVE INDUSTRIES FROM DAY ONE

Catalyst research has shown that women are less likely than men to enter tech-intensive industries in business roles, including management, finance, marketing, and sales. Only 18% of women opted for a business role in a tech-intensive industry immediately following completion of their MBA, compared to 24% of men. Of those who start their careers outside of tech-intensive industries, women were less likely than men to migrate from business roles in other industries to business roles in tech-intensive industries later in their careers (women, 9%; men, 13%).¹⁴



Organizational Assessment 1: How Do You Recruit?

How do you currently hire? What processes are in place to ensure a diverse panel of candidates for each and every position filled? Consider whether your recruitment practices should be improved. Review the assessment questions, and score your organization accordingly. Then, review your organization's profile and corresponding recommendations that follow.

No (0) Somewhat (1) Yes (2)

1. Look at the pictures on your website and recruiting materials (brochures, flyers, etc.). Are women included in these images?
2. Review your job descriptions. Is unbiased language used, referring to both men and women as candidates and using an even mix of masculine and feminine words (rather than only words that research has shown are perceived as stereotypically masculine like "competitive" or "strong"¹⁵)?
3. Do you use a blind resume screening process where all candidate names and identifiers are removed?
4. Does your company employ female recruiters to the same extent as male recruiters?
5. Have your recruiters been trained to recognize potential stereotypes and unconscious biases¹⁶ that can emerge during the recruitment process?
6. Think about where your company recruits most heavily. Are women adequately represented in those applicant pools?
7. Do you foster interest in your organization among young women by partnering with educational institutions and supporting initiatives to engage them?
8. Are candidates interviewed by an equal number of women and men employees?
9. Are your hiring managers and recruiters held accountable for attracting women for every open position?



Calculating Your Organization's Score

1. If you completed the organizational assessment online, your score is automatically tallied and displayed for you. Go to Step 3.
2. If you answered the assessment questions offline, give yourself points for each of your answers as follows: No = 0, Somewhat = 1, Yes = 2. Record your total score in the space provided.
3. Locate the range associated with your score in the Profiles and Recommendations Key, and read your organization's profile and the related recommendations.

Organizational Assessment 1 Total: _____

Profiles and Recommendations Key

Score	Organizational Profile	Profile Description and Recommendations
0–6	Getting Started	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company is currently falling short when it comes to recruiting women. Re-evaluate your practices, and ensure you include a diverse representation of images and perspectives in your recruiting materials (e.g., advertisements, website, job postings). Recruit from schools and professional networks where women are well represented, such as women's colleges, technology conferences, and women's interest groups in tech-intensive industries on LinkedIn. Include your current female talent in your outreach and recruiting efforts. This shows prospective employees that women are integral to your business. Finally, ensure that managers and recruiters are given goals and feedback regarding their efforts to attract women candidates.
7–12	Making Progress	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company has begun to make progress toward increasing the recruitment of female talent, but there is room for improvement. Review the areas where you are already effectively reaching female candidates, and ensure you continue those efforts. Identify the strategies you have yet to implement, and begin to apply them. For example, your recruiters may be very successful in identifying women candidates, but if women candidates primarily meet and speak with men during the interview process, they may ultimately choose not to join the company because they are turned off by the idea of being the "only woman in the room."
13–18	Leading Edge	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company is on the right track when recruiting female talent. Continue to represent women in your outreach materials and recruiting efforts, and hold recruiters and hiring managers accountable for attracting women candidates. Consider expanding your initiatives to attract an even broader pool of female talent, and share your successes in public forums to inspire other companies to increase opportunities for women in tech-intensive industries.



Job Descriptions: What Do They Really Say?

Job descriptions play a critical role in recruiting female talent and often provide the first impression of your organizational culture. Does your organization offer flexible work arrangements (FWAs)? If your job descriptions emphasize long hours, including early mornings, evenings, and weekends, but do not mention the availability of FWAs, this may inhibit qualified candidates from applying, especially those with primary care responsibilities.

Even subtle word choices in your job description can have a strong impact on your application pool. Research has shown that masculine wording of job descriptions including “superior,” “competitive,” and “determined” results in women perceiving that they would not belong in the work environment.¹⁷ You may be deterring women from applying for jobs at your company without even knowing it. Evaluate your job descriptions and consider adjusting the language used.

ACTIVITY: SPOT THE GENDER BIAS IN THIS JOB DESCRIPTION

Research has shown that certain words are perceived as masculine or feminine.¹⁸ How many words or phrases can you find in this job description that are perceived as stereotypically masculine?

Company Description: We are a top engineering firm that is dominant in the marketplace, boasting many leading clients. We are determined to lead the industry; our success stems from consistently challenging our competition.

Job Title: Mechanical Engineer

Essential Functions

- Challenge the status quo by creating superior product designs through the development and testing of specifications and methods

Knowledge and Skills

- Superior design skills
- Exceptional conceptual skills
- First-rate technical knowledge
- Strong communication skills
- Proven experience with production planning

Working Conditions

- Tight deadlines and multiple priorities, requiring decisive decision making in a fast-paced environment
- Willing to work outside the standard 9-5 schedule, including early mornings, evenings, and weekends as required by tight project deadlines
- Ability to work independently in a competitive work environment

Education & Experience

- Bachelor’s degree
- 3–5 years of work experience

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Answer: Research has shown that the following words have a masculine denotation.¹⁹

Dominant	Boasting	Determined	Lead	Challenging
Competition	Superior	Decisive	Independently	Competitive

Company Description: We are a top engineering firm that is **dominant** in the marketplace, **boasting** many leading clients. We are **determined** to **lead** the industry; our success stems from consistently **challenging** our **competition**.

Job Title: Mechanical Engineer

Essential Functions

- **Challenge** the status quo by creating **superior** product designs through the development and testing of specifications and methods

Knowledge and Skills

- **Superior** design skills
- Exceptional conceptual skills
- First-rate technical knowledge
- Strong communication skills
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- Tight deadlines and multiple priorities, requiring **decisive** decision making in a fast-paced environment
- Willing to work outside the standard 9-5 schedule, including early mornings, evenings, and weekends as required by tight project deadlines
- Ability to work **independently** in a **competitive** work environment

Education & Experience

- Bachelor's degree
- 3-5 years of work experience

Consider including terms that research has identified as feminine to create a balanced, unbiased job description:²⁰

Committed	Connected	Cooperative	Dependable	Interpersonal
Loyal	Responsible	Supportive	Trust	Considerate



➔ Take Action

- **Job Descriptions:** Audit your job descriptions for masculine terms and rewrite them focusing only on objective job requirements. Evaluate which elements of the job requirements are truly “required” vs. merely “nice to have.” For instance, does the job have to be based in a certain city? Is it necessary that it involves coming in at fixed times each day? Is prior experience required or a particular skill really needed on the job?
- **Diverse Slates:** Require that the panel for every open position include at least one qualified woman candidate. There are highly qualified women with technical skills out there, but they may not be as actively pursuing a position in a tech-intensive organization. Check out Catalyst’s *A Bright Spot Case Study: How Diverse Slate Policies Help Close the Gender Gap* for examples of organizations that have had success adopting diverse slate policies.
- **Recruiters:** Recruiters often serve as the gatekeeper to top talent. If you have recruiters in-house, train them to recognize:
 - Potential stereotypes and unconscious biases that can emerge during the recruitment process and impede consideration of diverse candidates.
 - The broad range of experiences that can demonstrate the desired competencies.
 - A possibly unfair reliance on informal judgments of “fit” (often meant as “feel comfortable with the person”) rather than fair and grounded criteria.

If you hire external recruiters, ensure that you emphasize the importance of gender diversity to your organization and make them aware of your requirements for diverse slates for each position.

- **Screening:** Implement a blind resume review process, removing all candidate names and potential identifiers, to reduce the possibility of unconscious bias influencing screening.
- **Interviews:** When candidates are interviewed for positions, ensure that they meet with an equal number of women and men employees whenever possible.
- **Organizational Targets:** Institute targets for diverse hiring at each level of management, and hold managers accountable for reaching those targets.

CH2M HILL—SPONSORING WOMEN INTO CRITICAL ROLES²¹

In 2009, CH2M Hill received the Catalyst Award for its initiative that leveraged women employees to achieve business success in the traditionally male-dominated construction industry. As part of this initiative, Bill Dehn, Executive Vice President, led the establishment of a policy that required that all job openings at mid-level management and above include a woman in the candidate pool. This approach gave women a chance to compete and lead within male-dominated divisions by valuing potential over seniority and providing access to critical experiences needed to advance.

At the time of the Award, CH2M Hill had three women in the Office of the CEO, four women on the Board of Directors, and numerous women heading business units, major projects, and engineering functions.



Developing and Advancing Women Through the Pipeline

Now that you have insight into closing the gender gap by transforming your recruitment practices, it's time to turn to developing and advancing women through the pipeline in your organization. This is an essential step toward retaining top female talent and minimizing costly turnover.

Organizational Assessment 2: Is Your Talent Management System Holding Women Back?

Catalyst research has shown that in many companies, core components of talent management are linked in ways that disadvantage women, creating a cycle in which men continually dominate executive positions.²² What do your talent management practices look like? Review the assessment questions, and score your organization accordingly. Then, review your organization's profile and corresponding recommendations that follow.

1. Does your company have metrics in place to track who receives access to the critical on-the-job development opportunities, especially those that are high profile?
2. Are specific individuals held accountable for ensuring women and men have equal access to the highly visible on-the-job development opportunities?

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT IN TECH-INTENSIVE INDUSTRIES

Catalyst research has shown that women in tech-intensive industries have fewer female role models to help pave their way to the top. Among high-potential women in business roles, those working in tech-intensive industries for their first post-MBA job were significantly less likely to have a female supervisor than those working in other industries (tech-intensive industries, 20%; other industries, 31%). Women in tech-intensive industries also lack transparent standards for evaluation compared to women in other industries. Among women in business roles, those who work in a tech-intensive industry for their first post-MBA job were significantly less likely than women who worked in other industries to *agree* or *strongly agree* with the statement that their supervisors let them see clearly how their work will be evaluated (tech-intensive industries, 42%; other industries, 55%).²³

No (0) Somewhat (1) Yes (2)



No (0) Somewhat (1) Yes (2)

3. Look at your company's talent management documents (e.g., performance review forms). Are unbiased terms used to describe the criteria for success, or do you find masculine terms emphasized? (Terms that research has shown to be perceived as masculine include "competitive," "dominant," and "independent." Terms perceived as feminine include "cooperative," "interdependent," and "responsible."²⁴) Does your company have metrics in place to track who receives access to the critical on-the-job development opportunities, especially those that are high profile?
4. Are managers trained to discuss leadership development and advancement opportunities regularly with their direct reports?
5. Does your company make performance evaluation criteria transparent?
6. Do women and men have equal access to senior-level sponsors?
7. Do you use unbiased language for criteria designating "high-potential" employees?
8. Are development opportunities offered to employees at all levels?
9. Do you have targets set for increasing the representation of women in senior-level positions?



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3. Locate the range associated with your score in the Profiles and Recommendations Key, and read your organization's profile and the related recommendations.

Organizational Assessment 2 Total: _____

Profiles and Recommendations Key

Score	Organizational Profile	Profile Description and Recommendations
0–6	Getting Started	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company needs improvement when it comes to engaging in gender-inclusive talent management. Formal processes should be in place to assess how high-profile assignments are distributed and leaders should be held accountable for ensuring women get equal access. It is important that performance criteria do not contain gender-biased language. Further, performance criteria should be transparent and communicated to all employees. Ensure that employees at all levels have access to senior-level sponsors that can launch their careers ahead further and faster. Oftentimes, sponsorship and essential development opportunities are only available to employees at higher organizational levels, leaving women perpetually stuck at the bottom with little opportunity for growth.
7–12	Making Progress	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company has begun making progress implementing a gender-inclusive talent management system, but there is room for improvement. Review your talent management practices that offer women an equal opportunity for success and ensure you continue those efforts. Identify the areas where men may still unintentionally have an advantage, and begin to address them. For example, you may already use unbiased terms to identify the criteria for success and allocation of “high potential” designations, but you do not have systems in place to ensure that women are getting equal access to critical on-the-job development opportunities.
13–18	Leading Edge	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company is on the right track. Continue evaluating your talent management processes and documents, and institute checks and balances to avoid gender bias. Set higher goals regarding women's career trajectories within your organization, and share best practices with other tech-intensive organizations.



➔ Take Action

- **Metrics and Accountability:** The *Vital Signs* exercise we referred to earlier in this tool will have helped you to identify any gaps in women's representation throughout your pipeline of talent. Now that you see the levels at which you need to focus your attention, set targets for increasing the representation of women at those levels.²⁵ Ensure that you establish the *Vital Signs* metrics to track progress over time. To guarantee that targets are met, hold specific individuals accountable, whether they are executives of business units or line managers, perhaps even linking their performance criteria or compensation to this goal.
- **Talent Identification:** Diversifying the leadership of tech-intensive organizations requires that systems be put in place for identifying high-potential talent and ensuring they receive opportunities to grow and learn. If you have a "high potential" designation in your organization, evaluate the criteria used to identify these employees. Use unbiased language and examine whether the criteria disadvantage women by prioritizing masculine characteristics. Ensure that stereotypes about women's commitment or abilities in these tech-intensive industries are not influencing the selection of "high-potential" employees.
- **Development Opportunities:** Research has shown that informal, on-the-job development opportunities—"hot jobs"—are critical to advancement.²⁶ Track who is getting access to the large, highly visible projects, mission-critical roles, and international assignments in your organization. If you find that there are gender gaps, hold someone accountable for ensuring that women get equal access to these critical opportunities.
- **Sponsorship:** Ensure you have systems in place to support women's advancement through sponsorship.²⁷ In male-dominated, tech-intensive organizations, women often lack sponsors to champion them and support their advancement, and have fewer female role models to pave their way to the top. Work to engage men, who are critical to closing the gender gap, in the sponsorship of high-potential female talent. And consider putting a formal sponsorship program into place to bring it out from behind closed doors and ensure women get equal access to senior-level sponsors.
- **Transparency:** Transparent evaluation and promotion practices are critical to leveling the playing field for women and supporting their advancement, because otherwise it is easy for unintended biases to creep in unnoticed and impact decision making. Ensure that women are receiving regular feedback from supervisors that is communicated openly and directly. Also ensure that they are evaluated fairly on the same unbiased criteria as men and are not being held to a higher standard. Finally, put safeguards into place that guarantee men aren't promoted based on potential while women are promoted on proven performance.



PROGRESS IS POSSIBLE: LOCKHEED MARTIN'S AWARD-WINNING INITIATIVE "WOMEN ACCELERATING TOMORROW"²⁸

In 2014, Lockheed Martin received the Catalyst Award for its initiative supporting women's advancement as part of a broad strategic effort to attract, develop, and retain diverse talent in a highly technical and engineering-focused industry. Between 2004 and 2013, women's representation in the exempt population²⁹ increased from 19.8% to 23.6%. Among senior executives, women's representation grew from 16.7% to 21.7%, and for director-level employees it increased from 16.0% to 19.5%.

D&I are woven into the fabric of expected leadership behaviors and actions, and a leadership competency framework holds employees and leaders accountable for the "what" (i.e., results) as well as the "how" (i.e., behaviors) of their performance. Every leader and employee is expected to contribute to creating a more inclusive work environment.

Retaining Female Talent

In addition to recruiting, developing, and advancing top female talent, tech-intensive organizations also need to keep an eye on retention, which has a direct impact on the bottom line. Turnover is incredibly costly³⁰ because organizations not only lose the valuable talent who possess core institutional knowledge they worked to attract and develop, but they also have to start the process again.

THE LEAKY PIPELINE OF WOMEN IN TECH-INTENSIVE INDUSTRIES

Catalyst research has shown that once hired in a tech-intensive organization, women are more likely than men to leave and take their talents elsewhere. Women who started out in a tech-intensive industry working in a business role immediately following their MBA were significantly more likely than men to leave and take a position in another industry after this job (women, 53%; men, 31%). One contributing factor is that women are often the only woman in the room and feel like an outsider in these industries. When considering only women in business roles across industries, women in tech-intensive industries in their first post-MBA job were significantly less likely than women working in other industries to report that they felt similar to most people at work (women in tech-intensive industries, 27%; women in other industries, 49%).³¹



Organizational Assessment 3: Are You Encouraging Women to Stay or Pushing Them Away?

Workplace culture is essential to the retention of women in tech-intensive companies. Women are more likely to remain in a company where the culture is supportive of women's advancement and work-life effectiveness, and where discrimination is not tolerated. How is your culture affecting women's likelihood of staying? Review the assessment questions, and score your organization accordingly. Then, review your organization's profile and corresponding recommendations that follow.

No (0) Somewhat (1) Yes (2)

1. Are policies and practices in place to increase transparency around what makes an "ideal employee," minimizing the impact of unwritten rules?
2. Do senior leaders act as role models, visibly supporting gender inclusiveness in the organization (e.g., ensuring women are respected and acknowledged for speaking up in meetings, informally sponsoring women, etc.)?
3. Does your company have successful women role models who new female employees can look up to?
4. Do women in your company advance at the same rate as men?
5. Does your organization have a women's employee resource group (ERG)?
6. Does your company provide FWAs to help both women and men more easily manage work and non-work demands?
7. Are there programs and processes in place to support women who return from maternity leave as they transition back into the workplace?
8. Does your organization have a formal sponsorship program in place?
9. Does your company enforce a zero-tolerance policy regarding sexist comments and "humor"?



Calculating Your Organization's Score

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2. If you answered the assessment questions offline, give yourself points for each of your answers as follows: No = 0, Somewhat = 1, Yes = 2. Record your total score in the space provided.
3. Locate the range associated with your score in the Profiles and Recommendations Key, and read your organization's profile and the related recommendations.

Organizational Assessment 3 Total: _____

Profiles and Recommendations Key

Score	Organizational Profile	Profile Description and Recommendations
0–6	Getting Started	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company should be taking more action to create a workplace culture that is inclusive and supportive of women. Otherwise, you risk losing your valuable female talent. It is important that policies and procedures (such as no-tolerance sexual harassment policies) are in place to address employees' needs, but it is equally important that those policies be supported by top leadership and managers in practice. Ensure that your supervisors are trained to be supportive of their female employees, and that the social environment provides opportunities for both women and men to form relationships that will help them be successful on the job.
7–12	Making Progress	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company has begun making progress creating a workplace culture that is inclusive and supportive of women, but there is room for improvement. Review the systems you already have in place to support women's inclusion, and continue those efforts. Identify the remaining issues that may be pushing women away and begin to address them. For example, you may already have no-tolerance sexual harassment policies in place, but the culture might still make it difficult for women to be acknowledged and respected for their comments in meetings, leaving room for senior leaders to serve as role models by visibly supporting gender inclusiveness.
13–18	Leading Edge	PROFILE DESCRIPTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Your company is on the right path when it comes to fostering a culture that is inclusive of women. Give your managers refresher trainings on organizational culture and gender inclusivity to ensure their continued ability to support their employees. Find new ways to encourage networking opportunities, particularly for women. When women <i>do</i> leave your company, be sure to ask about the impact of your company's culture on their decision, and utilize this information to make further improvements to your work environment in the future. Finally, share best practices with other tech-intensive organizations around retaining female talent.



Understanding Why Women Leave: Exit Interviews

When an employee leaves an organization, most HR departments conduct an exit interview to collect information on why the person chose to leave. This data can be extremely helpful in identifying patterns, particularly around why women leave.

Get in touch with HR, and request a sampling of exit interview transcriptions. As exit interviews are confidential, ask for these documents to have identifying information omitted so no one's identity is revealed. When you request the transcriptions, ask for a sampling of women and men from across departments, levels, and roles (technical and business).

Then undertake an evaluation of these exit interviews.³² Categorize the reasons for leaving for women versus men by:

- Department
- Level
- Role

The reasons for leaving will fall into one of three categories: push, pull, or personal.³³ Use the following descriptions to evaluate your exit interview data and identify where you should focus your resources to stem the tide.

Table 1
Reasons for Leaving

Reason for Leaving	Description	Take Action
Push	There was something negative about their experience in your organization that "pushed" the person out. Perhaps the work environment in the organization was not supportive of the person's gender or racial/ethnic group, or s/he was leaving a difficult manager.	Work internally to improve the trouble spots. You have significant control in this area and should take deliberate steps to improve the retention of women.
Pull	The opportunities available in your organization were not enough for the person and she or he left to pursue faster advancement, more money, or growth opportunities elsewhere.	Improve your development and advancement opportunities and ensure that women are being paid the same as men and at a rate that is competitive in the industry.
Personal	Child-rearing, spouse relocation, or other personal commitments required the individual leave your company, or they opted to leave in order to make a career change or a greater social contribution elsewhere.	Consider whether improving your available FWAs might provide women and men with the support they need to enable them to stay with your organization.

Depending on how robust the exit interview data are, consider asking HR to enlist an external consultant to do follow-up exit interviews three to six months after an employee leaves the organization. When exit interviews are conducted in-house, people may refrain from giving honest

responses to questions for fear that their answers might be shared outside of HR.

Once you complete this exercise, you should have a clear picture of where your strengths and weaknesses exist related to retention of women employees.



➔ Take Action

- **Expose the Unwritten Rules:** Unwritten rules often pertain to what makes an “ideal employee,” allowing those with the inside scoop to adapt their behavior accordingly and climb the corporate ladder. Since unwritten rules are often not equally accessible to all employees, they may create barriers for those not connected to the key networks.³⁴ Reveal these hidden norms, improve transparency, and ensure that women aren’t missing out on advancement opportunities as a result of these unwritten rules.
- **Senior Leaders as Role Models:** Actions speak louder than words, and senior leaders set the stage for how the rest of the company treats gender diversity. By taking the following actions, your company’s senior leaders can increase gender inclusiveness and improve the retention of women:
 - Ensure that direct reports, especially women, feel comfortable speaking up and making their viewpoints known. Give everyone an opportunity to contribute during meetings, and when suggestions are made, be sure that they are respected and acknowledged.
 - Hold networking sessions that connect women with industry mentors, and encourage direct reports to attend.
 - Demonstrate your investment in high-potential women with formal sponsorship programs. Women often lack access to sponsors, and formalizing this process can reduce the gap between men and women regarding the advantages reaped by protégés, including visibility and expanded networks.
 - Also informally sponsor up-and-coming women by “giving them a seat at the table” in important meetings.
 - Hold a “zero-tolerance” policy toward poor people management behaviors. Insist that leadership roles be filled by individuals committed to promoting women’s advancement in the workplace, and ensure that sponsorship and mentoring are identified as key leadership competencies for all leaders.
- **Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs):** Providing access to FWAs could improve the retention of top female talent.³⁵ Put formal FWA policies into place, and then work to ensure you have an organizational culture that is conducive to the use of these policies. Reference Catalyst’s toolkit [Managing Flex 1: Creating an Organizational Culture Supportive of Flexible Work Arrangements](#) for concrete, actionable steps toward accomplishing this goal.
- **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** As discussed, women are in the minority across tech-intensive industries and report feeling like the “other.” This sense of isolation that stems from often being “the only woman in the room” can drive women to other industries. Creating a women’s ERG to build a feeling of community and strengthen relationships among the women in your company is an effective strategy to approach this issue. The ERG can help to ensure that women receive access to critical networks, sponsors, and the key visible “hot jobs” that will help them to advance. Appoint several senior-level female managers to lead the ERG, demonstrating that there is support from the top for women’s advancement. See [The Catalyst Guide to Employee Resource Groups](#) for tools to help you establish an ERG and ensure its long-term success.



- **Building Community:** In addition to creating a formal women's ERG, it is also important to informally build and foster a sense of community for women generally in the organization. By providing women frequent opportunities to interact—both in person and virtually—across teams and departments, they will feel a sense of community. Consider organizing a monthly happy hour after work or a lunchtime lecture series geared toward women's professional development.
- **Professional Associations:** Support the involvement of your female talent, particularly those in technical roles, in professional industry associations by paying annual membership fees and providing time to attend meetings. Participating in a professional association is a great way to build a broader network of women in the industry across organizations.

RETAIN AND RETURN: PROGRAMS HELP WOMEN RE-ENTER WORKFORCE AFTER CAREER BREAKS

An increasing number of programs help individuals return to their careers after significant career breaks.³⁶ This is particularly helpful for women, who often take a hiatus from their careers to care for their families.

- Companies in the financial services sector have created successful returnship programs that help women re-enter the workforce:
 - Morgan Stanley's Return to Work program is a 12-week paid internship that allows interns to work with colleagues and senior leaders throughout the firm, with the possibility of an offer of employment upon completion of the program.³⁷
 - Credit Suisse's Real Returns program is an eight- to 10-week paid program intended to re-engage professionals after an extended absence. In addition to gaining valuable on-the-job experience, participants can join in events hosted by their various diversity networks, including the Americas Women's Network and Working Families Network.³⁸
- For tech-intensive industries, re-entry programs would assist in re-attracting valuable female talent that has left:
 - Daphne Jackson is a UK-based program that returns professionals in Science, Engineering, Mathematics, and Technology to their careers after at least a two-year break by offering flexible, part-time, paid fellowships that include research and retraining. The majority of fellows who successfully complete the program are in STEM research careers.³⁹



Keep the Momentum Going

Utilizing this tool is an important step in your organization's D&I journey as you create a culture shift through the use of more inclusive recruitment, advancement, and retention strategies. To maximize your efforts to attract and retain top female talent, be sure to revisit this tool every six to 12 months

once you've implemented changes to your organizational practices. Recurring reassessments will allow your organization to monitor progress and continue to raise the bar in recruiting and retaining female talent as well as increasing your organization's overall effectiveness.

Notes:



Endnotes

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