

The Glass Ceiling Still Remains in too Many Workplaces

By Carol Morrison

Although minorities and women have made some headway in management and professional positions in the last decade, the corporate "glass ceiling" still appears to be an obstacle to their advancement into senior leadership.

Originally, the term "glass ceiling" referred to the sometimes unseen, yet nonetheless real, barriers to women's progression into top-level management positions. While it still refers to obstacles encountered by women of all ethnicities, the expression's usage has widened to include barriers blocking both men and women of ethnic and other minorities.

There have been some signs of progress. More than half of all professionals are female, but they tend to be more underrepresented among the most prestigious and well-paid professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. Further, although they constitute 46.6% of the U.S. labor force, women account for just 36.7% of managers and 23.3% of chief executives.

African Americans and Hispanics also continue to be underrepresented in various management and professional jobs in the U.S. as of 2004. Department of Labor statistics place the percentage of all U.S. chief executives who are African Americans at 3.2%, well below their demographic representation (12.1%) in the U.S. population. Hispanic Americans are just 3.7% of chief executives but 13.7% of the U.S. population.

Minorities and women hold a total of 29% of U.S. corporate board seats, according to 2005 figures from the Alliance of Board Diversity. The group noted that minorities represent about half of that percentage and that companies tend to hire the same limited group of minority members for multiple boards: African American men held an average of 1.6 seats per person, while Hispanic men averaged 1.3 seats. Asian Americans accounted for just 1.1% of U.S. board seats.

Reported reasons for the glass ceiling's continued presence vary. Among the factors mentioned are gender-influenced attitudes, family responsibilities, clashing value systems, stereo-typing, bias against skin color and even boredom with management positions. Although minority and female education levels — oft-cited reasons for barriers in years past — are rising, wage gaps still plague women, in particular. Average pay for U.S. female workers is about 77% of men's earnings, and the ratio may be as low as about 44% over the course of a woman's career.

Governmental intervention — in the form of antidiscrimination laws and penalties imposed by enforcement agencies — is one means of addressing glass ceilings. Companies are taking action, too, while also taking care not to leave themselves vulnerable to legal problems arising from their good intentions. Corporate attorneys nationwide say that their biggest fear is employment lawsuits — including sex-discrimination actions — and they call such suits their companies' area of greatest vulnerability to litigation.

Global research on glass ceilings focuses primarily on gender issues

Glass ceilings are not a phenomenon limited to the U.S. workplace. Around the world, minorities and women report similar progress — and similar impediments — in their efforts to advance into organizations' topmost leadership levels. Most global perspectives and international research on the glass ceiling focus on gender-based barriers.

The International Labour Office reported that women held about half of the world's professional jobs in 2002. Percentages were highest in the Eastern European nations, the Philippines, Brazil, Venezuela and Puerto Rico. They were lowest in Middle Eastern and Southern Asian countries. Women's presence in management jobs ranged from 20% to 40% in

most countries where statistics were available. In the U.S., just over half of workers holding management and professional jobs in 2004 were women.

Among the world's largest Fortune 200 companies, women held just 10.4% of board seats in 2004, according to Corporate Women Directors International. U.S. companies led the list in terms of women's representation; Japan, China and South Korea were at the bottom. In the UK that year, one of every seven corporate board members was female, but women still held only 14.4% of corporate officer positions in Canada's largest companies. Despite Sweden's reputation for a progressive business environment, only about 3% of that country's managers are female, and 2003 government research found that nearly half (42%) of Sweden's companies had no women on their executive boards.

Interestingly, a few Asian countries have seen an increase in the number of female business leaders, which some experts attribute to the Asian cultural perception that women who put in long hours at work are good providers for their families. In European countries where Western ideologies were more prevalent, Eurostat reported in 2005 that women with young children had lower full-time employment rates and higher part-time employment rates than their childless counter-parts and men who had young children.

Internationally, barriers to career advancement echo those seen in the U.S.: senior-level executives from 20 European countries told Catalyst that the top five workplace obstacles women face are gender-based stereotypes, lack of role models, lack of management opportunities, family responsibilities and lack of mentors.

Continued focus on educational and business opportunities for women, along with cultural changes among societies that still relegate women to second-class status, will help women break down barriers both at home and in the workplace. Companies can shatter glass ceilings by implementing training initiatives, providing professional development opportunities, and supporting mentoring programs for women and minorities. As in the U.S., change is not likely to occur quickly, but the occasional sound of breaking glass already can be heard in many corners of the world.

Firms work to eliminate barriers through educational programs, career development, organizational changes and greater emphasis on workforce diversification. Nonprofits and professional networks also strive to abolish the obstacles that keep women and minorities from realizing their career aspirations. In addition, individuals who have broken through glass ceilings share their success stories to motivate and mentor those who follow in their footsteps.

Generally, business leaders express an optimistic outlook for the future. In 2005, Korn/Ferry International reported that senior executives anticipate greater diversity in corporate leadership and board representation in the coming decade. Similarly, Human Resource Institute research found North American and European firms concur that the glass ceiling issue will diminish in importance during that time. Finally, Census Bureau estimates have minorities accounting for 40% of college students by 2020, underscoring the conclusion that companies that commit to diversity now should be ideally positioned to attract the best talent for U.S. workplaces of the future.

Carol Morrison is a senior writer with the Human Resources Institute (HRI). HRI highlights ways firms can eliminate barriers through educational programs, career development, organizational changes and greater emphasis on workforce diversification.