

Developing Female Leaders: Addressing Gender Bias In Global Mobility

In many global organisations, international experience is viewed as a pre-requisite for executive and leadership roles. With just one in four outbound expatriates from Australia being female⁽ⁱ⁾, organisations may unintentionally be limiting the progression of their high potential female employees. By exploring and addressing the barriers to female mobility, there is an opportunity to enhance both individual careers and organisational performance.

A year-long joint research project between PwC Australia and Melbourne University's Centre for Ethical Leadership (CEL) has explored this issue in depth. Using data from interviews with HR leaders, online surveys, academic literature and PwC's expatriate tax client base, a number of "hotspots" for gender bias in the assignment lifecycle have been identified. In this article, we explore those bias hotspots and consider strategies to increase female participation in global mobility programmes.

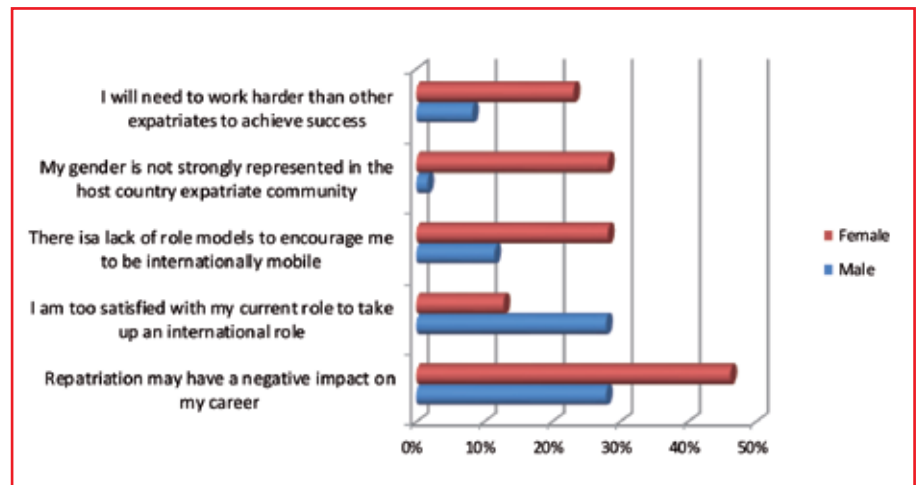
To identify bias hotspots it is useful to contrast the motivations and experiences of men and women in international assignments with the expectations, views and practices of those who make decisions about assignments, such as HR managers. We start this analysis by exploring men and women's motivations to go on international assignments.

Why Do Females Accept Or Decline International Assignments?

The PwC/CEL in-depth survey (which was completed by over 100 male and female expatriates) confirmed that the motivations behind accepting an assignment were strikingly similar for both men and women. Common reasons included enhancing careers and networks, offering distinctive skills to the host country employer, and more personal reasons such as interest in international travel, other cultures and other ways of working.

However, when asked why they would decline an international assignment, the responses were much more revealing of the differing viewpoints of men and women.

In this article we will explore these themes and address how organisations can



respond to the particular needs of female assignees in order to create a more balanced and representative expatriate workforce.

Where Are The Bias "Hotspots" Driving This Low Participation Rate Of Females In Global Mobility?

A. Assumptions About Female Candidates

Research shows that women are no less interested than men in international assignments⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. However, assumptions amongst both home and host country management about the availability, suitability and willingness of female candidates is seen as a significant factor in the under-representation of females amongst international assignee populations.

These assumptions do not stand up to scrutiny. A recent PwC survey⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ showed that 69% of female employees want to work outside their home country during their career, whilst 63% saw international experience as critical to furthering their career, and is applicable on a global scale.

Assumptions around the availability and willingness of female employees to move overseas can result in viable female candidates being overlooked before the selection process has even begun. The fact that one HR leader stated that they "just know" when they are looking at the right candidate for an assignment, along with some of the male-centric language which was frequently used when HR leaders were asked to describe an ideal candidate for an assignment, suggests these assumptions could be deeply embedded in many organisations.

This use of male-centric language

and the attitude of "just knowing" when a candidate is appropriate for an international opportunity is a concern, as it is indicative of bias whereby good management characteristics are equated with male managers. Whilst there has been a positive shift at a domestic level in addressing this type of bias, it may be that these assumptions remain embedded to a much greater extent when male and female employees are being considered for international opportunities.

A positive first step for employers is to focus on the fact that nearly 70% of females want to work overseas, and recognise it is a responsibility of the employer to help make this happen. In these situations, a female employee's career coach and line manager have a critical role to play in exploring that willingness to move overseas and connecting the candidate to the opportunity.

B. Lack Of Formality And Process In Recruitment And Candidate Selection

Despite the strategic importance of global mobility, a number of studies show that the use of formal or structured candidate selection is surprisingly low^(iv). As a result, closed and informal systems for selecting candidates are often the norm. As more than one HR leader interviewed by PwC/CEL explained, very simply "it comes down to who you know".

This closed approach to candidate selection negatively impacts females, as research indicates females in management are often "denied policy information, opportunities, contacts and social

support^(v). Furthermore, research also suggests that informal corporate activities such as fast track programmes, individual career counselling and career workshops are less available to women, which further limits their ability to be “in the know” about international assignment opportunities.

Such informal approaches to candidate selection severely restrict the pool of potential female assignees. They have the potential to facilitate the impact of bias on the decision making process, allowing assumptions and stereotyping to influence the final outcome.

These insights are supported by the data from the PwC survey. When asked how they became aware of the opportunity which led to their current international assignment, 35.6% of respondents (both male and female) said they initiated the opportunity themselves. The second most common means of securing the international opportunity was through personal networks and informal communication (17.8%). This points to a lack of an open, objective and fair approach to identifying candidates.

Furthermore, as HR leaders interviewed by PwC identified, when

there is a pressing need to fill an overseas role, management will typically select someone on their immediate radar, and someone similar to them. Given the imbalance between males and females in both expatriate positions and leadership positions, this “knee-jerk” approach to candidate selection is much more likely to result in the selection of “mini-me’s” and perpetuate the gender imbalance.

Interestingly, some HR leaders we interviewed took the opposite view. Their view was that not having a formal selection process helped the right candidates present themselves - by the candidates pushing themselves forward for the role, those individuals showed behaviours which indicated they would be a successful assignee. However, the majority of HR leaders saw that these behaviours are more frequently demonstrated by men than women, and taking this approach to candidate selection will not lead to a higher proportion of female assignees.

A recurring view amongst HR leader interviewees, and also in academic research, is that women are more conservative in their approach to pursuing international opportunities. There can be

a reluctance for female candidates to put themselves forward unless they are certain they can deliver on every requirement of the role, and that they stand a very high chance of being the successful candidate. A formalised recruitment and selection process may help, but would not eliminate this concern.

What Are The Strategies For Addressing This Bias?

A. Timing Is Everything

Female assignees are typically single and young. An analysis of over 10,000 assignees^(vi) shows that almost 50% of females on assignment are single, whereas 70% of male assignees are married. Furthermore, 40% of female assignees are aged between 30 and 39 (compared to 33% of males).

The graph below (based on data for over 10,000 assignees inbound to, or outbound from, Australia and receiving tax services from PwC), shows that women are more likely than men to take up assignments earlier in the career, but the balance changes at around the age of 40.

Using the same dataset, the graph underneath shows that there are now more single female assignees than married assignees. However, both percentages remain low. The more striking trend relates to male assignee demographics, and the split between married and single male assignees.

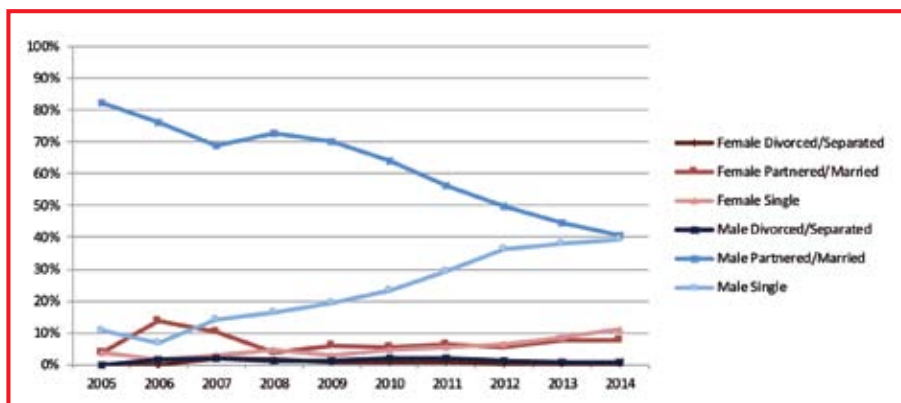
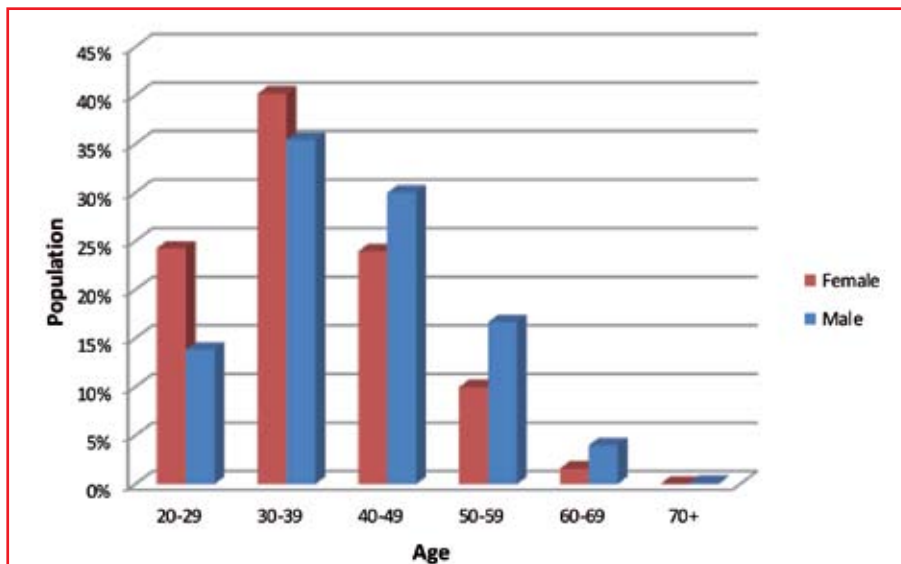
Making international opportunities available to female employees at an earlier stage of their career is critical to increasing female participation in mobility. As one Global HR Head told us, her view on female mobility is “start early, and start small” – identify high performing females at junior levels who are considered top talent, create short-term secondments (as brief as one month) to give them a flavour of working overseas, and increase their likelihood of accepting a longer-term, more strategic role later in their career.

B. Engagement Is Critical

Research^(vii) shows that the more committed a female employee is to her employer, the more willing she will be to accept an international assignment. The opposite is true for men.

Any activities undertaken by an organisation to improve staff engagement and commitment should increase the number of female employees willing to take an overseas role.

A challenge for employers is that “high



potential” and “leadership” programmes, which can have a very positive impact on an employee’s commitment to an organisation, tend to be most relevant to employees in their mid-30s onwards. Making accelerated development programmes available to female employees at an earlier stage in their career can increase commitment and engagement, and improve both the quantity and calibre of female assignees.

C. Location, Not Duration

Many HR leaders hold the view that short-term secondments could be more attractive to female employees, and this bias no doubt impacts on candidate selection. An analysis of PwC client data shows that female assignees show no greater preference for short-term secondments than male assignees.

What is more important is the location. The level of development in the host country, perceived cultural differences between home and host locations, and political risk are of greater concern to female assignees than males^(viii).

On this basis, working with female candidates to identify suitable host locations will have a greater impact on female participation than simply focusing on short-term mobility.

D. Champion Your Role Models

It is widely recognised that a lack of role models is considered a barrier to female leadership. This issue surfaced in almost all of the interviews. Similarly, in the PwC/CEL survey, when asked why they might decline an international assignment, 28.2% of females cited a lack of role models (compared to just 11.5% of male respondents). Furthermore, the same percentage of females cited their gender not being strongly represented in the host country expatriate community as a reason for declining an assignment.

Given many of the additional challenges females may face in securing international roles, there is a pressing need to celebrate and champion success stories. One approach to addressing this opportunity is for high profile, successful female leaders with international experience, to be available to play coaching and mentoring roles to potential or current female assignees within their organisation.

E. Tackle The Dual-Career Issue

Both men and women rank a happy and supportive spouse as highly important to a successful assignment^(ix). However, in a 2011

study^(x), 90% of female assignees stated that their assignment satisfaction was largely influenced by their spouse’s adjustment.

Many organisations, consciously or unconsciously, still adhere to the traditional view that expatriates are male with homemaker wives, with the critical role of family integration into host country life typically left to the non-working spouse^(xi). The PwC/CEL survey shows a higher percentage of spouses of female assignees work full-time in the host location than do spouses of male assignees (78.3 vs 51.1%). If an employer can play a role in helping a trailing spouse of a female assignee find full-time work in the host country, this is likely to help host country integration and increase the chances of a successful assignment.

Non-working male spouses can find adjustment particularly difficult when they were previously part of a dual career couple. Unresolved dual-career issues can lead to resentment and loss of identity (both for males and females), but expectations of traditional gender roles can make this a greater problem for female assignees.

There is a need for organisational policies which specifically target the issue of dual career couples. During our interviews we found that some organisations provide additional support for trailing spouses to help them find jobs, learn the local language, and integrate in host country society, but these organisations were in the minority.

Including spousal support as a core, non-negotiable benefit under an organisation’s assignment policy could be a positive first step towards tackling this complex issue which touches on professional, social and household dynamics.

F. Build Gender-Specific Support Networks

There is a critical role for professional support networks for female assignees. Best practice would suggest that an assignee should have both a home and host country mentor. Prior to departure, the home country mentor can help address unrealistic expectations around the upcoming assignment, as well as enhancing organisational knowledge, job performance on assignment, and promotion potential of the female assignee upon her return^(xii).

Once on assignment, providing buddying and mentoring systems (particularly with other senior female employees or assignees), can increase the

chances of a successful assignment.

Furthermore, cultural adjustment is thought to be the biggest influence behind an assignee’s decision to disengage or withdraw from an assignment, male or female. Given the role of social support as a coping factor, this is an issue which can be challenging for couples where the woman is the assignee and the man is the trailing, non-working spouse. Typically, without a workplace of likeminded individuals, the man may struggle to find relevant social networks. This can place pressure on both partners.

Any steps an employer can take to help female assignees and their families build social networks, whether formal or informal, in the host location, can significantly contribute towards the success of the assignment. This is an area where employers may need to be creative – traditional, male centric social and support networks may not be the best fit for a female assignee and her family.

As Global Mobility functions take on an increasingly strategic role around global talent identification, mapping and tracking, there is an opportunity for Global Mobility teams to take the lead in ensuring their female assignees feel supported throughout the assignment cycle.

G. Focus On Repatriation

Most HR leaders are familiar with the concept of the “career wobble” which can occur shortly after repatriation. Dissatisfaction around perceived under-utilisation of skills and experience acquired during the assignment, and potential frustrations with the seniority of the role they have returned to, can greatly increase the chance of losing that individual from the organisation. Equally, where the original home country assignment sponsors have moved on to other roles or organisations, and returning expatriates find themselves in “holding patterns” awaiting meaningful roles (or redundancy), individuals can very quickly disengage.

One Global HR Head we spoke to insisted that any proposed redundancies of repatriating assignees should receive her sign-off. However, there was also a recognition that by the time the paperwork reached her, the situation was most likely unrecoverable.

Research has shown that 44% of repatriates leave their companies within the first two years of returning to their home organisation^(xiii). Given the current focus on the Return on Investment (ROI) of

global mobility, this is clearly a matter which needs to be addressed, irrespective of gender.

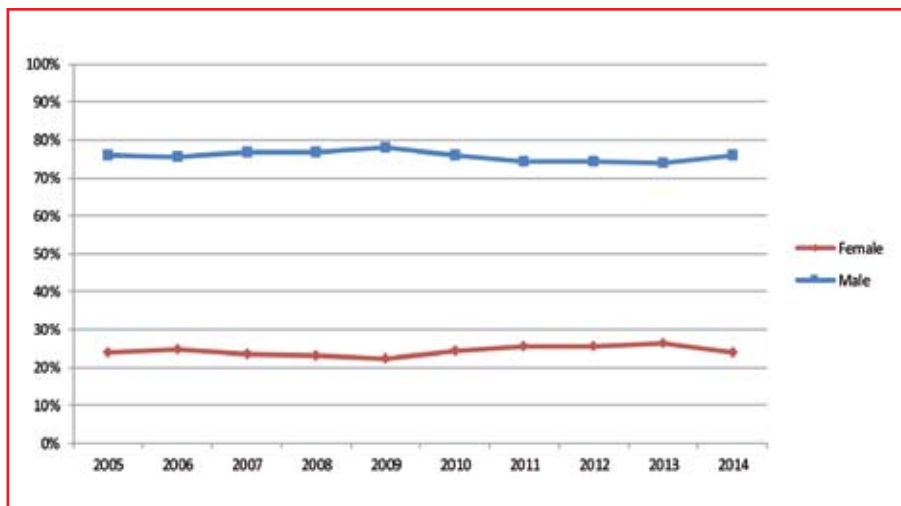
This is an issue which impacts upon both male and female expatriates. However, where a female assignee may have experienced difficulties during the assignment (such as the failure of a non-working spouse to adjust to life in the host country), the failure of her employer to adequately manage repatriation can be particularly damaging.

Through being mindful of the “reverse culture shock” which can occur upon repatriation, as well as taking steps to plan repatriation at least 6 to 12 months prior to the return, organisations can mitigate the career wobble and resultant flight risk.

Summary

Historical PwC data for over 10,000 assignees for the period 2005 onwards captured in the table below shows that there is no discernible upward trend in the percentage of female expatriates. Despite the increasing focus on gender equality in the workplace over the last 10 years, progress in female participation in global mobility has been worryingly slow, and action is required by employers.

Our research suggests that many organisations need an overhaul of their approach to global mobility in order to address unconscious bias in the candidate selection process. Organisations should ensure they have a strategy and policy framework which ensures mobility is equally assessable and attractive to both men and women. If successful, such an approach will provide a greater proportion of female employees with leadership development opportunities, a great personal and professional experience for the employee, and a positive return on investment for the employer.



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PwC's People Business helps clients to realise and discover the potential of their people by providing a single integrated people consulting and solutions service.

Our services range from payroll and immigration solutions through employment taxes and industrial relations advice to change management, culture consulting, HR technology, organisation design and remuneration and leadership.

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The CEL conducts internationally regarded academic research and delivers programs and tools to develop the ethical leadership capability of both senior and emerging leaders. The CEL's work is undertaken in partnership with a range of major organisations in both the profit and not for profit sectors and an extensive network of domestic and international academic collaboration.

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i Based on analysis of PwC data covering 6,581 outbound expatriates from Australia

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v Demographic data for over 10,000 recipients of PwC Australia tax services

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