WXN

Improving networking supports for women in the workplace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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WOMEN'S EXECUTIVE NETWORK (WXN)

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This is an executive summary of the report cited below:

Alvarez Vandeputte, Javier, Zsofia Agoston, and Rawand Amsdr (2021) "Improving Networking Supports for Women in the Workplace." Research report presented to Women's Executive Network. Department of Anthropology. University of Western Ontario.

Introduction

In 2020, the Canadian government launched the 50/30 challenge to increase gender parity to 50% and to achieve 30% representation of Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Colour, women living with disabilities and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community on Canadian boards and senior management positions. Although notable progress on equitable gender representation in the workforce has been made, women continue to face challenges and limitations in acquiring C-suite, executive, senior management, and FP500 (the highest ranked Canadian companies according to revenue) positions.

A previous study (Afrin et al. 2020) conducted in 2020 by Western Anthropology student researchers and WXN highlighted networking as a potential support and barrier for women excluded from work-related activities and mentorship opportunities. That study provided some insight into potential avenues to support the career development of women and recommendations for organizations seeking higher representation of marginalized groups on their leadership teams and boards.

The current report summarizes results of a follow-up study in 2021 that delved more deeply into networking. The objectives were to:

1. Explore the general motivations for women to participate in networks, characterizing their participation in networks;

2. Identify supports and barriers for networking;

3. Explore the relationship between participation in networks and trajectories of empowerment and professional success.

The study was carried out by three graduate students for a course in Research Methods in Sociocultural Anthropology at Western, the instructor Dr. Karen Pennesi, and Garry Atkinson, Research and Analytics Manager for WXN. The results of the research provide concrete recommendations to women in leadership, women more generally, to WXN and its networking strategies, and to organizations and corporations dedicated to creating gender equitable workplaces and achieving diversity goals.

Methodology

This report is informed by data collected between October and December 2021. The research is based on a mixed methods approach, using semi-structured interviews, a survey, and LinkedIn observations. In total, the researchers conducted six interviews, observed three LinkedIn social networking profiles, and received 85 complete responses to the survey. Participants were all women working in executive or leadership roles in Canada, in a variety of sectors. The work was approved by Western University's Research Ethics Board. All participants provided oral consent prior to participating in the research and their identifying information was kept confidential.
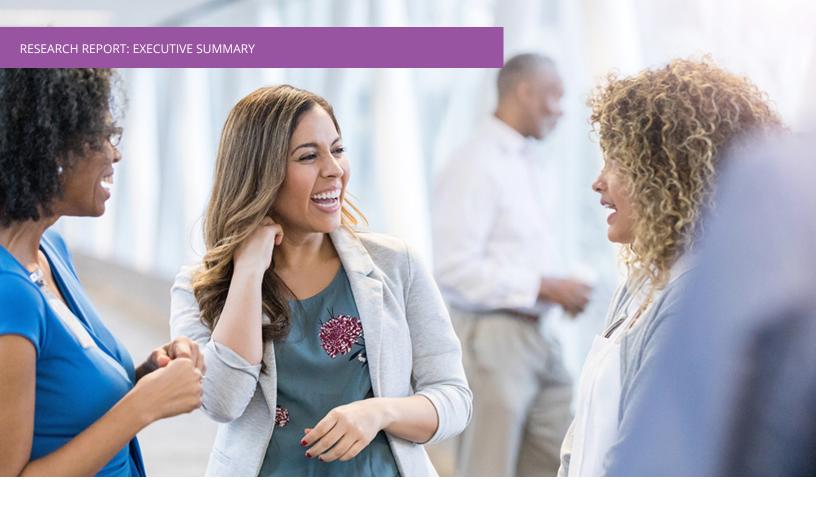
Findings

DEFINITIONS OF NETWORKING:

Researchers observed that the way women engage in networking is connected to how they define networks. For example, two prominent ideas about networks and their purpose emerged over the course of the interviews. First, participants reflected on how networking is used for ***building a community*** where common interests and mutual support are a key element of the process and desired outcome. Second, women discussed networking as a way of ***pursuing one's own interests***, including professional success and marketing their skills and attributes. Incorporating these perspectives, the researchers put forward this definition: **Networking is the creation and maintenance of a community of diverse interests, through in-person and online engagements that can be mobilized for the benefit of oneself or other members of one's network.**

PARTICIPATION IN NETWORKS:

Professional women participate in several and various forms of networking, both formal and informal, online and in-person. According to the survey results, LinkedIn is used the most in terms of online platforms, while networking with colleagues was most common among in-person networking activities. More frequent participation in some networks did not necessarily imply that those are more important with regards to the trajectories of women's empowerment and professional success. For example, women in this study participated more often in online networks, but they placed greater importance on in-person networking opportunities in terms of their professional career development. Altruistic and utilitarian characteristics were equally important across both online and in-person networks, and can generally be summarized as a way of creating and maintaining a **community of diverse interests.**

EFFECTIVE NETWORKING:

The old adage that successful networking includes the idea to "come back with as many business cards as you can collect" was rejected among participants. The **quality of connections** held greater importance for the participants, along with the desire to seek networking with diverse people across diverse geographical areas. Both common interest and difference were defined as necessary for establishing qualitative, authentic, organic and genuine relationships. Common interests evolve because of the potential to build clients, find mentors in their field and make connections; whereas difference or diversity across industries and sectors created a broader capacity for professional and personal development. Intensive networking and strategically building relationships brought more value and quality relationships for professional development than extensive networking that relies heavily on the quantity and speed of connections.

COVID-19, INTERSECTIONALITY: AGE, GENDER, RACE:

The results of the survey indicated that just over 51 percent of women felt excluded from networking opportunities in their organizations or industry. Age was a significant factor for a number of reasons. Women further along in their professional careers spoke highly of the importance of networking activities as well as using their networks to support young women in their career goals. They also commented on how technological barriers could escalate for more senior women, and that sexist comments related to gender were more prominent in their junior years. Further, junior level women may have less control over the flexibility of their schedule, creating an additional barrier to participate in networking activities. Racialized barriers were also discussed in terms of age and networking. For example, women of colour in senior leadership were important as mentors and role models contributing to the career success of junior women of colour. Participants also spoke to the effects of Covid-19 on their work environments, and that online networking has improved their quality of networking across industries and regions. Overall, the increase of online networking due to the pandemic was recounted as a model that reduced the barriers associated with age and gender.

Recommendations

1. Create networking events that provide opportunities to encourage the participation of junior level women who may have less flexibility than their senior leaders; schedule events in late afternoon, on evenings and weekends

2. Recognize and accommodate different networking strategies; increase the duration of networking opportunities to support intensive strategies for building strong relationships

3. Cluster hires; appointing more women and underrepresented groups into leadership roles not only provides multiple perspectives among leadership teams but also creates an opportunity for women to support each other beyond token hires for diversity

4. Actively create networking and mentorship opportunities; don't wait for employees to seek such opportunities – develop them now to create leaders who are ready and visible for future advancement

5. Advocate and support diverse women's perspectives and contributions; building equitable environments that speak to the multitude of intersecting social locations encourages success

6. Create networks of common interest or identity; groups that serve commonalities such as racial or ethnic identities, gender, religion or musical interest can motivate, encourage and support women

7. Create networks of diverse interests or identities; provide spaces for women to extend their understanding of personal and professional development beyond their industry as well as build mutually beneficial connections to promote their success

8. Be helpful to others; "leave the door open" for other women by utilizing experience, mentorship and networking to create more equitable spaces

9. Ask for help; seek supports, knowledge and professional advice through networking opportunities

VIEW FULL REPORT

| Appendix A: Female participants table

PSEUDONYM	AGE	SECTOR	LinkedIn Profile Observation
Smiles	40 - 49	Non-Profit Organization	Yes
Claudia	40 - 49	Music and Government	No
Shar	40 - 49	Non-Profit Organization	No
Danielle	21 - 29	Business and Comminications	Yes
Sam	30 - 39	Health	No
Presto	40 - 49	Financial Planning	Yes