ABOUT THE STUDY

*Gender and Career Advancement in Healthcare* is a comprehensive study of the impact of gender on career growth and succession in the industry and sheds light on the strides men and women are taking to advance to a senior level or leadership position.

## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambition &amp; Drive</td>
<td>03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity &amp; Purpose</td>
<td>08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors, Networking &amp; Relationships</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Belief</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

There is a strong correlation between women in leadership and increased organizational performance. According to a 2016 survey of more than 20,000 companies by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, for instance, the presence of more female leaders in top positions of corporate management correlates with increased profitability.¹ For many reasons, healthcare can benefit from greater female representation in the C-suite. Yet while women represent a majority of workers in healthcare, they comprise only 26% of hospital and health system CEOs and 28% of board members.²

Therefore, the need for increased female healthcare leadership is clear. The means by which to achieve it is not always apparent. A year ago, Witt/Kieffer conducted its fourth-ever healthcare leadership diversity survey, polling more than 300 executives. We explored ideas around diversifying the healthcare executive suite, including: more commitment by top management; promotion from within; more culturally competent organizations; and greater career development opportunities. Results showed that men and women differed in terms of what they hope to achieve and how they define and succeed.

This study further explores gender-related factors in executive career advancement and how women and men differ in this regard. Our online survey evaluated 192 participants’ experiences, based on gender, in relation to career ambition, influential factors that govern decisions, personal development tools and workplace opportunities. In addition, more than a dozen executives provided input and insight through phone interviews.

AMBITION & DRIVE

Based on results from nearly 200 participants, ambition and drive are two qualities that are essential to move up the ladder in healthcare. The industry is continuously changing and adapting to the needs of today’s society and requires strong leaders who put in hard work to achieve success.
Ambition to be part of a senior leadership team is common among those that have the desire to advance their careers.

When asked to identify their ultimate career ambition, a majority of both female and male participants indicated that they would like to be part of a healthcare organization’s senior leadership team. However, male healthcare executives were more likely to target the CEO position. Fifty-five percent (55%) of men named the CEO role as their goal, compared to 34% of women.

Women are more willing to be part of a senior leadership team through other C-suite roles. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of female participants chose this route as their career goal, while only 27% of men chose the same option. One female executive noted, “I am in an incredible position of influence directly aligned with my passions and have no desire to assume a President/CEO role.”

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**Over twice as many male respondents chose to target the CEO role compared to another C-suite executive position.**
While the highest percentage of women are content with another C-suite role, a similar percentage of female participants chose the CEO position as their ultimate goal. Confidence to pursue a CEO position is greater at a company whose executive team is comprised of mostly women. Sixty percent (60%) of female respondents whose organization's executive team contains 75-100% women were interested in pursuing the CEO role, while only 21% of female respondents whose executive team is made up of less than 25% women were interested. In addition, our study illustrated how female CEO-focused respondents were more likely to have a higher percentage of gender diversity on their leadership teams and boards.

Confidence and risk taking leads to advancement toward senior leadership.

Throughout the survey, both men and women noted how taking risks in the workplace assisted their personal development or advancement. Yet when it came to applying for a new position, men were more likely to have applied for the most recent position they considered. One female director commented, “I might not apply for a position because I have to be more prepared for the job, but men might apply. I don’t think we have that risk mindset as much.” Seventy-seven percent (77%) of male respondents and 61% of female respondents ultimately applied for the newer, more senior role.

While men are more willing to take risks when seeking a position, women have more confidence of the outcome. Our survey showed 94% of women were not only confident that they would be selected for a more senior position, but also that they would be successful in the role. Only 83% of men felt this way.
FAMILY

Family commitments are the strongest factors influencing both men and women as they consider career advancements. However, men are more likely than women to continue pursuing leadership roles even if they interfere with family commitments.
Family members, including partners and spouses, are the most influential career counselors.

Respondents were asked to identify factors that influence decisions to advance to a more senior role. An overwhelming majority of both female (93%) and male (89%) participants’ highest rated consideration was their partner/spouse.

Our study showed that three-quarters (75%) of female participants would not apply for a position if the timing of relocation were a roadblock for their family, while only 65% of men felt this same way. One female executive said, “I spent 26 years professionally in one community because of family commitments that kept me there. Family was the ultimate deciding factor and because of that, I had very limited opportunities.”

Our study demonstrated that more than half of men (53%) would not accept a position if their family did not support their decision to pursue the role. One male executive noted, “Everything starts at home. Family plays a huge role,” while another man emphasized that his “Wife is [his] trusted mentor and sounding board.”

Both genders see family as the most important factor when applying for a new position, but women are more likely to lose a career opportunity due to family commitments.
OPPORTUNITY & PURPOSE

A clear purpose and clear goals ignite a stronger drive to seize opportunities in the workplace. An awareness of new opportunities can also open doors that were not previously considered as viable options.
Being open-minded is key to success.

When asked to identify what steps are taken to prepare for a senior leadership position, both female (96%) and male (92%) participants agreed that remaining flexible and open to assignments that may not be part of their formal career path is essential to advancement. Over half of all participants rated this as “very important,” while 94% rated it as a major contributing factor to moving up the ladder. One female executive noted, “my ability to take on new projects outside of my comfort zone and taking on assignments/positions that enabled me to learn new aspects of the industry” helped advance her career.

“In healthcare, flexibility and adaptation to change are instrumental in our daily work and key in successful advancement.”
- Female Executive

Developing and evaluating career goals on a regular basis is essential to advancement.

Almost all female respondents (99%) and 96% of male respondents agreed that regularly developing and evaluating career goals is also vital to career progression. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of both genders listed goal-setting as the second-most important factor when taking steps to move upwards. One male executive noted that part of his career advancement was due to “being able to achieve goals and make my direct reports promotable.”
Seizing opportunities in the workplace encourages personal improvement and fosters career growth.

Our study found women are more likely than men to take advantage of career development opportunities within their organizations. As a result, women are able to further advance their careers and develop relationships that open doors for future career prospects.

More so than men, women place higher importance on discussing career opportunities with their boss. Almost three-quarters (74%) of female respondents found their relationship with their supervisor had a positive impact on their career development, and only 59% of male respondents agreed. One female executive noted, “I’ve been really fortunate to have several outstanding bosses who were extremely giving of their time and support and have empowered me to do whatever I want – to try something different, to do something new. They either opened the right doors for me or gave me the time and the freedom to do and explore those things.” Another female executive specifically noted that “maintaining positive relationships with previous bosses” helped to advance her career.
Women are more likely to request formal performance reviews. Ninety-three percent (93%) of women found formal performance reviews to have an important impact on the expansion of their careers, while only 88% of men agreed. Furthermore, 80% of female respondents listed formal reviews as a contributing factor of steps taken for career advancement, while less than three quarters (73%) of men placed importance on them.

Additionally, 84% of female respondents agreed that utilizing organizational resources devoted to career development and training are important to prepare for a senior leadership role. Less than three quarters (74%) of male respondents agreed. Ninety-four percent (94%) of women also agreed that formal talent management strategies, such as succession planning, executive coaching and board exposure have had a positive impact on their personal career development. Forty percent (40%) of those women rated these strategies as “very important” for their personal development, while only 28% of men found these strategies to have the same importance.

Two female executives noted that the most important and valuable factors to their career advancement were “participation in leadership courses” as well as “networking and working with a career coach.” Another female executive noted that she furthered her personal development when she “secured an executive career coach who provided very helpful feedback relating to different approaches for advancement.”
MENTORS, NETWORKING & RELATIONSHIPS

Mentoring does not only benefit the person who is mentored. Being a mentor is also an opportunity to lead by example and build positive relationships in the workplace.
Mentoring, networking and relationship building can assist in career advancement and development of influential leaders.

Throughout the survey, a large percentage of female and male respondents agreed that mentors played a significant role in their career growth on multiple levels. Ninety-four percent (94%) of women and 90% of men stated having a specific mentor inside or outside their organization had a positive impact on their professional development. One male executive attributed his career advancement to “strong mentors who help[ed] me take advantage of opportunities by providing direct feedback on my performance and constructive advice on how to improve as a leader and team member.”

In addition to having mentors, more than half of all respondents (57%) served as one to an aspiring executive inside or outside their organization. One female executive noted, “It’s been a fabulous experience – I learn as much from it as they do and I think it’s important from my perspective as I’ve grown in my career and ascended the ladder; that’s one of the ways I give back to the profession.” A male executive agreed that mentoring someone also influenced his own professional development by stating, “I have seen the impact in my own career and others who I have mentored or sponsored. Health systems struggle with that. It is critical for all of us to invest in and groom the next generation of leaders.”

“ I was fortunate to have extraordinary mentors for the first 20 years and then work with a visionary leader for the next 20. ”
- Female Executive

### POSITIVE CAREER IMPACT FROM MENTORS

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Mentors were not the only relationships that healthcare executives found important. Ninety-six percent (96%) of female and 94% of male respondents agreed that cultivating relationships with professionals outside of their organization is important to career advancement and preparation for senior leadership roles. One male executive noted, “I have always tried to meet new people, learn from successful leaders, and get involved with professional groups….every time I have been hired for a new position or promoted it was preceded by a phone call from someone I knew that made the recommendation or the introduction.”

Organizations with a gender diverse leadership team encourage women to participate in mentoring programs.

Organizations with a gender diverse leadership team are more likely to offer formal mentoring programs. Only 8% of female respondents at organizations where less than 25% of the executive team is female reported that their organization offers a formal mentoring program, compared to 23% of organizations where the leadership team is 25-49% female, 29% at organizations where the leadership team is 50-74% female and 33% at organizations where the leadership team is 75-100% female.

“ I’ve had a couple of sponsors…Most of my sponsors were men, but the two best were women. ”

- Female CEO Executive
Our study found both women and men believe their personality and self-confidence are essential to their career development and overall happiness in a high-level position.
Belief in oneself motivates career aspirations.

Ninety-nine percent (99%) of women and 97% of men agreed on the importance of their personality and the positive impact it had on their personal career development. One male executive noted his persistence was the most important factor that played a role in advancing his career.

An overwhelming majority of women (97%) and men (100%) also agreed they would move into a more senior-level position if they believed they could make a difference in the new role. Furthermore, 92% of females and 93% of males considered a more senior position because they believed they possessed the specified qualifications, including years of experience and educational requirements.

“ I am doing what makes me happy, and I am passionate about it. I jump out of bed everyday wanting to go to work. ”

- Female Executive
METHODOLOGY

This study is based on research from an online survey of 192 participants from healthcare organizations across the United States. In the summer of 2016, the survey, consisting of 30 questions, was distributed to a broad range of Witt/Kieffer healthcare executive contacts. The survey included questions on demographics, career development and advancement strategies, and how participants evaluate career opportunities. In many questions, respondents were asked to rate the importance of techniques or influences based on a rating scale of “not at all important” to “very important.”

In addition to our outreach to our own network of executives, we contacted leaders of the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) state and local chapters, Asian Healthcare Leaders Association (AHCLA), Association of Hispanic Healthcare Executives (AHHE), Institute for Diversity in Health Management (IFD), National Association of Health Services Executives (NAHSE) state and local chapters, National Forum for Latino Healthcare Executives (NFLHE) and Rainbow Healthcare Leaders Association (RHLA) to engage their partnership and share the survey with their membership. The survey was also promoted through Witt/Kieffer’s social media presence.

To gather additional thoughts on healthcare executive career planning, development and mobility, we conducted 14 extensive phone interviews with executives who participated in the online survey. Interview topics included career ambitions, mentors, organizational support and the impact of gender diversity in recruiting and retaining executive leaders.
DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the 192 survey participants, 46% identified as female and 54% as male. Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents acknowledged themselves as CEOs, 44% as other C-level executives, 16% as directors or managers and 25% as other leaders. Sixty-one percent (61%) of respondents indicated they have 21 or more years of professional healthcare experience, with 28% having between 11 to 20 years and 11% having 10 or fewer years of experience.
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REFERENCES

