“NOT ENOUGH RUNWAY”:
GENDER, AGEISM AND SUCCESSION PLANNING IN HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

By

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“Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is, not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” (John Dewey)

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Abstract

Women constitute a largely ignored labour force due to human resources structures and processes that are gendered in the evaluation of leadership and managerial potential. A number of studies have found that age in combination with gender disadvantages older women throughout the leadership development and succession planning process. This research article examines the impact of the glass ceiling on older women who are disproportionately discriminated against by gendered and ageist talent management structures that are rooted in patriarchal management schemes. This project also examines the mechanics of perception, attitudes, and stereotypes within society and how these may cause cascading bias throughout organizational settings.

This is an integrated research project that analyzes existing sources, which provide theoretical and empirical grounding to the overarching theme of gendered ageism in the traditional Western organization. By engaging in a feminist/postmodern perspective, this article seeks to understand the relationship between a patriarchal hierarchy and the Othering of women through diversity, gender mainstreaming and equality processes.

This integrated project will be useful to human resources professionals who must employ critical reasoning in challenging best practices in HR management. This project may also be useful from an organizational policy perspective in the analysis of leadership development and talent management processes. This paper may also reveal underexplored aspects of human resources that might provide the basis for future studies in gendered ageism. At its heart, this article seeks transformation by challenging the imbalance of power that a male patriarchy enjoys at the expense of the disadvantaged Other.
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“Not Enough Runway”:

Gender, Ageism and Succession Planning in Human Resources Management

Many organizations have argued that diversity in leadership development is one means to ensure capital gains and business longevity in a rapidly changing global economy. However, because the workforce is aging, some organizations are concerned there could be a shortage of critical talent to assume key leadership roles. Nonetheless, building diverse leadership remains a challenge because many organizations uphold talent management processes and structures that advance employees who best match the profile of the ideal, disembodied worker. Acker (1990) describes the *disembodied worker* as “the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children” (p. 149).

Consequently, women constitute a largely ignored labour force due to succession planning processes that are gendered in the evaluation of leadership and managerial potential. A 1998 Catalyst study reveals relative parity between men and women who enter an organization, although within “five or six years [women’s] careers begin to lag behind those of their male counterparts” (Blake-Beard, 2001, p. 331). Gender, however, does not appear to be the only hindrance to higher-level leadership opportunities. A number of studies have found that age in combination with gender compromises older women who are subsequently under-utilized and under-developed despite organizational rhetoric about a commitment to diversity in the workplace. This article hypothesizes that older women who encounter the glass ceiling effect in their career progression are disproportionately discriminated against by talent management structures and practices that are inherently gendered and ageist.
Not Enough Runway

A personal work experience influenced the subject of this article. In my recent work as a human resources (HR) professional, my team facilitated annual meetings with our client groups to identify key critical talent and emerging leaders for organizational succession plans. Succession planning is a systematic talent management process that determines future leadership and/or management needs and develops high potential employees to meet those needs (Pennell, 2010). My HR colleague was reviewing the potential of an older, female candidate who had exhibited key leadership abilities and who had consistently delivered strong results. Despite the referent employee’s proven track record and strong potential for upper management, my colleague pronounced “Not enough runway” as a curt evaluation of the employee’s potential. In other words, because the female incumbent was older, it was presumed that she had insufficient time remaining in her work life to accelerate along a career runway and soar into the executive ranks.

Although that particular organization includes equality and diversity statements in its organizational documents, the woman’s age was expressed as an insurmountable obstacle to senior management. It appeared to be less relevant that the woman had the appropriate educational and experiential qualifications. Ainsworth (2002) states, “Rather than treat gender in isolation or gender and age as separate social categories, there is much to be gained from looking at their combined influence” (p. 580). This paper aims to do just that.

Research Strategy

Objectives and Methods

This integrated project was conducted via secondary analysis of existing sources that established theoretical and empirical grounding to the overarching theme of gendered ageism and
leadership development within an organizational setting. With this specific intent to engage in an interdisciplinary research effort, the selected literature represented a range of subject areas: organizational behaviour (e.g., perceptions, attitudes, bias, stereotypes), organization theory, adult education and leadership development, feminism, gender, and human resource management. The literature facilitated a relational understanding of the two variables of ageism and gender as well as a causal understanding of gendered ageism within organizations, talent management systems, and succession planning practices. The secondary research examined statistics and demographics data, books, government and private organization reports, academic and scholarly articles in journals, critical essays, textbooks, professional association magazines, and so on.

The Athabasca University online library was utilized as the primary means of accumulating research materials. The AU library provides convenient, immediate access to peer-reviewed journals, archival material, and up-to-the-moment research. Specific research about current business trends and best practices was obtained from The Conference Board and Catalyst. Additional supplementary resources were obtained via the Internet from miscellaneous websites. An extensive collection of literature was reviewed and assessed for validity and relevance to the topic. Literature that appeared to be largely opinion based, overtly biased and/or lacking in theoretical foundation was eliminated from the list of potential resources.

**Research Perspective**

This integrated project will engage in a feminist/postmodern perspective. According to Bonnycastle (2002), postmodernism rejects an absolute Truth or “frame of reference; [instead] there are only communities, each operating with its own knowledge, or relative “standards of truth” [that are] only valid within the community” (p. 237) at a particular moment in time.
Therefore, I acknowledge my own perspective of ‘meaning’ and knowledge of language is relative to my own experience at this particular moment in my life. Hence, in recognition that my own standard of truth may impose bias on the research project, I seek to understand the clashes between conflicting socio-cultural standards of truth through “differing frames of reference” (p. 237).

A feminist perspective seeks to expose organizational power and privilege extended to men and denied to women. As well, feminism strives to expose the structures by which “the powerful dominate social life and ideology” and how “men and women differ in their perceptions of life due to their social status” (Sarantakos, 2004, p. 55). Eschewing the notion that organizations are gender-neutral, a feminist postmodern lens focuses on the marginalization of women by gender-based power relations throughout talent management structures. Holistically, postmodern feminism will help to frame my understanding of the social construction of gender bias and age discrimination in organizations and through broad mechanisms of patriarchy, power and domination, the privileging of male knowledge and experience, leadership development for women, and the “Othering” of women in the course of diversity, gender mainstreaming and equality processes.

**Intended Outcomes**

Networking and sharing of “best practices” is a common Human Resources focus. I have observed that many HR professionals are eager to learn how HR operates in different organizations. However, I have also observed that few HR divisions execute critical analysis of so-called best practices and the potential for negative impact on women and other disadvantaged members. This integrated project could influence HR professionals to employ critical reasoning in challenging the status quo as well as in evaluating best practices. On a broader basis, this
project will be useful from an organizational policy perspective as a potential resource in analyzing talent management processes for gender bias. This project could also reveal underexplored aspects of human resources that might be examined in future studies for evidence of gendered ageism, for example recruitment and selection or work-life balance. This integrated project could also provide a foundation to other research efforts to fully develop a stronger theoretical foundation for gendered ageism.

**The Glass Ceiling and Workforce Demographics**

Recent newspaper articles and television news features have focused on the lack of career progress for women who must overcome a frequently insurmountable glass-ceiling barrier within the traditional organization. The *glass ceiling* describes “an intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions (Merriam Webster, 2011). In “Baby Steps to the Corner Office”, Abma (2011) reviews data that confirms women are making minimal inroads in shattering the glass ceiling. In “Family Finance”, Mazurkewich (2010) declares, “It’s still a man’s world” as she outlines a series of obstacles that most women must navigate en route to the executive suites. In “Canadian Companies Lag in Developing Women Leaders”, Fournier (2011) laments the glass ceiling is made of steel as “a survey of 290 organizations in Canada found that the overwhelming majority — 82 per cent — had no clear strategy for encouraging women to enter leadership positions”. In “Women Still Face a Glass Ceiling”, Snowdon (2011) reports a survey that reveals 73 percent of British women believe in the existence of barriers to advancement for women, which contrasts starkly to the 38 percent of British men who are aware of barriers to women.

The aforementioned mainstream media reports confirm the persistence of the glass ceiling despite many years of legislative equality measures and an increased public awareness of
the unfair disadvantages that women and other groups face. In addition, a number of business-focused associations have conducted studies on the slow progress that women have made in cracking the upper echelons of organizational hierarchy. A 2011 Catalyst survey demonstrates that while the labour force in Canada is comprised of 47.3 percent women, only 17.7 percent of the executive officers of the Financial Post 500 companies are women (2011a). This represents minimal progress since 1999 when a comparable referent group was comprised of 12.0 percent women. While the percentage of women in senior management occupations for the same period was higher at 31.99 percent, this reflects only the slightest improvement from 1995 when this figure stood at 25.20 percent of the workforce (Catalyst, 2011a). Another Catalyst survey describes a parallel pattern in the United States labour force (2011b). While women make up 46.7 percent of the labour force, only 14.4 percent of women occupy executive offices, and 17.7 percent hold senior management positions. In 1990, Acker described the influence of organizational practices on the creation and maintenance of: “gender segregation of work”, “income and status inequality between men and women”, and organizational images of masculinity and gender identity (1990, p. 140). Despite feminism’s work to remove these negative aspects, gendered practices continue to maintain barriers within organizational systems and processes.

On a broad basis, labour force demographics span four generational cohorts. Each cohort represents tremendous diversity in perspectives, work-life priorities and approaches to work (Catalyst, 2010). Over 40 percent of the labour force in Canada and the US is comprised of the veteran cohort (born before 1946) and the predominant baby boomer cohort (born between 1946-1964). The bulk of managerial and executive leadership within the traditional organization is typically comprised of male baby boomers who have climbed hierarchical career ladders
throughout extended careers with the same company. Traditionally, organizations have primarily looked towards their employees aged 35-44 years old for succession planning and leadership development. Currently, the generation X demographic represents that specific age range. However, recent statistics show the 35-44 age demographic in the workforce will continue to decrease in numbers for the foreseeable future. While generation Y (born in the mid-1980s and onward) is comparable to the size of the baby boomer group, it will be many years before that demographic can assume key leadership roles within organizations (Parkinson, 2002).

Many organizations have expressed concern about the potential loss of talent should its large base of older workers leave the workforce (Catterall & MacLaren, 2001; McCann & Giles, 2004; Radford, 1987). A Conference Board report reviews research demonstrating that organizational failure to fully employ, train or advance mature workers “will pose a threat to future growth and productivity” for a business (Morton, Foster & Sedlar, 2005, p. 6). This report also cautions, “If Boomers [sic] retire as expected, there won’t be enough people to do the work” (p. 9). However, for many older workers the traditional life trajectory of “education, work, and leisure is becoming obsolete” (p. 10). Some older workers must work because they do not have the financial means to support full retirement, some older workers re-enter the workforce after time away to attend to personal or family matters, and some older workers eschew societal expectations of aging that dictate retirement at the 65 years of age. Studies suggest organizations will benefit from a “well-orchestrated blending of the generations” (p. 10) whereby individuals may successfully engage in a life plan “in which education, work and leisure exist in different proportions throughout life” (p. 10). Unfortunately, organizations are slow to utilize these trends in the talent management and succession planning processes.
Ageism, Sexism and Stereotyping

Stereotypes of older workers as “lower in job performance, slower in work, lacking in creativity, and less able to cope with job stress” (McCann & Giles, 2004, p. 172) contradict research that “has shown that the output of older workers is equal to that of younger workers” (p. 172). There is a wide range of opinion about what constitutes an older worker (Riach, 2007). In one survey, a group of executive officers reckoned peak productivity of workers “occurred, on average, at age 43” (McCann & Giles, 2004, p. 172). A number of studies have assigned the age range of 45 and above to define “older” (Bugental & Hehman, 2007; Duncan & Loretto, 2004; McVittie, McKinlay & Widdicomb, 2003; Perry & Bourhis, 1998; Snape & Redman, 2003). Another UK survey showed a sample group of IT employees perceived an older worker was anyone aged 35 and older (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). However, these studies also indicate perceptions of “older” are not universal and women are perceived to be “older” at least 10 years earlier than men. A key study performed by Itzin and Phillipson (1995) describes findings that women are often considered “older” when they are between the ages of 30 – 35 years. Furthermore, the study reveals that it is men who perceive women “as being ‘older earlier’ than men” (p. 82). Within the study, a human resources representative described the 10-year span between the ages of 30 – 40 as the golden decade for promotion into top management. Nonetheless, women are written off for career development if they haven’t managed to “get where they are going by the age of 35” (p. 82). Conversely, although women are expected to soar into executive levels by the time they have reached the age of 35, men are more frequently appointed to this level of hierarchy at around age 45.

The actual age at which women are considered “older” is less significant than the processes that categorize women as different from an ideal norm. Several studies posit there are
inherent historical, contextual and social processes that influence the mutable nature of the meaning behind older workers and ageism (Catterall & Maclaren, 2001; Riach, 2007). At a macro level, society and culture are influential in the construction of categories, including age and gender (Cattarall & MacLaren, 2001; Radford, 1987). Bugental & Hehman (2007) identify several findings that describe an innate human propensity to “categorize people based on gender and age” (p. 181). Ageist (and sexist) stereotypes are, in turn, “central to the production of ageist attitudes, discourse and behaviours in the workplace” (McCann & Giles, 2004, p. 164). However, in an ever-expanding circle, attitudes, both good and bad, also have the potential to affect social policy and ‘become institutionalized’ (Bugental & Hehman, 2007; McCann & Giles, 2004; Riach, 2009) in the workplace. At a micro level, gender differences in the treatment of men and women in organizations are a result of organizational structure “rather than the characteristics of women and men as individuals” (Kanter as cited by Acker, 1990, p. 143).

In 1968, Robert Butler coined the term ageism to describe, “a process of systematic stereotyping of discrimination against people because they are old, just as…sexism accomplish(es) this with gender” (as cited in Radford, 1987, p. 4). Ageism is now more widely understood “to include any prejudice of discrimination against or in favour of an age group” (Palmore, as cited by Snape and Redman, 2003, p. 4). Levy & Banaji’s (2002) definition of ageism describes the closer workings of ageist stereotyping as “an alteration in feeling, belief, or behaviour in response to an individual’s or group’s perceived chronological age” (as cited by Bugental & Hehman, 2007, p. 173). Whilst ageism discriminates against individuals because they are either too young or too old, sexism is discrimination “based on gender and the attitudes, stereotypes, and the cultural elements that promote this discrimination” (Tekanjji, 2007).
Rupp, Vodanovich, & Crede (2006) highlight Banaji’s research that suggests, “ageism is more ubiquitous than sexism” (p. 1339) albeit ageism may be more difficult to detect. It is important to understand that at the heart of both ageism and sexism is a systemic imbalance of power and privilege. In short, it is likely that men have both and women have neither. Sexism and ageism in combination place women in a double jeopardy bind. *Gendered ageism*, then, makes the individual ‘more markedly disadvantaged’ (Radford, 1986, p. 5) and older women will face greater negative consequences than older men (Barnett, 2005; Bugental & Hehman, 2007; Itzin & Phillipson, 1995). In their discussion of gendered ageism, Itzin and Phillipson (1995) explore a double jeopardy that women face within society and organizations,

It would appear that ageism is in fact significantly gendered and that sexism operates always with a dimension of ageism within organizations for women of all ages. What we would conceptualize as “gendered ageism” appears to be a significant aspect of organizational culture. (p. 88)

Duncan & Loretto (2004) point out that some researchers have stated much more study on gendered ageism is required. Some feminists argue that ageism is a red herring, and it is sexism that disadvantages women. Other researchers suppose there is an “under-theorizing in…the bisection of age and gender” (p. 98), which lends to uncertainty about whether ageism and sexism are “simply additive or in some ways mutually reinforcing” (p. 98). This essay is not focused on resolving that particular debate. However, this essay does acknowledge Duncan & Loretto’s admonition that “both ageism and sexism have common roots in being defined by male experience” (p. 99).

Perceptions of age and gender are biologically, sociologically and cognitively based and become instantiated in individuals as assumptions, mental models or stereotypes (Bugental &
Tanggaard (2006) describes gender as a sociocultural construction, which is “learned and performed in practice” (p. 221). This hearkens to Scott’s concept of gender as an Integral connection between two propositions; gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power (as cited by Acker, 1990, p. 145).

Perry & Bourhis (1987) define stereotype as a form of cognitive structure by which one individual may categorize the “personality traits (or) overt behaviours [and] social categories (i.e. occupations, age)” (p. 1673) of another individual. The person who is discriminated against is regarded as different from and, therefore, less desirable than a presumed norm. On one hand, femininity is stereotyped as oppressed, weak and passive (Acker, 1990). On the other hand “older” is perceived to be not only physically weaker but also as lacking in affective characteristics such as ambition and drive, and cognitive abilities such as mental flexibility, acuity, and malleability (Bugental & Hehman, 2007; Catterall & MacLaren, 2001; Gullette, as cited by Barnett, 2005; Radford, 1987; Rupp, Vodanovich & Crede, 2006). Older women are “particularly negatively stereotyped” (Wood, Wilkinson & Harcourt, 2008, p. 430) where age is a social construct resulting in “older women…often [being] treated differently from older men” (Schuman and Kleiner, 2001, as cited by Wood, Wilkinson and Harcourt, 2008, p. 430). For example, stereotypes assume that older women are less physically attractive and they are warm but incompetent (Barnett, 2005; Kite et al. as cited by Bugental & Hehman, 2007). Conversely, stereotypes about older men assume they become more distinguished looking with age and they are knowledgeable and wise (Barnett, 2005).
Alas, stereotypes or “private preconceptions” (Radford, 1987, p. 4) do not remain concealed as they cross over into the broader realm as “public prejudice” (Radford) and become manifest as stigma (Bugental & Hehman, 2007), defined by Merriam Webster as a mark of shame or discredit (2011). In Tanggaard’s (2006) view, gender is produced and reproduced “through actions pertaining to one’s body and self-performance which constitutes particular gender roles in practice” (p. 221). As this relates to gendered ageism, the stigmatization process devalues the identity of older women “and the limitations imputed to [their devalued identity] are employed as a justification for social inequalities” (Bugental & Hehman, 2007, p. 179) at the hand of those “groups in society with power to control those without it” (Radford, 1987, p. 4). Darity reinforces this by describing the propensity for dominant groups who will protect their position of superiority through deliberate actions that are meant to undermine lesser groups (as cited by Wood, Wilkinson & Harcourt, 2008, p. 429). Since older individuals and women are both generally assigned to a lesser role, it is likely that older women will experience a double whammy of exclusion or subordination within society (Bugental & Hehman, 2007).

As described previously, a wide variety of research has revealed that gender distinctions are deeply embedded in social structures and organizational processes (Acker, 1990; Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998a & 1998b). Organizations are a reflection of broader sociocultural norms; therefore, older women will likely encounter a higher level of bias and discriminatory human resource practices (Barnett, 2005; Itzin & Phillipson, 1995). Bugental & Hehman (2007) examine research, which determined that older in combination with male exhibits a different salience than older in combination with female. Heilman et al (2004) report a psychological study which examined how older women in the business world are categorized as “members of an ‘outgroup’ (i.e. any group other than white males)” (as cited by Barnett, 2005, p. 27). In
practice, those individuals who are part of the outgroup (in this case, older women of any ethnic or racial group) will experience less career success than those individuals who are not part of the outgroup (i.e., male workers). Hence, the creation of a “male work world and a female work world” (Barnett, 2005, p. 27), which categorizes women into different career paths both hierarchically as well as vertically.

However, despite current research findings that promote diversity in leadership, many talent management processes continue a reliance on traditional career ladder schemes that are rooted in hierarchy. These schemes generally disregard older candidates at the recruitment phase and maintain barriers to older workers’ advancement prospects (Morton, Foster & Sedlar, 2005). This is borne out by a Conference Board survey of 400 human resources professionals, half of which indicated their organizations do not “actively recruit or retain mature workers” (Parkinson, 2002, p. 7). Instead, many organizations appear to perpetuate a dichotomous HR approach whereby older workers are perceived to be both economically redundant and economically vital (Catterall & MacLaren, 2001; Radford, 1987; Riach, 2007). Within the former viewpoint, older workers are perceived as obstacles to the career advancement of younger employees. Conversely, within the latter viewpoint, employers perceive older workers as more interested in withdrawing from employment than in pursuing advancement opportunities within the workplace (Radford, 1987).

A focus on the mechanics of perception, attitudes and stereotypes does not delve deeply enough to explain why women experience less career progression, lower wages and occupational segregation both horizontally and vertically. To begin to examine the manner by which talent management negatively impacts the leadership development of older women, one must
understand the patriarchal roots of management and the persistent nature of gender within the organization.

**Roots of “Man”agement**

The traditional career progression from new hire to management is an employee development scheme of the late nineteenth century (Goffee and Nicholson as cited by Wilson, 2005). Organizational hierarchy has historically held a preference for youth at career outset plus a career progression that is continuous and without breaks (Wilson, 2005). Prior to World War II, it was more unusual for women to be members of the paid labour force. However, with military conscription of male workers in most Western nations, and with home economies that were struggling to maintain productivity, it became imperative to hire women to fill the roles that had previously been exclusively offered to men. In the United States, the female labour force increased by 6.5 million workers during WWII. Between 1943 and 1945, polls indicated 61 – 85 percent of women wanted to continue to work after the war (The WAC, 2004).

By war’s end, a large number of women had acquired the experience, knowledge and broader competencies that should have permitted movement into the managerial hierarchies (Wilson, 2005). In the mid to late 1940s, it was widely believed that women’s societal roles would forever be transformed from domestic servitude to economically productive and equal members of society (Bloom, as cited by Wilson, 2005). However, the post-WWII era saw the same limitation of women’s management access continued through workplace barriers, which perpetuated long-held social distinctions between “men’s work and women’s work [and] what was considered work for the young and work of the mature” (Wilson, 2005, p. 4). The Post-WWII economic machine was firing on all cylinders, and it was during this heightened time of business activity that the norms for management progression became entrenched within
traditional organizations. Those norms required that in order to achieve managerial levels, the worker must start at a young age with the company and work continuously through a steady and predictable progression of career levels (Wilson, 2005).

Women at the management level became regarded as an organizational risk because young women might require time away from work and the career ladder to have babies. Older women who have not had “continuous economic activity from youth to middle age” (Wilson, 2005, p. 4) fare no better as candidates for management since age is as significant a barrier to promotion as gender is (Liff & Ward, 2001). Once a woman took time away from work, she would be considered too old to re-enter a career ladder at any point in the hierarchy. This was rationalized through the perception that an older woman couldn’t start at a lower rung because she would be too old for that position and she couldn’t start at a higher level because she had not put in the years of continuous service that were required of that position. (Wilson, 2005). As Acker (1990) explains, women’s reproduction and sexuality is overtly used as an excuse for discrimination of women in organizational processes.

It was men who were already in managerial positions so it was men who outlined management requirements “in accordance with their own beliefs and wishes” (Wilson, 2005, p. 9). Ability did not necessarily influence consideration, although women weren’t the only disadvantaged group (e.g. members of religious groups, ethnic minorities). Nonetheless, Wilson suggests this organizational linkage between age and hierarchy reflects the traditional bureaucracy’s resolve to establish and maintain a “male normative nature of management” (p. 10). Similarly, Kanter (as cited by Acker, 1990) identified a masculine ethic of “cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision-making” (p. 143) in early management history. This masculine ethic was established and maintained by men, and it required potential managers to be
tough minded, analytical, impersonal, and unemotional. In the post-WWII years, many companies deliberately recruited young men into management training programs “on the basis of their ‘promise’ not their achievements” (Wilson, 2005, p. 14). Through power and control, management would ensure the young recruits were “groom[ed] to be company men” (p. 14) and company men were always expected to be trustworthy and loyal to management and to the organization. These paternalistic structures could neither tolerate time away from work nor permit the entry of difference.

The preceding account reveals the historical depth and breadth of the glass ceiling with gendered ageism as an additive protective barrier, which restricts women and youth to lower hierarchical levels whilst simultaneously permitting men to zoom ever upwards from their career development runways (Acker, 1990). As Acker explicated, masculine hegemony continues unhindered. Although women may seek to break the glass ceiling, “to function at the top of male hierarchy requires that women render irrelevant everything that makes them women” (p. 153).

Equality? Diversity? Gender Mainstreaming? What’s a (Old) Grrrl to Do?

Employment equity opportunity (EEO) legislation has been in place in most Western countries (e.g., Canada, the US, Australia, the UK, the Scandinavian countries, many European countries, and so on) from the early 1970s. EEO legislation seeks to remove obstacles to women in employment and to enable equal opportunities. However, as Riach (2009) points out, by the early 1990s, researchers were beginning to criticize the effectiveness of governmental policies. Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn (2009) describe the duality of equality legislation whereby “women require different treatment and remedial measures to promote equality in outcomes” (Guerrina; Liff and Cameron; and Scott as cited by Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn, 2009, p. 660) and at the same time suggest “that equality is best achieved by evaluating individuals ‘on their
particular merits against the same standards’ ” (Liff and Dickens, as cited by Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn, 2009, p. 660). This paper only attempts to fit the complex concerns with EEO legislation within a minuscule nutshell in order to establish the broader legislative formalities by which organizations must develop in-house equality rules and policies. Albeit, Riach (2009) cites Hoque and Noon who describe many organizational formalities as “empty shell policies [that are] simply an insurance against litigation” (p. 319). From a gender perspective, it is more likely that EEO policies and procedures will protect the status quo. Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn’s (2009) study reinforces the ineffectiveness of EEO as 90 percent of organizations in a sample survey sought only to meet the minimum requirements of legislation. As Cockburn (cited by Benschop and Verloo, 2006) explains, EEO models “seek to give disadvantaged groups a boost up the ladder, while leaving the structure of that ladder and the disadvantage it entails just as before” (p. 21). Likewise, Thornton asserts such piecemeal equality gestures are “designed to instantiate inequality for women at work” (as cited by Aynsworth, Knox and O’Flynn, 2009, p. 661).

Ergo, in an HR and/or talent management context, empty shell policies can ensure neither fair succession planning practices nor valid and consistent monitoring processes (Riach, 2009). In response to these concerns, the 1990s saw an organizational turn to a diversity approach as a means of satisfying “both a business and social-justice incentive to drive equality within organizations” (Riach, 2009, p. 320). However, diversity may be less an acknowledgement that every individual is unique in his or her own way and more likely an iteration of ‘othering’ as “diversity became aligned with something for the disadvantaged” (Riach, 2009, p. 328) rather than something for all. In much the same way as EEO policies maintain the status quo, diversity initiatives may also leave the hierarchical ladders intact by rationalizing stereotypes of difference
within policy. As described previously in this article, older women workers are frequently stereotyped as best suited for lower level positions; hence, they are not elevated to “positions where they can influence and infiltrate strategic change within the company, as espoused by diversity philosophies” (Riach, 2009, p. 322). As Riach explains, the potential for disadvantage as a result of diversity exists “because one of its central tenets, ‘difference’, is also used to define discrimination as well” (p. 330). In short, diversity measures may merely pay lip service to equality as men’s career opportunities “depend on the barriers that deny those opportunities to women” (Acker, 1990, p. 153).

Despite growing evidence of age- and gender-based differences within succession planning, Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn (2010) point out organizations have infrequently “developed comprehensive programmes to address these issues” (p. 661). As French (1995) succinctly questions, why would men want to “move over” (p. 141) to make room for women in the executive ranks? This situation illustrates Acker’s (1990) assertion that feminist objectives, “such as why women are always concentrated at the bottom of organizational structure” (p. 141), continue to remain unresolved within “managerial questions, such as how to achieve organizational efficiency” (p. 141). To explain this, Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn (2009) describe studies that simultaneously maintain gender inequality in the very organizational programs that are espoused to “address and alleviate gender discrimination” (p. 664). If this is so, one may confirm the existence of a broader gender subtext within the succession planning process, which is described by Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) as “concealed processes subtly and latently (re)producing gender distinctions” (p. 787).

Benschop and Verloo (2006) examine the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming in expunging the genderedness of organizations “by eliminating biases in existing
routines, involving the actors in the transformation process” (p. 19). The authors review gender mainstreaming’s capacity to improve the implementation of equality efforts by specifically “addressing the genderedness of organizations” (p. 22), an inherent trait that so frequently remains embedded not only in structures but also in the attitudes and behaviours of organizational members as described previously. One key to transformation, therefore, might lie in challenging the biases and notions of the organization’s “regular actors” (p. 19). This is, seemingly, no mean feat. As discussed in this article, there appears to be an innate human and societal bias against age and gender in tandem with an innate organizational preference for male over female. Be that as it may, Benschop and Verloo cite Rees who sees an opportunity through gender mainstreaming to challenge the status quo via means other than EEO’s “‘tinkering’, which is equal treatment” or diversity’s conception of “‘tailoring’ situations to the needs of women” (p. 22). Gender mainstreaming’s transformation potential lies in the identification and implementation of “new standards for everyone” (p. 22). These new standards could potentially challenge the status quo and “replace the segregated institutions and standards associated with masculinity and femininity” (p. 22).

Transforming Talent Management

For the purposes of talent management and succession planning, the potential for transformation lies in the identification and elimination of embedded gender biases within organizational policies and practices (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Warren, 2009). Warren (2009) provides a basic outline of talent management and HR processes. The key stakeholders of talent management systems are employees, human resources personnel, and organizational leadership. In general, human resources act as the intermediaries between all organizational departments, the organization’s talent or personnel and the senior leadership. In the traditional organization, it is
generally a given that the senior leadership group “determines strategies, policies, goals, and objectives” (p. 4). Talent management divisions are an extension of HR groups and both factions coordinate their efforts to advance employee development as well as performance review processes and programs that are based on direction from senior leadership. Mid-level managers and team leaders bear the responsibility of evaluating employee performance and making recommendations for promotions or to provide feedback regard succession viability. The employees are involved in annual goal setting, which establishes key criteria against which annual performance reviews are measured. Because there are so many stakeholders in the system, and because each carries their own preconceptions, the entire talent management system may be impacted by gender bias that cascades throughout an organization (Warren, 2009). Warren summarizes three key components of talent management that disadvantage women: The senior leadership effect, institutionalizing bias, and compounding bias.

**Senior Leadership Effect**

Senior leadership typically wields a great deal of power and influence in the talent management and succession planning processes. A mainstay of organizational culture is a “system of shared values…and belief…that create behavioural norms…to guide the activities of organizational members” (Schmerhorn, as cited by French, 1995, p. 56). Given the number of men in senior level positions, these individuals hold an excessive ability to influence organizational culture. As a result of the senior leadership effect, successors are selected because of their similarity to existing leadership and in a circuitous loop will “mirror the traits and biases of the senior leadership team that promoted them” (Warren, 2009, p. 6). As it is likely the senior leadership of most organizations is predominantly male, then the perspective that cascades downward will be skewed to a masculine perspective of leadership (French, 1995).
French (1995) also draws an important distinction in saying that senior leaders influence selection criteria on the basis of how likely the candidate will perform a job according to an accepted mode rather than the leadership traits that an individual may display. This appears to be born out by my workplace experience of a capable older women being de-listed from succession planning simply because her age in combination with her gender did not adhere to that organization’s preference for the Ideal Worker mode. As described previously, senior leadership maintains the status quo of management rather than seeking new leadership models that will include women of all ages. Therefore, talent management and succession planning processes are compromised by biases that “are codified and promulgated throughout the organization” (Warren, 2009, p. 9). Masculine stereotypes become conflated with leadership qualities and talent management is suddenly measuring women’s effectiveness in acting like a male manager rather than her leadership attributes.

In addition, organizations fare poorly at maintaining transparency in the succession planning process and employees rarely understand “what it takes to get promoted and be a leader” (p. 10). This means that employees have to rely on their perceptions of what leadership looks like based on the cues that surround them within their organization. Warren recounts Catalyst research that clarifies, “when left to their own interpretations, women and men leaders…[resort] to gender stereotypes to define characteristics of effective leaders” (p. 10).

**Institutionalizing Bias**

Organizations may believe the formality and centrality of talent management systems make them fair and equal. However, Riach (2009) reports research that reveals a tendency for managers to adhere to more “informal managerial or cultural norms” (p. 319) in making HR-related decisions such as succession planning. Therefore, such systems and structures are subject
to institutionalized bias when they fail to “[implement] checks and balances that minimize gender biases and level the playing field for men and women” (Warren, 2009, p. 6). A Catalyst survey examined sample talent management documents and discovered that first impressions appear to reveal gender neutral and inclusive language (as cited by Warren, 2009). However, on closer examination, gender-neutral references for senior leadership positions in particular were compromised by criteria that are inherently masculine in tone and content. As well, while talent management programs strive to address programming for all employees, succession planning and leadership development programs likely extend an advantage to men in general and, more specifically, to those already in leadership positions. For those female employees who are counting on their exceptional performance to break management ranks, they may discover the performance review programs have not been closely scrutinized to eliminate competency stereotypes that have a strong pro-male bias (Warren).

By deconstructing the manifestations of hegemonic power that maintain organizational bias and stereotyping, transformation seeks to “understand how social relations are conceived…how relations of production are experienced, and how collective identity is established” (Scott, as cited by Ainsworth, Knox and O’Flynn, 2009, p. 665). Discursive analysis of organizational documents and the nature of conversations and formal discussions in the workplace could reveal how the identity of the older woman worker is constructed and how this impacts the employee as well as how socio-culturally constructed role assignations are maintained within the succession planning processes (Ainsworth, 2002). At the fore of deconstruction, one must be ever mindful of the mercurial nature of social identity, as it “may be fragmented, ambiguous and subject to continuous reproduction through political, social and discursive processes” (Ainsworth, 2002, p. 583). The purpose of transformation, in this regard,
should aim to make visible the bias towards the “gendered, biomedicalized, aging body acting as a ‘cultural icon of decline and helplessness’.” (Tulle-Winton, as cited by Ainsworth, 2002, p. 581).

Of utmost importance to transformation is the matter of pervasive power relationships in the traditional Western organization. As Barnett (2005) points out, ageism and sexism is built into public policies and workplace practices. Understood in this context, organizational processes seek to not only maintain the status quo of an organization’s hierarchy, but they also seek to maintain a preference for the societal group “men” over the societal group “older women”. This hearkens to Bourdieu’s argument “that some bodily forms have more symbolic value than others do” (as cited by Catterall and MacLaren, 2001, p. 1127). Persistent evidence of biased talent management structures and succession planning practices points to the continuation of the lower symbolic value of the older woman.

**Cascading Gender Bias**

Talent management systems become compromised when organizations do not identify “gaps between the design and execution of talent management programs” (Warren, 2009, p. 6). However, evidence of cascading gender bias in talent management is upheld by the surveys as described previously in this article, which indicate women have scarcely improved on their thin and precarious toehold in the executive offices. Any stakeholder or group of stakeholders could be influenced by their biases at any point throughout a process that is intended to evaluate employee performance and make advancement decisions. Duncan and Loretto (2004) reflect that it is often “difficult to distinguish oppressor from oppressed [as] individuals may be both victims and perpetrators of ageism” (p. 97). My personal observation that inspired this article exemplifies this statement, as it was a young female HR practitioner who said “Not enough
“NOT ENOUGH RUNWAY”

runway” in evaluating an older woman’s prospects in ascending to the executive ranks. In this case, the oppressor was a young woman who surely must overcome gendered disadvantages as a normal part of her everyday organizational life.

The aforementioned incident reinforces the gaps that exist within organizational procedures. Nonetheless, research indicates very few companies conduct surveys to detect bias. Without intentional checks and balances in talent management and human resource systems, gender bias will continue to disavow diversity in the succession planning process. For example, many organizations have enacted flexible working policies in recognition of the conflicting roles that employees must navigate. However, in the succession planning process, senior managers frequently conflate a woman’s need for flexible working arrangements with a lack of interest in higher management (Liff and Ward, 2001). In this regard, a bias for the traditional male-oriented uninterrupted career path cascades from general HR-related work-life structures into talent management and succession planning. As mentioned previously, the roots of “man”agement disadvantage younger women as well as older women within organizations that have implemented formal EEO and diversity policies.

Very few companies offer targeted diversity training, which can help to educate about forms of stereotyping and methods of avoiding bias within the evaluation process (Warren). As Perry and Bourhis (1998) point out, simply knowing about diversity initiatives “may be insufficient to overcome bias against older workers” (p. 1692). Those authors aver, “the training [of] decision makers (emphasis added) is essential” (p. 1692). However, this suggestion fails to understand that the training of all employees is essential to ensure broad transformation within organizational settings. In a wider sense, cascading gender must be viewed as the culmination of
what has already been learned by all organizational actors about how “gender is learned and performed in practice” (Tanggaard, 2006, p. 221).

Tanggaard’s discussion about gender and learning in the workplace lends itself to the transformation potential of the removal of cascading gender in organizations. An organizational member learns about “his or her social, cultural, embodied and gendered participation in social practices related to the workplace” (p. 221). Therefore, by enacting checks and balances in what a worker learns about his or her workplace; the organization can ensure the worker reframes an understanding of career development through talent management processes, which should train “Difference is a gift” (Gloria Steinem, 2009) rather than difference is a problem. In this workplace learning environment, gendered ageism would be understood and eliminated at all junctions of talent management systems.

Unfortunately, organizations frequently place more emphasis in determining gaps that have the potential to limit economic gain rather than identifying those practices that perpetuate bias (Muson, 2003). In two separate studies performed by The Conference Board, a wide variety of gaps were exposed, as outlined in the following table below. The feedback contrasts gaps in perceptions, beliefs and or attitudes between women workers, mature workers (a group comprised of both men and women) and those who manage them (predominantly men). It is interesting to note the potential for women to experience gendered ageism as double jeopardy by contrasting the beliefs of women with the beliefs of mature workers, one may note striking similarities. Equally striking is the shroud of ignorance that influences managerial beliefs about aspects of their organizational culture.
Table 1 – Feedback Gaps/Cascading Bias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women’s Beliefs++</th>
<th>Older Workers’ Beliefs*</th>
<th>Managerial Beliefs about Older Workers*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compensation</strong></td>
<td>Fewer women than men are satisfied with compensation.</td>
<td>Contributions are not recognized; not fairly compensated.</td>
<td>Mature workers receive the same (or more) compensation as younger employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retention</strong></td>
<td>More women than men feel pushed out when they no longer grow with their current employer.</td>
<td>First to be targeted when companies are reducing staff.</td>
<td>Early-retirement is used as an incentive to avoid downsizing and not to make room for younger blood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work Life Balance</strong></td>
<td>More women than men report family and childcare obligations as a hindrance to their work roles.</td>
<td>Older employees willing to stay with their employers if given more time off to pursue interests/concerns.</td>
<td>Survey results show few companies offer reduced hours or phased retirement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advancement</strong></td>
<td>Fewer women than men are satisfied with advancement opportunities. Institutional bias and stereotyping is the top barrier to women’s advancement.</td>
<td>Supervisors perpetuate negative stereotypes of mature workers; reserving promotion opportunities for younger employees.</td>
<td>HR Executives say older workers get the same promotion opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversity and Inclusion Training</strong></td>
<td>Critical to educate managers and employees on the nature of bias and perception gaps.</td>
<td>Believe in the importance of age-diversity training, especially for managers.</td>
<td>HR Executives say diversity training does not address attitudes toward older workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workplace and Lifelong Learning</strong></td>
<td>Lack of mentoring. Lack of leadership opportunities. Uneven access to training opportunities.</td>
<td>2/3 of respondents desire more training &amp; leadership opportunities.</td>
<td>2/3 of HR Executives say their companies do not offer training to upgrade skills and/or offer specialized training to mature workers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Conclusion

Our current environment demonstrates that societal privilege for men remains vastly unchecked and organization structures, such as the glass ceiling, continue to perpetuate gendered practices. Despite prognostications of labour and talent shortages, and regardless of assertions of EEO, diversity and gender mainstreaming policies; capable older women are frequently viewed as “different” from the Ideal Worker norm and, therefore, have insufficient runway to succeed at higher organizational levels. Although organizations are beginning to reconsider their perspectives on older women workers in response to shifts in workforce demographics, EEO legislation and policy will likely continue to be of limited use in helping older women to break through the glass ceiling.

Carter and Silva (2010) outline the frequent pronouncements that women will gain parity within organizations: “When women get the right education, the right training, the right work experience, and the right aspirations – to succeed at the highest levels of business” (p.1). This is a succinct reminder that women themselves are held to blame for their lack of progression into the senior managerial ranks. As one CEO simplistically proclaimed, “Women need to get more assertive and ask for what they deserve” (Hasenfratz, as cited by Carter and Silva, 2010, p. 5). These assertions appear to situate women as singularly and collectively responsible for hegemonic societal organizational processes. Most importantly, claims such as these merely reinforce the long-held notion that there is only one form of management – the masculine form.

Might resolution of these matters be accomplished by invoking the optimistic words of feminists such as Gloria Steinem who derides the negative impact of categories of difference?
Steinem (2009) advocates “making difference a source of learning”. At a conference Steinem imparted,

I think the…challenge of our lives, is to learn from difference, and at the same time, in perfect balance with difference, understand that we are all human in a universal sense. We live in a world of either/or. We’re trying to make a world of and. So it is about shared humanity in perfect balance with difference. And I hope…we think not only about difference in conventional labels, but in terms of uniqueness. Each one of us is unique. (2009)

Later in the same keynote address, Steinem elucidates,

We all have the full circle of human qualities. It may be that men need to become more expressive, more empathetic, more nurturing – that’s their progress. And we need to become more daring – that’s our progress. But we are each trying to complete the full circle of humanity. (2009)

Humanity is lacking in organizations that perpetuate talent management practices that can designate a capable woman as too old to aspire to elevated leadership positions. If cascading bias has the potential to negatively inform an entire organization’s practices, then surely feminist perspectives can become a linchpin of organizational learning that strives to cascade a bias for the human, rather than a bias for the white male human over the older female human. In completing the full circle of humanity, men and women alike must learn from each other and strive towards interdependence rather than independence and isolation. Through new understanding, organizations might summon a feminist transformatory philosophy that has the potential to alter evaluations of “Not enough runway” into words of encouragement: “The sky’s the limit! Take wing and soar ever higher!”
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