

# SPONSORING WOMEN'S SUCCESS

Executive leaders' views on sponsoring and mentoring

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# FOREWORD: Ann Francke, Brenda Trenowden CBE and David Mills



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**In 2019, workplace gender diversity and inclusion retains its position as one of the critical business issues that still needs to be fully addressed. Although women make up nearly half of the workforce in the UK, they still predominantly find themselves relegated to entry-level roles rather than management positions, with significant challenges working their way up the management pipeline to achieve a prized boardroom seat.**

## GENDER DIVERSITY BOOSTS GDP

The economic importance for diversity in a 21st-century workforce is well documented: McKinsey report that bridging this gender pay gap could boost UK GDP by £150 billion by 2025<sup>1</sup>. Yet the UK still struggles to keep pace with closing this existing gap.

It is now over 20 years since the first female CEO was appointed to a FTSE 100 company, and despite some exceptional stories of success in the intervening years, progress to increase the overall number of women with executive responsibilities remains disappointing. As of November 2019 just 4% of CEOs and 7% of board chairs are female in the FTSE 350<sup>2</sup>.

## WOMEN STILL UNDERREPRESENTED AT SENIOR EXECUTIVE LEVEL

Although FTSE 350 companies hit a significant milestone of 30% female directorships in September 2019, there are still 151 FTSE 350 boards<sup>3</sup> that have not yet reached that modest level, and the lack of diversity at senior management level remains stark. Both the 30% Club and the Hampton Alexander Review have set targets to increase the number of women in senior management positions by 2020 (30% and 33% respectively). In November 2019, there were just 28.2% women at executive committee and direct report level of FTSE 350 companies<sup>4</sup>: there is still much work to do to achieve better gender balance at the top of businesses.

Whilst there is no silver bullet to resolve the diversity and inclusion challenge affecting some of the UK's top companies, there are steps that must be taken to ensure the pipeline of talented women have the opportunity to secure their seats on

executive committees. Senior leaders must act with conviction and address their workplace cultures to ensure that diversity can thrive through the implementation of targeted diversity action plans.

## ADOPTING SPONSORSHIP AND MENTORING CRITICAL TO INCLUSIVE ACTION PLANS

Critical to these inclusive diversity action plans is adopting and implementing talent management and succession planning approaches which may have traditionally been less accessible to women. Sponsorship, the practice of championing and advocating to support a woman's progression, is something that only 3% of CMI's female practising manager members report receiving. Mentoring, a better-known practice designed to guide and support women, is still only received by just under 1 in 5 CMI female managers.

Sponsoring for Success aims to reignite an essential, national discussion ensuring corporates put sponsorship and mentoring at the top of their agenda. This conversation must ensure that women are provided by senior leaders with the support they need throughout their career, as identifying and nurturing talent is a key aspect of any management role. Only then will we start to get anywhere close to redressing the imbalances that are still so apparent in FTSE 350 companies.

This report explores the role that some of the UK's most senior executives believe sponsorship and mentoring can both play in driving forward gender diversity in the workplace. Our report makes some practical recommendations about how leaders, whether in the FTSE 350 or other large companies, can look to implement successful sponsorship and mentoring programmes in their organisations to achieve greater parity in executive roles. In so doing, we fully acknowledge that considerations of ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, socio-economic background and beyond are all part of the journey; and that gender identities are themselves evolving rapidly.

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in The United Kingdom, September 2016 accessed on 21/11/2019 at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-the-united-kingdom>

<sup>2</sup> Hampton-Alexander Review, Hampton Alexander Review 2019: Improving gender balance in FTSE Leadership, accessed on 13/11/2019 at: <https://hsewomenleaders.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/HA-Review-Report-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Data sourced from BoardEx (<https://corp.boardex.com/solutions/>) on the 19 November 2019

<sup>4</sup> Hampton-Alexander Review, op.cit.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our report, produced by CMI in partnership with the 30% Club and Russell Reynolds Associates, provides an overview of the extent of sponsorship and mentoring in UK businesses among managers and senior leaders. It critically drills down to focus on the perspective of senior decision makers in UK firms about the role sponsoring in particular should play in the workplace, alongside mentoring, to support gender diversity at an executive level.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Within our research we found that mentoring is a concept that is well understood by senior leaders and practising managers in the UK. However, with the exception of the most senior executive levels, there is a weak understanding of the concept of sponsorship.
  - 90% of our practising managers were able to provide a definition of a mentor using key words around “advice,” “support” and “building confidence.”
  - By contrast, 51 percent could not provide a definition for a sponsor: this means many women may be missing out on opportunities to progress through the executive pipeline.
- Although most female senior leaders polled had been sponsored and mentored across the course of their career, only 3% of female practising managers reported they are currently being sponsored and 19% reported being mentored.
  - The benefits of sponsorship for career progression are unquestionable: the key career benefits for our senior leaders of being sponsored were general promotion opportunities and increased influence which were selected by 61% of senior leaders.
  - Mentoring by contrast focuses more on short-term career goals and objectives: the key benefit reported by 59% of our senior leaders was increased knowledge.
- Senior leaders are generally supportive of sponsorship and mentoring: nearly all (98%) of our senior leaders had sponsored or mentored staff over the course of their career
  - For the majority (62%) involved in sponsoring the number one reason for becoming a sponsor was to develop the next generation of talent, with 52% of our senior executives looking for high potential in a sponsee.
- ▸ For those involved in mentoring, this was driven, for 72% of our senior leaders, by a belief that it was the right time to share their skills and experience. As a result the majority (83%) were looking for mentees who displayed a willingness to learn.
- With sponsorship being less common in the UK, we explored our senior leaders views on the corporate benefits of sponsorship
  - 72% of senior leaders polled agreed sponsorship supported the promotion of talent in the leadership pipeline.
  - 66% agreed that it supported gender diversity in the leadership pipeline.
  - 64% agreed it was critical for succession planning in a company.
- There are barriers to implementing sponsorship as a formal programme within an organisation: but most critical, as our interviewees report, one of the greatest barriers is an unsupportive tone from the top.
  - Only a fifth of senior leaders (21%) stated that the businesses they worked with had a formal sponsorship programme, compared to 86% who had formal mentoring schemes.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Sponsorship leads to promotion opportunities and enhanced influence, however there is low understanding and uptake in corporate business. Therefore we recommend that:

1. Sponsorship, alongside mentoring, must form part of a commitment to leadership gender diversity and be driven from the top.
2. Formal sponsorship programmes need to be developed as part of structured talent management programmes to support gender progression in business.
3. Businesses need to ensure a culture of sponsorship is embedded throughout the leadership layers, especially in large companies.
4. Businesses should combine sponsorship efforts with a culture of, and structured approach toward, mentoring so women receive support all the way to the top executive roles.
5. Senior women and men should act as agents of change to back formal sponsorship in organisations where such programmes are yet to be implemented.

“ We know that there is great talent out there, you only have to look at young graduates and entrepreneurs. To earn that talent, companies have to put the formal mentoring structures in place that will develop and enrich the employees using them.

The sponsorship piece is really the difference between someone staying in your organisation or going somewhere else. Businesses need to realise that this is how they retain their talented staff in a competitive world. ”

**Heather Melville OBE CCMI, Chair of CMI Women**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI), the 30% Club and Russell Reynolds Associates would like to thank all those who took part in our research. We're grateful to CMI Companions' and managers' survey participants for their contributions and, in particular, the senior leaders who contributed their insights via our joint Breakfast Seminar and in depth interviews. We're also grateful for the continued support of the CMI Women Board, chaired by Heather Melville, and those who attended CMI Women's Sponsoring for Success events for their insights.

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# BACKGROUND OF SPONSORING FOR SUCCESS

Our report, produced by CMI in partnership with the 30% Club and Russell Reynolds Associates, provides an overview of the extent of sponsorship and mentoring in UK businesses among managers and senior leaders. It critically drills down to focus on the perspective of senior decision makers in UK firms about the role sponsoring in particular should play in the workplace, alongside mentoring, to support gender diversity at an executive level. This focus on sponsorship and mentoring is critical to make the difference needed to close the gender pay gap in the executive pipeline and create the associated boosts to GDP<sup>5</sup>.

## THE GLASS PYRAMID-TIME FOR A STEP CHANGE

The glass pyramid describes the shape of female leadership in organisations—there are many more women in the bottom quartile of organisations than at the top<sup>6</sup>. Indeed women are still woefully underrepresented at the highest senior leadership levels: currently just 4% of CEO's and 7% of board chairs are female in the FTSE 350. The deadline for achieving the government's 33% target for women in senior management positions FTSE 350 companies set in the Hampton Alexander Review report is only a year away, yet there are just 28.2% women at executive committee and direct report level in the FTSE 350. More action is urgently needed to improve and redesign workplace policies that will ensure a level playing field for women vis-à-vis men.

*The main issue is the pipeline. Women get to a stage in their career in middle management and then they can't break through and get to the right side of the pipeline.*

In 2018 CMI's *Blueprint for Balance*<sup>7</sup> outlined sponsorship and mentoring as critical mechanisms within a wider organisational action plan that should be employed to redress the imbalance for gender at the top of an organisation. It recommended that executive leadership teams should be tasked with sponsoring at least one high-potential woman and tracking her progress. At the same time, leadership teams should be supporting senior and middle managers to sponsor more female middle managers. Managers should also support female team members in becoming mentored whether by senior women or by men. The 30% Club research has also demonstrated that women value sponsorship far more than men do<sup>8</sup>.

*Unfortunately, it is still a violation of the norms to see women achieve top management positions so we must continue to push to make sure it happens.*

## SPONSORING FOR SUCCESS

Research from the United States has demonstrated that well-qualified women need sponsors to advocate for their next key role or promotion and to propel and protect them as they make the journey through to senior management<sup>9</sup>. However, there is limited research around how widespread sponsorship is in the UK and also how the concept is understood in relation to mentoring. The only large-scale research to date in the UK examining sponsorship in large companies showed that just 16 percent of full-time female employees reported being sponsored<sup>10</sup>.

Through survey work with senior executives and managers, and drawing on some real-life insights and reflections from senior executives, we look to examine how endorsing sponsorship works as an approach to talent management. We place a particular emphasis on how it can support women to progress through the executive management pipeline and elevate the next generation of female managers to executive leaders.

Our research highlights the fundamental bedrocks that are required for effective and successful sponsoring arrangements. We also explore how sponsorship differs from mentoring, and how the two can interact in the world of work. We present best practice for sponsorship and mentoring schemes, and how sponsorship could operate as part of formal talent management programmes.

<sup>5</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, opcit.

<sup>6</sup> A Francke, *Create a Gender-balanced Workplace*, Penguin, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> CMI, *A Blueprint For Balance: time to fix the broken windows*, January 2018 accessed on 20/11/19 at:

<https://www.managers.org.uk/-/media/Files/PDF/Blueprint%20for%20Balance%20Broken%20Windows%20Full%20Report.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> The 30% Club, KPMG and YSC, *Cracking the Code*, 2014 accessed on 22/10/19 at: <https://home.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2015/04/Cracking-the-code.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Hewlett, *The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling*, 2010 accessed on 22/10/19 at: <https://30percentclub.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/The-Sponsor-Effect.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Hewlett, *Sponsor Effect: UK*, The Centre for Talent Innovation, 2012

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

- ▶ Interviews and insight from 16 senior executive and non-executive leaders of UK businesses: referred to as “UK business leaders” throughout the report. 9 participants were female and 7 male.
- ▶ Survey with 58 CMI Companions (senior business leaders from the CMI membership community): referred to as “senior leaders” throughout the report. 35 participants were male, 22 were female and 1 preferred not to disclose their gender.
- ▶ Survey with 940 responding practising managers (managers from the CMI membership community): referred to as “practising managers” throughout the report. 597 participants were male, 326 participants were female and 17 preferred not to disclose their gender.

Our research includes the opinions of both male and female respondents. In our report any figures reported refer the total aggregated response (i.e. both male and female participants) unless otherwise stated.

All quotes are taken directly from our interviews with UK business leaders, but are anonymised for the purpose of this research.

**If you require further information please contact the CMI research team [research@managers.org.uk](mailto:research@managers.org.uk).**



# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SPONSORSHIP AND MENTORING

Neither sponsorship nor mentoring is a new concept in the business world. The 1970s saw the first businesses focus on the important role that a mentor could play in executive development<sup>11</sup>. Roche's research saw mentees place the highest value on mentors who had a willingness to share knowledge and understanding. However, within this original research, the terms sponsee and mentee were used largely interchangeably.

In more recent years there has been a clearer focus on the very different roles that sponsorship and mentoring have (for example Hewlett). Senior leaders and managers need to be very aware of the differences between the two: sponsorship is a clear talent strategy for supporting someone moving into a leadership position, whereas mentoring can be used across the course of someone's career by offering advice and coaching with specific short-term goals and objectives.

## SPONSORSHIP

Sponsors have a voice at decision-making tables, champion their sponsees for promotions and critical opportunities when they are not in the room, and provide "air cover" for the less experienced individual to take risks.

## MENTORING

A mentor gives a mentee valuable career support and advice, builds self-esteem, and provides a sounding board.

However, the reality is that in practice the differences between these two terms are poorly understood among

the broader UK management population: although there is a relatively strong understanding of mentoring, there is a weaker understanding of sponsorship. Among our practising managers, the majority (90%) were able to give a definition of a mentor using at least some of the key words around "advice", "support" and "building confidence". By contrast, 51% did not even attempt to provide a definition for a sponsor.

Many managers simply viewed sponsorship as involving a financial commitment to an individual to deliver training in order to support their development; others could not differentiate between a mentor and a sponsor, focussing heavily on the careers support and advice element, which is more closely associated with mentoring. If managers themselves are unclear as to what they should be looking for in a sponsorship arrangement, it lessens the likelihood of increasing any progression around gender diversity in the executive pipeline.

In our poll of senior leaders, we asked them to select three words that they associated with both sponsorship and mentoring. The most frequent word reported for both sponsorship and mentoring was "support", but positively the words associated with sponsorship were much more likely to be linked to increasing visibility in a company: advocacy, promotion and opportunities.

<sup>11</sup>Gerard Roche, Much Ado about Mentors, accessed on 22/10/2019 at: <https://hbr.org/1979/01/much-ado-about-mentors>

## Language used to describe sponsorship



Our senior executives had a stronger understanding, having encountered the terms through either being a sponsor or a mentor or having been sponsored or mentored across the course of their careers.

“ Sponsorship is when you go out of your way to help an individual progress. It is action, engagement and it is taking a risk. Mentorship is important because individuals need a sounding board. However, a mentor is not usually the decision-maker. It is someone who is informing and advising you on how to handle the decision-maker. These are not usually one and the same person. ”

Many of our UK business leaders flagged that an additional difference between mentoring and sponsoring was that mentoring can be a two-way exchange of knowledge and skills. This is often referred to as “reverse mentoring”: our interviewees flagged this often, including senior executives learning new technology skills from so-called “digital natives”.

“ A mentoring relationship is a two-way relationship: any mentor who thinks that they don't learn from this experience is a bad mentor in my view. ”

## Language used to describe mentoring



There are in fact clear distinctions between sponsorship and mentoring: at a basic level a mentor talks to you, whilst a sponsor talks about you. Both serve very distinct purposes over the course of someone's career and are designed to support very different outcomes. Mentoring can occur at any time over the course of one's career with specific goals around increasing self-confidence and resolving specific challenges. Sponsorship is specific advocating to support progression in the workplace via promotion, increased responsibilities or stretching assignments.

“ Mentoring provides guidance and support, that injection of confidence, the nerve-giver—all of which gives you the strength and the permission to go and be proactive. Whilst sponsorship is about moving careers. Research shows that it is sponsorship that helps individuals advance up the ladder. Mentoring doesn't do that, but it helps you to get there-I think you need both. ”

# THE SPONSORSHIP AND MENTORING LANDSCAPE IN THE UK

So to what extent are both sponsorship and mentoring currently practice in the businesses in the UK? We wanted to understand the scale of the sponsorship and mentoring landscape, as well as the lived experience of senior business leaders over their professional lives in relation to these arrangements.

Of our practising managers only 3% reported they are currently being sponsored, whilst 14% reported that they are being mentored: this is a very small proportion of the overall manager population. Broadly the same proportion of male and female managers report they are being sponsored (2% of men and 3% of women), although encouragingly significantly more female managers (19%) report that they are being mentored compared to male managers (12%).

As sponsorship is a really crucial form of talent management for underrepresented groups, it's disappointing to see such limited uptake for women in the general management population. However as a number of our UK business leaders flagged, sponsoring is about developing the top talent supported by a clear business case based on organisational requirements - not everyone can be sponsored.

“It is important to highlight that sponsorship might not be for everybody. Sponsorship is needed at different times for different people because it needs to fit with what the needs of the organisation are.”

Mentoring, on the other hand was considered to be more universal - which is reflected by the slightly higher uptake in comparison to sponsoring. This is driven, in part, by organisations offering mentoring schemes, such as the 30% Club who organise a cross-company mentoring scheme. However for a career development tool that really should be accessible to the majority, a higher uptake than just under a fifth of women should be expected.

Positively our senior leaders have greater exposure to sponsorship and mentoring: 66% had been sponsored or mentored over the course of their career, with 64% being mentored compared to 31% being sponsored.

Female senior leaders were more likely to have been sponsored and mentored than their male counterparts. This suggests to move to the highest levels of executive leadership requires a more structured programme of support-particularly if you are a woman.

“You can mentor all you want, you can network all you want but if there is not a sponsor at the very highest level taking risks on talent, you are simply not going to get women into the executive ranks in a big enough number.”

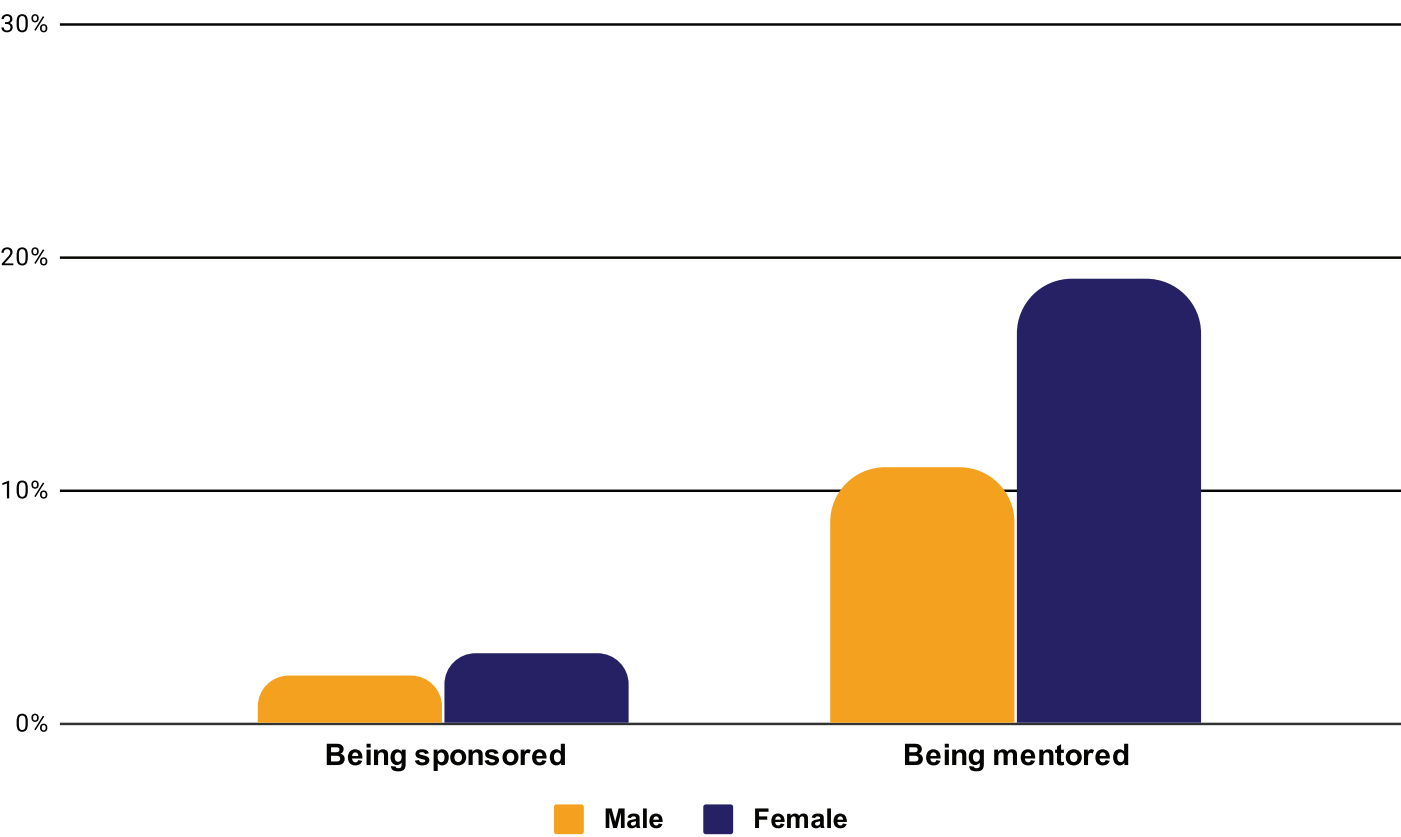
The majority of our senior leaders' sponsors and mentors were male, with a ratio of two men to every one woman for both arrangements: this highlights the importance of men as agents of change at senior levels. Indicatively male senior leaders were likely to first be sponsored early in their career, typically at a middle management level; for our female leaders this could occur any time in their career up to director level- which is simply too late.

“Men are often picked out earlier in their careers, perhaps because they are seen as being a longer term investment, whereas women are often seen as more likely to have breakpoints and career breaks.”

It should be remembered that sponsoring will happen only at significant junctures over the course of a career, whilst the nature of mentoring means it may occur at any point in time and the timing won't necessarily be detrimental to career progression.

Of note, some of our senior executives thought it was critical for mentoring to continue at the chair and chief executive officer (CEO) levels to provide the most senior leaders with an objective sounding board on business challenges. Of course this could take the form of executive coaches.

**Figure 1: Proportion of practising managers being sponsored or mentored**



# THE LEADERSHIP BATON: LEGACY BUILDING AMONG SENIOR EXECUTIVES

*“It is probably strange but i have a passion for helping individuals who aren't seen to be your archetypal future directors and senior managers, and giving them the confidence to be winners.”*

Nearly all (98%) of our senior leaders had been either a sponsor or a mentor at some point during their career. Most senior leaders had mentored by the time they had become a senior leader, whilst those who sponsored typically did so by C-suite level. Those currently acting as sponsors had two sponsees on average-and typically these were more likely to be female. Those with mentees had on average 4 mentees, typically at a ratio of 3 women for every 1 man.

*“I think as executives we should always spend at least 10-20% of our time coaching and mentoring individuals within or outside of our teams.”*

Why did our senior leaders become involved in sponsoring and mentoring? For the majority involved in sponsoring, the number one reason (selected by 62%) was to develop the next generation of talent, followed by just under half (46%) who felt they were at a stage in their career where their skills and experience could be beneficial.

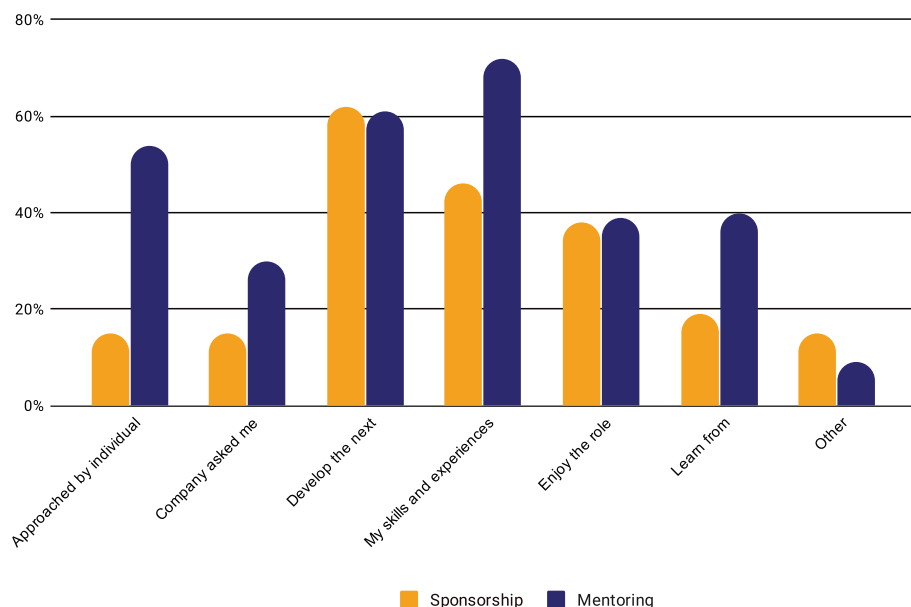
*“I think every organisation needs a really authentic talent management programme to ensure that women, or for that matter, any other part of the workforce who isn't getting a fair crack, get the active support they need from the organisation they work for. This is simply the best way to ensure that you are getting the best from your people.”*

Sponsors were often perceived as leaders with the ability to identify, attract and retain the best staff, described by one of our interviewees as “talent magnets”. Another interviewee highlighted that putting into place such talent management arrangements showed a commitment to your employees’ future which has a positive knock-on effect for employee engagement. Offering such opportunities was viewed as a way of ensuring that young talent remains within a business, allowing companies to stay ahead of their competitors, and not losing critical talent.

*“Millennials' and generation z's expectations are much higher. Any company that's not really reflecting what is important to young people and actively helping to develop them, will simply see them leave. Businesses need to do more to retain their loyalty and that means working hard to support, sponsor and mentor all employees.”*

Mentors are much more likely to want to share their skills and experience than sponsors (72% compared to 46%), to have been directly approached by the individual to take up the arrangement (54% of mentors compared to 15% of sponsors), to think they learn from their mentee (40% of mentors compared to 19% of sponsors) or be asked by their company as part of the formal scheme (30% of mentors compared to 15% of sponsors).

**Figure 2: Senior leaders reasons for becoming a sponsor or mentor**



# SEEKING OUT HIGH-POTENTIAL TALENT

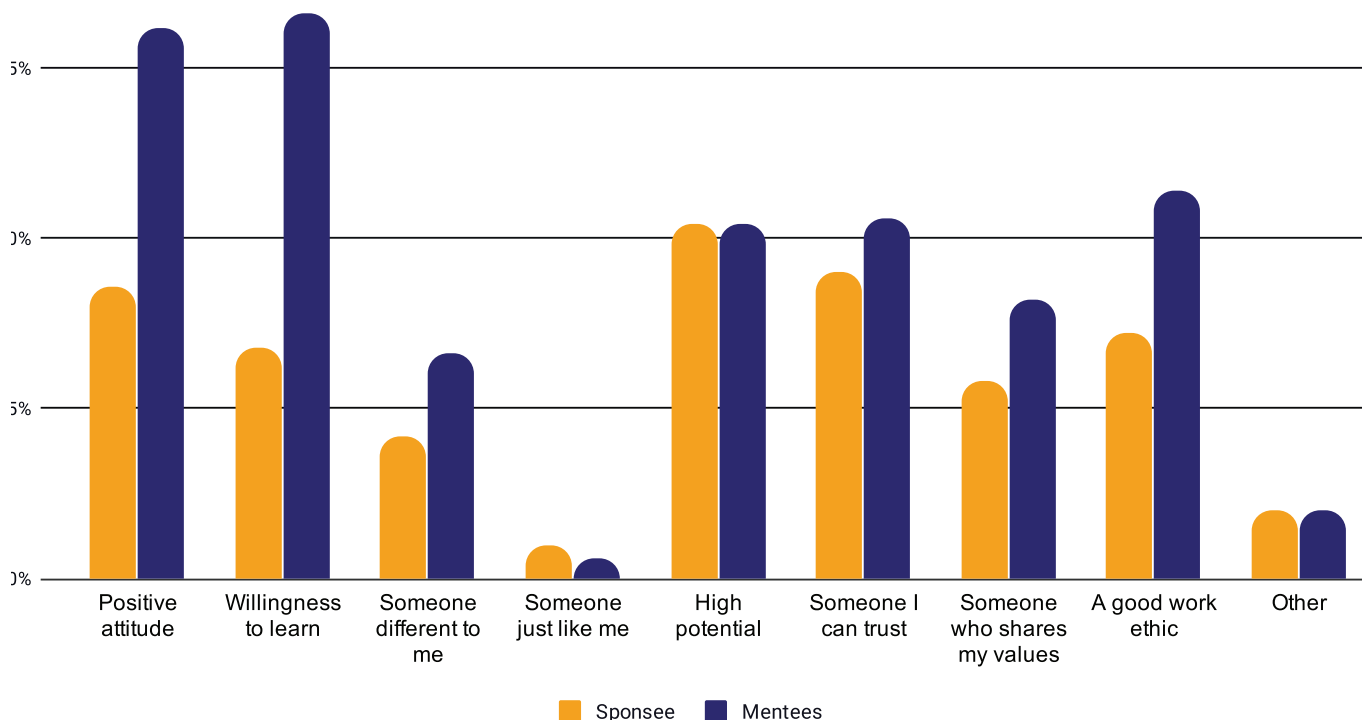
Many women often question how they can acquire either a sponsor or mentor: we investigated with our senior executives and leaders the qualities they look for in both sponsees and mentees.

52% of our senior leaders stated that the key attribute they were looking for in a sponsee was high potential, followed by someone they could trust (45%) and a positive attitude (43%). Of note only 5% of senior leaders said they were looking to recruit someone just like themselves-meaning diversity in sponsees is valued over replicating the status quo.

“Proactivity is important. Individuals who say, ‘I’m going to take this off your desk’ or ‘I’m going to lead this project for you’ get noticed as individuals who are worth investing in. It is these individuals who have sponsors who will open doors for them.”

For mentees, the most important attributes slightly differ: the large majority (83%) were looking for mentees who had a willingness to learn and a positive attitude (81%). The third top trait was a good work ethic, which was selected by 57% of senior leaders. Again only a small proportion were looking to mentor someone just like them.

Figure 3: Qualities senior leaders look for in potential sponsees and mentees



# CAREER BENEFITS OF SPONSORSHIP AND MENTORING

Hewlett's seminal work on sponsorship found that sponsored women were much more likely to ask for pay rises and promotions and receive them<sup>12</sup>. We looked to test out with our senior leaders whether their own experiences had resulted in these outcomes.

The key career benefits of being sponsored (for those who had been sponsored) reported were general promotion opportunities and increased influence, which were selected by 61% of senior leaders. Notably, though, only just under two-fifths stated that they had received C-suite promotions (this was the same for men and women) via sponsorship. A number of the UK business leaders we interviewed had achieved C-suite positions as a result of sponsorship, often as a result of a more senior male colleague who advocated for them. This highlights the importance of men having a critical role in stepping up to advocate for women.

*I would not have been offered the chair role had someone not sponsored me. Nor would I have been offered the CEO role. Sponsorship is critical and interestingly it is often men in power who can do the most.*

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of "stretch assignments": these are challenging assignments that provide exposure. 56% of our senior leaders polled also said that sponsorship presented the opportunity to take on more challenging assignments.

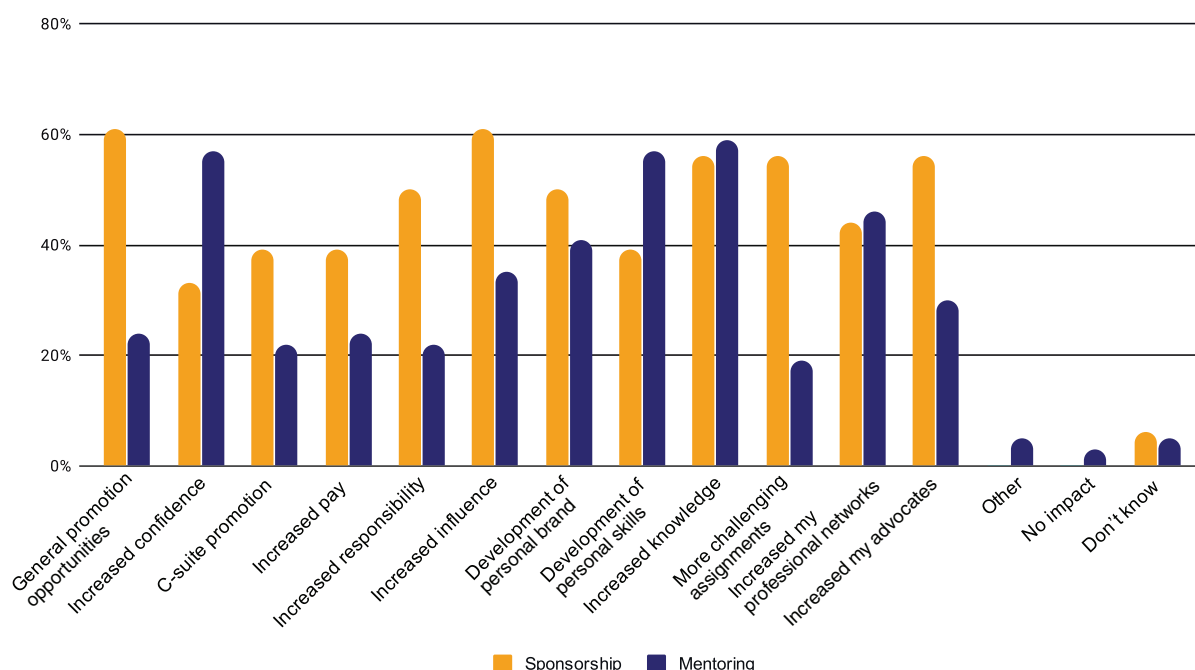
In comparison, senior leaders said the top benefit for mentoring was increased knowledge (selected by 59% of senior leaders), followed by confidence and the development of personal skills (both selected by 57% of senior leaders). Mentoring is much less about career progression, with just 24% of senior leaders suggesting this led to general promotion opportunities in their own experience.

*The big advantage is you can learn from other individuals experience instead of making the mistakes yourself. Of course you learn from your own mistakes and failures but with a good mentoring relationship, you can learn from others as well and get exposure to really interesting, intellectually stimulating people.*

Only two of the benefits were perceived to be broadly the same for sponsorship and mentoring: these were increased knowledge and increased professional networks.

*It also gets you connected to people who can help you in your day-to-day, whom you can learn from and who can advocate and create opportunities for you.*

**Figure 4: Key benefits of sponsorship and mentoring for sponsees and mentees**



<sup>12</sup> Forbes, Sylvia Ann Hewlett: Find A Sponsor Instead Of A Mentor, September 2013, accessed on 21/11/19 at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/09/10/sylvia-ann-hewlett-find-a-sponsor-instead-of-a-mentor/#765b57b21760>

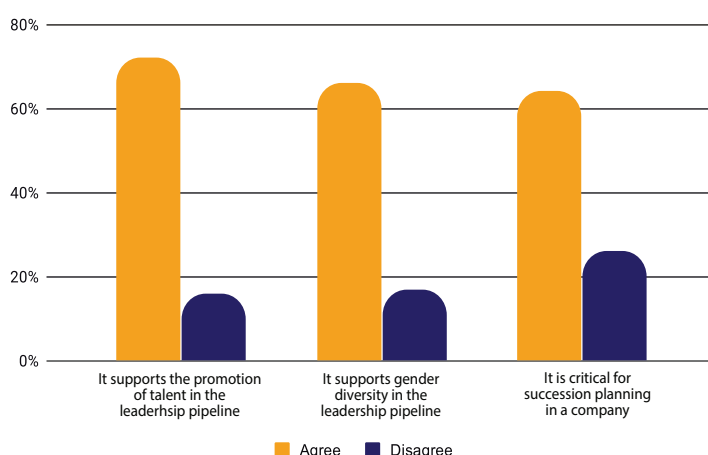


# THE CORPORATE BENEFITS OF SPONSORSHIP

It is widely evidenced that greater gender diversity at the executive level will boost GDP: our research did not seek to further evidence this fact. However we were interested in assessing whether senior leaders thought sponsorship alone was a useful talent management tool in the workplace.

We asked our senior leaders for some reflections on the role of sponsorship as a formalised part of talent management. 72% agreed sponsorship supported the promotion of talent in the leadership pipeline, 66% agreed that it supported gender diversity in the leadership pipeline and 64% agreed it was critical for succession planning in a company.

**Figure 5: Benefits of sponsorship for business**

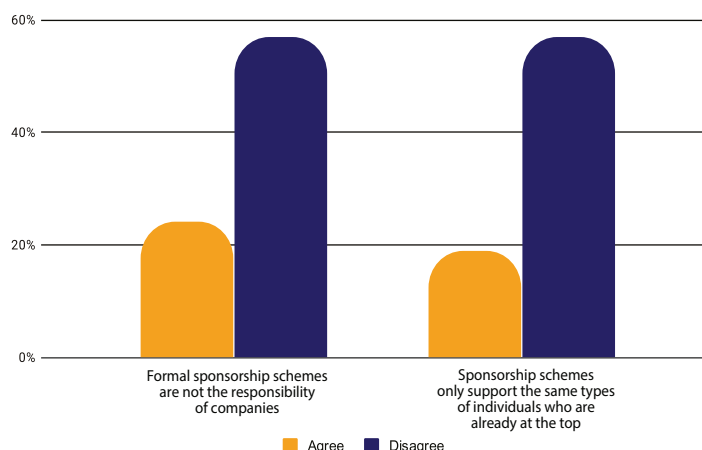


We heard time and time again from UK business leaders that organisations needed to be more diverse at the top to survive in the modern business world. Gender-diverse leadership teams are critical to understanding the needs of all customers and clients: corporates need to look carefully at their management pipelines to ensure women, and other underrepresented groups, are able to make it to positions at the top.

“ Having diversity at all levels is important: you need to enable employees to come in and progress and contribute to the conversations. ”

Very few senior leaders believed that formal sponsorship programmes should not be the responsibility of the company (just 24%) or would be used to only fill the management pipeline with individuals who were similar to those already at the top of the company (19%).

**Figure 6: Senior leaders opinions on formal corporate sponsorship schemes**



And this wasn't solely the view from the most senior leaders-when the concept of sponsorship was clearly explained to practising managers they agreed: 87% of practising managers said that sponsorship was important for increasing diversity in the management pipeline. Managers at all stages of their careers see the benefits of a structured programme to ensure diversity at the top.



# BARRIERS TO SPONSORSHIP

Over half (58%) of our practising managers stated that they were either not aware or that their organisation did not have a formal talent management programme. Of our senior leaders only a fifth (21%) stated the organisations they were working with had a formal sponsorship programme, compared to 86% who had formal mentoring schemes. Indeed 77% of senior leaders had become involved in sponsoring informally rather than in a formal capacity (i.e., it was not sponsorship implemented by their organisation).

With so many of our UK business and senior leaders and managers flagging that sponsorship is important for diversity in the management pipeline, why do we not see more sponsorship in the workplace via formal corporate schemes? From our in depth interviews we have outlined some of the key barriers to sponsorship in the workplace. It should be noted that these barriers are not necessarily unique to supporting women's progression in the workplace but are equally important in supporting any minority groups who are underrepresented at a senior leadership level.

## ORGANISATIONAL ENDORSEMENT

Our senior leaders were not in unified agreement about whether sponsorship could be formally organised as a programme within a corporate: as seen from our poll, nearly a quarter of senior leaders did not believe it was a company's role to provide this type of formalised programme. Our interviews explored these concerns. Some interviewees felt the traditionally more informal nature of sponsorship arrangements would not work if the selection of sponsor and sponsee were "forced" as a part of a programme. Sponsors needed an assurance that the member of staff they were championing was indeed "high potential".

These concerns are likely to be due to the lack of evaluation evidence on successful sponsorship programmes and best practice, or reflect the fact that some companies' inclusive action plans still lack a proactive or strong champion at the senior leadership level. Indeed, many of our interviewees highlighted the importance of a clear tone from the top on diversity.

*“ They have to look around the organisation. They have to set up structures for women and other non-traditional leaders to give them the right experiences and skills for the top roles and, ultimately, they often need to just take a chance and move them into a big role. ”*

Other interviewees suggested that organisational commitments to sponsor women could be championed by business critical external stakeholders, such as investors. These groups could ensure that executives commit to making real changes by influencing the board to adopt approaches that support gender diversity, such as sponsorship.

## AT A SPONSOR LEVEL

Potential sponsors can sometimes be reluctant to take the reputational risk in advocating for a potential sponsor. Sponsors need to be confident in their sponsee's ability to deliver: a sponsee who does not deliver, either on stretch assignments or when promoted, was considered to create professional risks for senior leaders.

Although unusual, a limited number of our interviewees recalled sponsorship arrangements which had not been successful. A prime example was when an individual had been sponsored and promoted on the basis of potential, but the hiring manager (not the sponsor) did not have the capacity to give this individual the support they needed to further develop in their new role. Not only is this problematic for the sponsor (for their reputation) and for the sponsee (it may jeopardise their career) but it may also have a negative impact on business outcomes.

*“ I can't have everybody in a team in jobs that are quite a big stretch for them, because I won't be able to support all of them. If I don't feel someone will get the right support in a role I won't sponsor them for a promotion—you can actually put a career on the wrong track. ”*

Other UK business leaders also flagged concerns about perceptions of favouritism and how that could have a negative impact on women being sponsored: this was perceived to be an even greater risk in sectors where women were still significantly underrepresented, such as finance.

*“ It is very important that in every sponsorship arrangement it is clear that the person deserves it. It should be clear that the individual has all the right skills for the role; they simply need help getting there faster and help and support them once they get there. If they were not good enough, they would not be getting such active sponsorship. ”*

## AT A SPONSEE LEVEL

Although not a reflection on every woman, UK business leaders believed that women needed to put themselves forward to be heard and considered for the top opportunities.

“ I think often with women, they won't go for a role unless they are 110% certain they have the skills for the role. Often men are happy with only 90% and believe they can bluff the last 10%. ”

While this view that women are less willing to put themselves forward for a role than men if they are not certain they are qualified for it is not one we can evidence with our survey data, it was a viewpoint that was raised by a number of the UK business leaders we interviewed. This viewpoint does reinforce the critical need for sponsorship arrangements, whereby the sponsor actively pushes their sponsee to put their hand up for opportunities that may feel like a stretch and advocates for them when they do so.

Another interviewee flagged the importance of recognising career-stage in the timing of sponsorship programmes. Due to the varied backgrounds and life experiences prior to commencing employment, identifying a sponsee at the very start of their career may mean “diamonds in the rough” might be missed.

# FOUNDATIONS OF SPONSORING FOR SUCCESS

It has long been argued that to increase gender parity within the workplace, senior leaders must be bought-in to creating an inclusive culture with a corporate action plan to create equity in the workplace. Sponsorship programmes form a critical part of these action plans.

Sponsorship programmes are already successfully being incorporated into more formal talent management programmes to support gender diversity. If implemented correctly in a culture that supports gender diversity, they can be extremely successful. Sky's Women in Leadership<sup>13</sup> programme provides such an example of a corporate running a successful sponsorship programme to deliver diversity at the top.

To help other organisations drive progress in this area, we have identified essential actions that we believe are required to ensure the successful sponsorship of women in the workplace.

## 1. Sponsorship, alongside mentoring, must form part of a commitment to leadership gender diversity and be driven from the top.

- ▶ There should be a board-level commitment as part of the business purpose to champion gender diversity.
- ▶ All large companies should have an action plan to deliver executive diversity, and sponsorship should be an essential part of that action plan.
- ▶ Mentoring schemes should not be considered a substitute for identifying high-potential leadership candidates, who must have access to sponsorship opportunities.

## 2. Formal sponsorship programmes need to be developed as part of structured talent management programmes to support gender progression in business.

- ▶ Large companies should familiarise themselves with approaches to adopting sponsorship as part of a talent management programme, and consider how they could be implemented within their own company.
- ▶ Talent management programmes can be used to support groups that have not traditionally had leadership roles to ensure that they have a profile within a company.

- ▶ As part of this, high-calibre cohorts of future female executives can be identified and matched to a sponsor.

## 3. Businesses need to ensure a culture of sponsorship is embedded throughout the leadership layers, especially in large companies.

- ▶ Senior leaders, both male and female, need to be bought-in to advocating for sponsees who have been identified as part of talent management programmes.
- ▶ The disproportionate number of men heading up senior leadership teams across the UK, means that men must act as agents of change and sponsor women throughout the pipeline.
- ▶ Managers of all levels need to be adept at identifying and sponsoring women, especially at a mid-managerial career level where many women report struggling to progress beyond.

## 4. Businesses should combine sponsorship efforts with a culture of, and structured approach toward, mentoring so women receive continuity in support all the way to the top executive roles.

- ▶ Mentors and mentees need to ensure they are clear on the goals of their mentoring arrangement and have the time to make the arrangement a success.
- ▶ Senior leaders need to recognise that the best mentoring arrangements incorporate a degree of reverse mentoring.
- ▶ Women should look for opportunities to take part in formal mentoring schemes, whether within their organisation or outside their organisation.

## 5. Senior women and men should act as agents of change to back formal sponsorship in organisations where such programmes are yet to be implemented.

- ▶ Female and male executives can identify and work with agents for change at both C-suite level and throughout the organisation.
- ▶ Female and male executives can aim to “pay it forward” by championing future cohorts of women looking for sponsorship opportunities.

<sup>13</sup> A full case study for Sky's Women in Leadership can be found on page 17 of this report.

# CASE STUDY: BOOSTING DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

## SKY UK AND IRELAND

Sky UK and Ireland aims to have a 50/50 gender balance in senior roles: Sky's ambition is driven from the top with a clear action plan to ensure that women are recruited into the business. Sky UK has executed the following programme of activities:

- ▶ Ensured all vacancy shortlists have a 50/50 gender balance.
- ▶ Developed its Women in Leadership Sponsorship programme - offering sponsorship and training for the next generation of female leaders.
- ▶ Changed its approach to marketing for and job descriptions to attract a wider talent pool.

There are 350 women on Sky's sponsorship and development programme - which identifies high-potential women across the business and allocates them a sponsor to build their profile and advocate for them across the business, opening opportunities. The women have four development sessions on strategy, networking and confidence, as well as regular networking events.

Notably, Sky has an executive sponsor of its Women in Leadership programme-Chris Stylianou who is the company's chief operating officer. Chris works with the core Women in Leadership team to create a wide variety of initiatives to encourage gender parity and female advancement. Chris actively champions gender diversity at Sky by speaking internally and holds fellow executives accountable to their departmental targets with regular reviews.

Of note, 8 out of 10 women on Sky's sponsorship programme felt it helped their career progression and two-thirds were confident to take a role outside of their comfort zone. Currently 39% of Sky's senior leadership roles are held by women.



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