

Why more women are falling off the corporate glass cliff ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

By April 2018, all UK employers with +250 staff had to report the gap between what they pay female and male employees. Iceland has just passed landmark equal pay legislation. Meanwhile, #MeToo and #TimesUp continue to gain traction.

While I believe the same barriers persist for women in the workplace, 2018 may be the year social awareness and legislation catalyse a big shift. To bring about the sustainable change we need to delve into some of the big barriers facing women as they progress through their careers: recruitment, the childcare penalty and the glass cliff.

Junior level: Recruitment

There has been progress.

In 2017, the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gap report ranked SA as number 19 out of 144 countries for gender parity. But there's more to be done.

For companies to ensure a steady talent succession pipeline that champions diversity, they need to:

- Support talent development from a school-going age
- Introduce mentorship, coaching and bridging programmes
- Support young women from disadvantaged communities through exposure to various careers and educational sponsorship
- Offer flexible working hours
- Ensure equal pay for people in similar roles
- See B-BBEE as a sustainable business opportunity rather than an administrative cost
- Be aware of unconscious biases and unintended discriminatory practices at recruitment level
- Nurture an internal culture of open communication, fairness and equality.

The lesson for South African companies is to reconsider their paternity leave policies and to consider flexible work hours, with the option for staff to work from home.

Mid-level: The childcare penalty

Henrik Kleven, a Princeton University economist, recently used data from Denmark to investigate the effect of childcare on women's salaries. He found that women's earnings steeply declined following the birth of their first child, with a cumulative effect of women earning 20 percent less than their male counterparts over the course of their careers.

This is part of a growing body of research delving into the 'motherhood penalty'. Pew Research had similar results and so did Harvard economist Claudia Golden, who found the pay gap is widest in the US when women are in their 30s and most likely to be having children.

Maternity leave can take women out of the workforce for up to a year, which is why some Scandinavian countries (like Iceland) are now revising parental leave policies to give dads more leave. The lesson for South African companies is to reconsider their paternity leave policies and to consider flexible work hours, with the option for staff to work from home.

In order to retain top talent, companies need to set their staff up for success rather than failure.

Senior level: The glass cliff

Often, when a disaster or dramatic company restructuring occurs, a woman or person representative of a minority group is very publicly promoted to a senior leadership position. Think of Nhlanhla Dlamini, appointed CEO KPMG South Africa in September 2017, following the company's Gupta scandal.

Frequently, the new position is tenuous – it can seem to set the leader up for failure, with unfair expectations for the role – hence, the glass cliff analogy. And if the leader does fail, all too often the existing notion of gender bias is reinforced. It's perhaps not surprising then that there are reports of senior-level, high performing women turning these opportunities down – in fact, there's a growing trend of women 'opting out.'

In order to retain top talent, companies need to set their staff up for success rather than failure. This means having career plans in place for every team member, with support and training pivotal at every level of advancement.

We're still sitting with inequality, but there's been a definite shift in sentiment. It's becoming more of a public norm to acknowledge the gap and take a stand against it. I believe that businesses are going to fundamentally change the way they recruit and retain talent – especially women and minority groups – in the next year. To do so, we need to encourage open, honest dialogue on the biggest barriers faced by women as they progress professionally.

-reprinted from the Huffington Post

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