Women Managers: Self-Imposed Barriers to Career Advancement

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ABSTRACT
In this study the authors compare networking comfort levels of male (n=32) and female (n=33) senior executives with female mid-level (n=88) managers. While both male and female senior executives were quite similar and comfortable with networking activities, the mid-level female managers reported significantly higher levels of networking discomfort.

PRESS PARAGRAPH
Want a shot at that senior VP title and a corner office to go along with it? If you’re a woman you’d better sharpen your networking and self-promotion skills. In today’s Fortune 500, women account for only 8% of executive vice presidents and above. In a comparison of senior execs and mid-level female managers, Dudley, Goodson and Weeks found senior execs far outweighed the mid-level managers in the use of networking and self-promotion strategies for career advancement. The mid-level managers reported significant discomfort engaging in these types of strategies preferring instead to rely on sheer perseverance and hard work.

Paper presented at the 21st Annual Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology Conference, Dallas Texas
May 2006
Introduction

Over the past decade, considerable attention has focused on the “glass ceiling” phenomenon to explain why women executives’ climb up the corporate ladder is slower and less certain than their male counterparts. Many women seem to reach a plateau in middle management positions, and often find it difficult to attain higher levels of authority and salary increases. This inability to progress in their careers is often attributed to an invisible barrier called the glass ceiling.

Many studies have shown that male executives are consistently paid higher salaries and awarded more promotions than female executives. (Dreher & Ash, 1990; Exum, Menges, Watkins & Berglund, 1984; Jacobs, 1995; Morrison & von Glinow, 1990; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). A formal report issued by the U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission on women and minorities in executive management, stated that white males still have 95% to 97% of all management positions (Seligman, 1995). A more recent survey of Fortune 500 companies noted that “though women now hold about half of all managerial and professional positions, they account for only about 8% of executive vice presidents and above” (Morris, 2005, p. 66). Yet researchers studying this phenomenon have failed to come to a suitable conclusion as to why it occurs (Brett & Stroh, 1997; Lewis, 1992; Morrison & von Glinow, 1990; Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992). Early studies examining the backgrounds of women executives hypothesized that disparities in pay and number of promotions could be due to inferior education, work experience, spousal influences or industry differences (Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1992). However, none of these hypotheses were confirmed. Even though the women and men had similar educational and work experience backgrounds, the men were still paid significantly higher salaries and received more promotions.

In a continuation of their research, Brett and Stroh (1997) examined the effects of external labor market strategies on earnings and compensation and hypothesized that women could improve their earnings outlook and career progression by changing companies. The study surveyed 605 managers from 20 Fortune 500 companies representing a variety of industries and found that only the male managers benefited from changing companies. The female managers who changed companies received no greater compensation than female managers who stayed at their existing companies. The authors concluded that the gender gap in compensation could be due to discrimination built into systems of employment. In a study conducted at Carnegie Mellon University, Babcock and Laschever (2003) found, however, that men were eight times more likely than women to negotiate higher initial salaries.

Women executives tend to believe they must have better technical skills and work much harder than male executives in order to obtain promotions and salary increases (Nieva & Gutek, 1981; Schuck & Liddle, 2004, Singh 2002). They consider support related factors such as networks, role models and mentors as being among the least important influences on career success and advancement (Gaskill, 1991). Instead of playing the “organizational game” which can involve networking, ingratiation and self-promotion strategies most often used by their male counterparts, women prefer to trust and rely on the goodness and fairness of management systems in place. Many studies have demonstrated, however, that perseverance, competence and hard work are not enough. In a meta-analytic investigation of the impact of self-monitoring (self promotional) activities on career success, Day, Schleicher, Unckless & Hiller (2002) found significant relationships between self-monitoring behaviors and job advancement. It appears that in order to move up the corporate ladder executives must pair technical skills and hard work with competent networking skills (Ibarra, 1993; Singh, Kumra, Vinnicombe, 2002). Effective
networking involves the ability to develop informal relationships with key people of influence and power within an organization (Brass, 1985; Deshpande, Schodenbek, & Joseph, 1994; Heisler & Gemmill, 1978; Jones, 1983; Judge & Bretz, 1994; Veiga, 1987).

Even though most women agree that networking is important, not all are equally comfortable engaging in these types of activities (Azrin & Besalel, 1982; Wanberg, Kanfer & Banas, 2000). Singh, Kumra and Vinnicombe (2002) conducted two studies in which they assessed and interviewed young and experienced male and female managers on the frequency with which they used networking and impression management as a strategy for career advancement. While both the young and experienced male managers reported using these strategies on a frequent and consistent basis, only the experienced female managers reported using these strategies, but only after having observed their male counterparts use them successfully.

Why are some women uncomfortable networking? Some explanations suggested are lack of support due to fewer women in senior positions, less access to old-boy networks, fear of disapproval for behaving “immodestly” or inconsistent with sex-role stereotypes or fear of reprisals due to sexual innuendo since most senior executives and persons of influence in organizations tend to be male (Anderson, 2005; Lyness & Thomson, 1997; Rudman, 1998; Schuck and Liddle, 2004).

While the majority of studies have focused on demographic and human capital factors to explain the discrepancies in pay and career progression for female executives, few have examined the influence of attitudes towards impression management and networking. The purpose of this study was to examine differences in attitudes and comfort levels related to various types of networking activities in a group of senior and mid-level executives.

Hypothesis 1: Male and female senior executives will be similar in networking comfort levels.

Hypothesis 2: Female mid-level managers will report significantly higher networking discomfort levels than the senior executives.

Method
Participants
The participants in this study were 32 male and 33 female senior executives and 88 female mid-level managers who were participating in a program designed to assist in the career-development of mid-level female managers. Consequently, the authors were unable to include a comparable group of mid-level male managers. Most of the participants worked for large Fortune 500 companies and a few worked for small businesses. Industries were varied and included financial services, information technologies, engineering, accounting, consulting and various manufacturing industries.

Measures
Networking attitudes. Attitudes and comfort levels regarding various networking activities were measured by utilizing the Meeting People Questionnaire (MPQ). The MPQ consists of 184 items, and provides scores for 22 scales. The Social Brake represents a general summary measure of networking comfort, while 11 of the scales measure comfort levels associated with specific types of networking. These scales are General Apprehension: social shyness, will not take social risks, Getting Ready: over-concern with getting organized and utilizing methods which do not involve social contact, Posing: over-concern with image, Avoiding Speeches: discomfort when speaking before groups of people, Conflicted Career
Identity: discomfort about career choice, Evading Conflict: does not want to appear to be pushy or intrusive, Deference: discomfort associated with initiating contact with up-scale people of wealth, education, power or prestige, Family/Friend Networking: fears loss of approval from family or friends, Referral Networking: fears disturbing existing relationships, Telestress: discomfort associated with initiating contact through use of the telephone, and Disputing: discomfort associated with feedback and criticism. These scales are also listed and described in Table 1. Examples of items include: “It is hard for me to meet new people because I am so shy,” “I am not comfortable asking people I have recently met to help me network.” Individuals respond by selecting from among 8 possible answers (1 = True, 2 = False, 3 = Need more information, 4 = Choices are too restrictive, 5 = Both 1 and 2 apply equally, 6 = Neither 1 nor 2 applies, 7 = Too personal/prefer not to answer, and 8 = Does not apply to my situation). Additional scales include measures of motivation, goal level, competing ambitions, maintaining attention, positive impression making, hedging, mendacity, positive vs negative attitude about the questionnaire, and a scale assessing stability and consistency of testing conditions. For purposes of the present study, our main focus was on the scales pertaining to networking comfort levels only. Descriptive statistics and Cronbach’s Alphas for the scales are listed in Table 1.

**Procedure**

Surveys and questionnaires were administered and collected through the development program manager.

**Results**

Differences in hypothesized variables were analyzed with t tests. Effect sizes (d) computed represent differences between the group means in standard deviation units (Cohen, 1988). The means, standard deviations, t tests of gender differences for senior executives, and effect sizes (d) are shown in Table 2. The means, standard deviations, t tests of management level differences, and effect sizes (d) are shown in Table 3.

Tests for hypothesis 1 suggesting that male and female senior executives would score similarly on the MPQ scales of networking comfort were supported. We found relatively low levels of networking discomfort for the two groups and no significant differences between the males and females which suggests that they are both comfortable engaging in networking activities.

Hypothesis 2 was also largely supported by a number of significant differences in networking comfort levels between the senior executives and the mid-level female managers. The mid-level female managers scored significantly higher on the MPQ Brake scale (general measure of networking discomfort) with a medium to large effect size, t = 3.94, p < .0001, d = .66. The mid-level managers also reported significantly higher discomfort levels on General Apprehension (general shyness, avoidance of social contact initiation), t = 4.05, p < .0001, d = 67; Avoiding Speeches (fears speaking to groups), t = 3.65, p < .001, d = .61; Conflicted Career Identity (uncomfortable disclosing career choice), t = 3.15, p < .001, d = .51; Deference (intimidated by up-scale contacts), t = 2.54, p < .01, d = .42; Family/Friend Networking, t = 2.27, p < .05, d = .38; and Referral Networking (fears asking for referrals), t = 3.11, p < .01, d = .52.

**Discussion**

Studies have consistently shown that in order for executives to progress in their careers it is essential to accompany competent job performance with visibility, impression management.
and the formation of informal networks with persons of influence and power within the
organization. Yet results of several studies noted earlier suggest that female managers in mid-
level positions are more likely to emphasize perseverance, hard work and competence on the job
at the expense of self-promotional and informal networking activities. The results of the present
study appear to support the findings of these previous studies. It is interesting to note that the
women in this study who do emphasize networking and are comfortable engaging in networking
activities were also able to make it to senior level positions in their organizations.

Researchers have found that women can be quite comfortable networking among
themselves. However, these activities have proven to be nonproductive due to the small numbers
of female senior executives in their corporate environments (Brass, 1985). Articles in the popular
press suggest that even when females do reach the top, they may not be willing to support and
promote other women beneath them. A highly visible political candidate in Sydney, Australia
stated that “When women get to the boardroom or get to the top of the corporate ladder, they pull
up the ladder behind them because they are frightened by the challenge presented by women
following in their footsteps.” She recommended that women try to make it on their own.
(Weekes, 1995). Rudman (1998) also found that women tended to be much less supportive of
other women who used self-promotional tactics for career advancement purposes.

In response to issues that women do not have equal access to the “old-boy networks”
often established among male executives, some companies have encouraged the practice of
mentoring in an effort to assist female employees to gain access to these informal networks
(Anderson, 2005; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Exum, Menges, Watkins, & Berglund, 1984; Lewis,
1992). Mentoring is an informal interpersonal relationship formed between a senior executive
and an employee who serves as his or her protégé. This mentoring relationship is intended to
give the employee the opportunity to display talent and competence to senior management and to
acquire important information through informal networks. Research studies, however, designed
to study the relationships between mentoring and promotions and salary increases are still

In one study, even though there were no gender differences with regard to the frequency
of mentoring activities, and mentoring activities were found to be related to more promotions
and higher incomes, the females were still paid significantly lower salaries than their male
counterparts (Dreher & Ash, 1990). Women may have equal access to mentors, but they may
not be taking advantage of the opportunities that the mentor can provide. Again, anxiety about
promoting themselves may cause women to hesitate instead of actively using the relationship
with the mentor to build visibility within the organization.

In conclusion, to survive and move up the ladder in today’s corporate environments,
women as well as men must combine competent job performance with hard work and effective
networking and self-promotion. The results of this study suggest that women may be
contributing to the “glass ceiling” by hesitating or avoiding altogether key visibility management
activities which can help them reach higher levels of management. For example, it may be
unwise to assume women who know how important visibility management is can therefore
translate what they know into effective career management behaviors. The emotional difficulty
women seem to have initiating first contact for self-promotional purposes may present rich and
rewarding areas for research and psychological counseling applications.
Table 1

*Scale Descriptions, Means, Standard Deviations, and Coefficient Alphas*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Brake Composite</td>
<td>Inhibited contact</td>
<td>30.89</td>
<td>11.09</td>
<td>0.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Apprehension</td>
<td>Worries, will not initiate social contact</td>
<td>32.47</td>
<td>20.89</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Ready</td>
<td>Over-analyzes, under-acts</td>
<td>32.97</td>
<td>16.59</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posing</td>
<td>Concerned with image, appearing credible</td>
<td>28.60</td>
<td>15.43</td>
<td>0.43</td>
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<td>Avoiding Speeches</td>
<td>Fears speaking to groups</td>
<td>34.46</td>
<td>24.3</td>
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<td>Conflicted Career Identity</td>
<td>Ashamed of career choice</td>
<td>25.55</td>
<td>11.51</td>
<td>0.59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evading Conflict</td>
<td>Fears intruding on others</td>
<td>50.32</td>
<td>18.08</td>
<td>0.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td>Intimidated by &quot;up-scale&quot; individuals</td>
<td>27.38</td>
<td>25.54</td>
<td>0.90</td>
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<td>Fam/Fr Networking</td>
<td>Fears loss of approval from family or friends</td>
<td>34.59</td>
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<td>Referral Networking</td>
<td>Fears disturbing existing relationships</td>
<td>26.97</td>
<td>19.62</td>
<td>0.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telestress</td>
<td>Fears use of telephone to initiate social contact</td>
<td>31.55</td>
<td>19.16</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disputing</td>
<td>Rebuffs feedback, overly critical of others</td>
<td>20.41</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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n= 153

Table 2

*Means, Standard Deviations and Gender Comparisons for Senior Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>t</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>Social Brake</td>
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<td>7.62</td>
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<td>9.53</td>
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<td>25.34</td>
<td>18.43</td>
<td>24.43</td>
<td>16.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting Ready</td>
<td></td>
<td>36.22</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>32.38</td>
<td>16.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>15.38</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td>14.28</td>
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<td></td>
<td>28.78</td>
<td>21.75</td>
<td>24.05</td>
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<td>10.62</td>
<td>22.16</td>
<td>12.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evading Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td>48.62</td>
<td>18.55</td>
<td>49.43</td>
<td>16.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deference</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.39</td>
<td>21.30</td>
<td>23.44</td>
<td>20.57</td>
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<td>Fam/Fr Networking</td>
<td></td>
<td>30.08</td>
<td>11.81</td>
<td>32.48</td>
<td>16.13</td>
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<td></td>
<td>20.52</td>
<td>11.02</td>
<td>22.30</td>
<td>17.63</td>
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<td>30.99</td>
<td>15.39</td>
<td>26.84</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>11.65</td>
<td>20.88</td>
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n= 33  n=32
Table 3
*Means, Standard Deviations and Senior Execs vs Mid-level Managers Comparisons*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Mid-level Managers</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>8.56</td>
<td>33.79</td>
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<td>24.89</td>
<td>17.22</td>
<td>38.06</td>
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<td>34.33</td>
<td>17.06</td>
<td>31.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posing</td>
<td>26.71</td>
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<td>Avoiding Speeches</td>
<td>26.43</td>
<td>20.42</td>
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<td>22.23</td>
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<td>51.29</td>
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<td>21.38</td>
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<td>31.82</td>
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<td>31.26</td>
<td>14.04</td>
<td>37.05</td>
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<td>Referral Networking</td>
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<td>14.57</td>
<td>31.09</td>
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<td>28.95</td>
<td>16.88</td>
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<td>20.77</td>
<td>10.75</td>
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n = 65            n = 88

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, **** p < .0001
References


