

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, talent acquisition challenges have been compounded by a persistent and ongoing labor shortage, creating an environment in which organizations and HR professionals depend on increasingly innovative strategies to identify and recruit from the widest possible talent pools. In such conditions, it comes as no surprise that one-third of recruiting executives cited securing critical talent as the most pressing concern for 2025.¹

Yet, despite this urgency, few organizations look inward when filling open roles. The median percentage of nonexecutive positions filled internally is just 7%, and 100% of executive hires are sourced externally.² When career advancement opportunities are limited, employees often seek growth somewhere else, undermining the development of internal leadership pipelines.

This reality prompts an important question: What can organizations do to prevent highly qualified emerging leaders from seeking greener pastures? A clear starting point is to tap into existing talent by removing barriers to internal mobility and investing in development strategies that prepare high-potential employees for senior roles.

To better understand how organizations can meet this challenge, SHRM conducted research focused on:

1. The factors driving the ongoing labor shortage and the critical need to improve labor mobility among untapped talent pools.
2. The importance of women in the labor force and the barriers to career advancement experienced by women leaders.
3. What women and men at different levels of leadership value in their organizations, especially relating to leadership development opportunities.
4. How organizations can support emerging leaders' professional development through leadership development programs, executive sponsorships, and lateral career opportunities.

As part of this work, SHRM surveyed 3,010 leaders, ranging from managers to directors and above, to understand what organizations can do to support leaders as they progress through their careers. Additionally, SHRM surveyed 1,141 HR professionals to gain insights on organizational initiatives that lead to better retention outcomes. The findings from this research are intended to provide organizations with actionable steps aimed at creating healthy leader pipelines and reducing the barriers to career progression that women leaders face.

¹ [Recruiting Executives: Priorities and Perspectives](#), SHRM, 2025.

² [2025 Recruiting Executives Benchmarking: Insights to Maximize Recruitment](#), SHRM, 2025.



Women in Leadership: Reducing Barriers and Expanding Opportunities for Career Progression



KEY FINDINGS

- 1. The U.S. has been experiencing a significant and persistent labor shortage due to underlying factors that predate the pandemic.** In recent years, there have consistently been more job openings than unemployed people in any given month, underscoring a persistent shortage of labor. This shortage is the byproduct of many factors, including a long-run trend of population aging that has significantly slowed labor supply growth in recent decades and could cause an absolute decline in labor supply in future decades.
- 2. Women are the largest underutilized talent pool in the labor force.** Women now represent nearly half of the employed population (47%), but the data show female employment representation declines as managerial positions become increasingly more senior.
- 3. Women leaders are less likely to see a clear path to advance in their current organization.** About two-thirds of female managers and supervisors (66%) indicated they see a clear path to advance, compared to 74% of their male counterparts. About 3 in 4 women at the director level and above (74%) indicated they see a clear path to advance, versus 83% of men who hold similar positions.
- 4. Regardless of gender, leaders are motivated by job opportunities that provide them with access to learning and development opportunities.** Although a competitive salary and benefits were certainly the dominant motivating factors when leaders were asked what they look for when considering job opportunities, nearly half of female managers and supervisors (48%) and female directors and above (46%) indicated it would be a step back in their career if access to learning and development programs decreased despite their pay increasing.
- 5. Formal leadership development programs are highly valued by leaders and HR professionals.** When organizations provide employees with opportunities to participate in formal leadership development programs, HR professionals indicated these programs are effective at increasing participant skill development (96%), engagement (95%), satisfaction (94%), and retention (93%). Additionally, 86% of leaders participating in leadership development programs indicated they are more likely to stay at their organization because of these opportunities.
- 6. Executives play an important role in demonstrating their commitment to advancing leaders within their organizations.** Nearly half of leaders currently participating in leadership programs indicated the opportunity to learn from (50%) and connect with (48%) higher-level leadership as a top benefit of these programs. For women participating in women-focused executive sponsorship (WFES) programs at the time of the survey, 90% of female managers and supervisors and 96% of female directors and above indicated WFES programs helped them develop the skills needed to advance in their career.
- 7. Improving internal talent mobility to develop healthy leadership pipelines is essential.** About 60% of leaders who made lateral career transfers indicated their desire to stay increased after making their most recent transfer, and more than 90% of leaders would recommend that others make at least one or more lateral transfers in their career.

THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT AND PERSISTENT LABOR SHORTAGE IN THE U.S.

Organizations continue to face strong competition to attract and retain talent, resulting, at least partially, from a broader talent shortage in the labor market. In fact, 56% of recruiting executives identified talent shortages as a challenge in 2025, with 1 in 5 naming this as their organization's greatest obstacle.³

The U.S. labor market has experienced a persistent shortage in recent years. Since mid-2021, the unemployed-people-per-job-opening ratio (UJOR) has remained below 1.00, meaning job openings have consistently outnumbered unemployed individuals.⁴ This imbalance highlights ongoing challenges for employers and reflects continued tightness in the labor market.

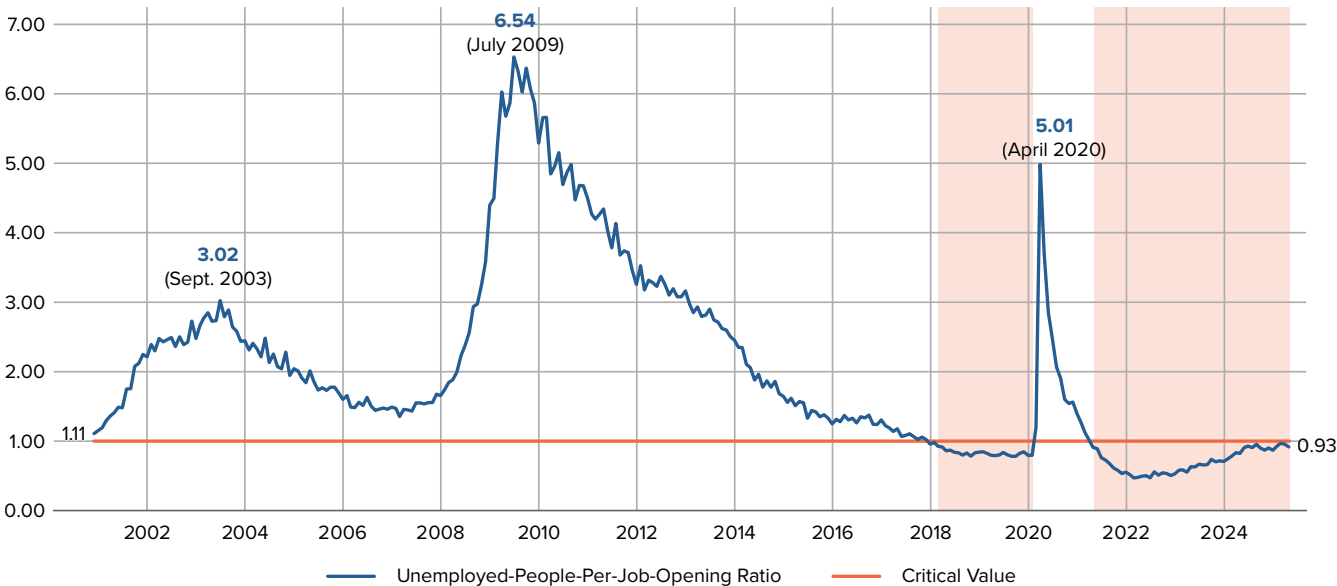
Even before the pandemic, the U.S. was already facing a significant and sustained labor shortage. The issue became especially pronounced during the pandemic-era labor market boom, when the UJOR dropped as low as 0.5. At this extreme point, there were approximately 6 million more job openings than there were unemployed people. While conditions have since eased, the gap remains. As of May 2025, there were approximately 475,000 more job openings than unemployed people.

Unemployed-People-Per-Job-Opening Ratio, December 2000-May 2025



The shaded region indicates periods when the UJOR falls below 1.00.

FIGURE 1



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: December 2000-May 2025 Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey (CPS) Series ID: LNS13000000 and Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) Series ID: JTS0000000000000000JOL downloaded from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Data is seasonally adjusted.

The persistent labor shortage is reshaping how organizations compete for talent, requiring more strategic and long-term workforce planning. To respond effectively, it's essential to understand what's fueling the shortage in the first place.

³ [Recruiting Executives: Priorities and Perspectives](#), SHRM, 2025.

⁴ The UJOR is calculated as the ratio of unemployed people to the number of active job openings on the last business day of the month. The unemployed population represents the supply of labor that could theoretically fill open positions without vacating other positions, whereas the number of open jobs captures unmet labor demand.

POPULATION AGING CREATES A MAJOR CHALLENGE FOR LABOR SUPPLY GROWTH

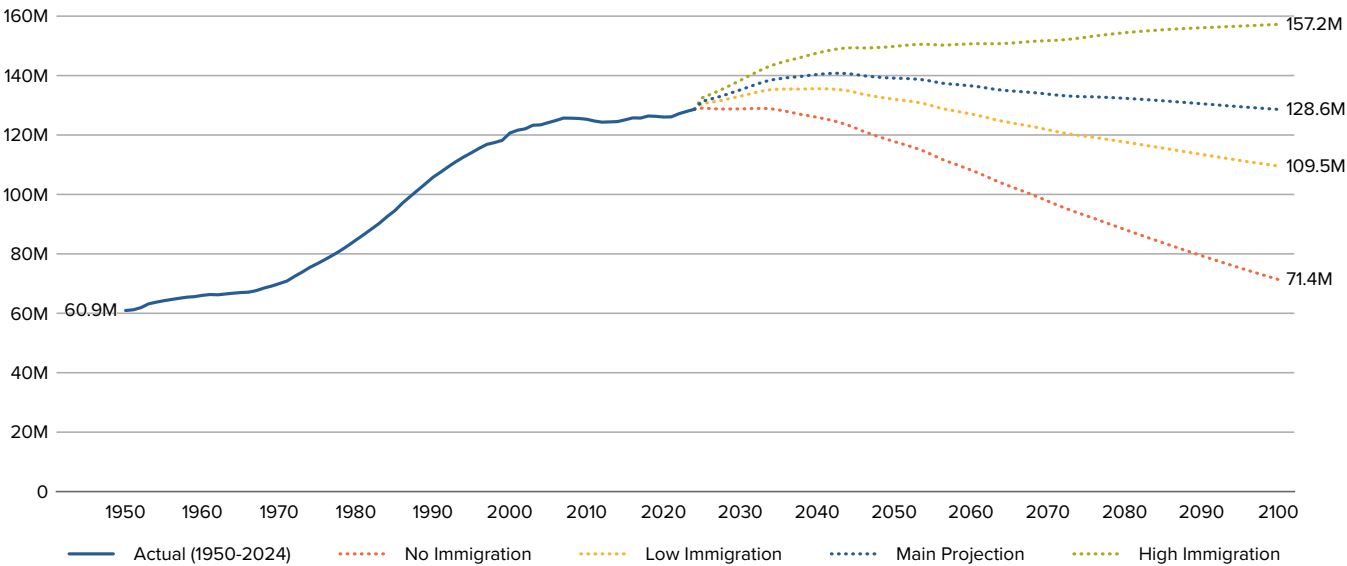
Several factors, many of which predate the pandemic, are contributing to the ongoing labor shortage. For example, skills misalignments and other constraints during the matching process often prevent open positions from being filled. This is especially true as roles become more technical because organizations face a much smaller talent pool to recruit from. In 2025, 61% of recruiting executives indicated the lack of qualified candidates has been an organizational challenge.⁵

One critical long-term issue is that demographic change driven by population aging has significantly dampened labor supply growth. Figure 2 demonstrates this by plotting the historical and projected size of the U.S. prime working-age population (i.e., people ages 25 to 54) from 1950 through 2100. One key takeaway from this figure is that growth in the prime working-age population has slowed significantly in the 21st century after effectively doubling between 1950 and 2000. This slowdown has hampered growth in the overall U.S. labor force, leading to an environment in which labor demand consistently outstrips labor supply.

Actual and Projected Size of the Prime Working-Age Population (Millions), 1950-2100 — SHRM

The **prime working-age** population is defined as people ages **25 to 54** years old.

FIGURE 2



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: Historical data (1950-2024) from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Downloaded from FRED (fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNU00000060). Annual averages calculated from monthly data. Population projections (2025-2100) from U.S. Census Population Projections 2023-2100.

Going forward, the projections in Figure 2 suggest that this issue will likely worsen over time. In fact, low domestic fertility rates mean that future growth in the prime working-age population will depend heavily on the level of immigration. In a no-immigration scenario, this population is already at or near its peak and will begin to fall steadily after about 2030. Even in the more optimistic main projection, the prime working-age population will begin falling in the 2040s and end the century very near its current level. In short, outside of a high-immigration environment, current projections point to significant and worsening labor supply constraints for the foreseeable future.

⁵ [Recruiting Executives: Priorities and Perspectives](#), SHRM, 2025.

WOMEN ARE THE LARGEST UNTAPPED TALENT POOL IN THE WORKFORCE

Amid demographic shifts, skills shortages, and uncertainty around immigration policy, concerns about the future of labor are growing — underscoring the need for innovative strategies that maximize the potential of all available workers. As employers and HR professionals seek solutions to these challenges, a powerful yet underleveraged strategy is to engage underutilized segments of the workforce. Untapped talent pools include millions of people willing and able to work who often fall outside the scope of traditional recruitment channels.

Although women now account for nearly half of the employed population, they are by far the largest underutilized talent pool in the U.S. labor force. Despite their critical role in the labor market, women's employment representation declines as roles become more senior, signaling persistent barriers to career advancement.⁶ Women still face societal and cultural pressures that affect their labor force participation and career progression in the long run.⁷ Because household and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately fall on women, they are more likely to take breaks in their professional careers, are perceived as less qualified upon re-entering the workforce, and more often forgo career advancement opportunities.⁸ To this end, increasing women's participation and advancement opportunities presents a significant opportunity to strengthen labor supply and leadership pipelines. To address the talent shortage, organizational leadership and HR teams must prioritize internal mobility, reduce advancement barriers, and fully leverage the contributions of women in the workforce.



⁶ [Women in the Workforce: Underrepresentation in Management Positions Persists, and the Gender Pay Gap Varies by Industry and Demographics](#), U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023.

⁷ [The Not So Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap](#), American Association of University Women, 2025.

⁸ [Gender Wage Inequality](#), Washington Center for Equitable Growth, 2018.

WOMEN ACCOUNT FOR NEARLY HALF OF THE EMPLOYED POPULATION BUT REMAIN UNDERREPRESENTED IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT ROLES

While women have always been part of the workforce, women's employment representation grew substantially after World War II, rising from 28.1% in January 1948 to about 47% as of May 2025.⁹ A complex set of factors has contributed to the growing role of women in the U.S. workforce. One widely discussed example is changing social norms during the latter half of the 20th century, which normalized female employment in a wide variety of contexts that had previously been considered unusual, taboo, or even impermissible.¹⁰ During the same period, women also gained greater agency across a variety of socioeconomic, financial, and political dimensions, all of which tended to further enhance their role in the workforce.

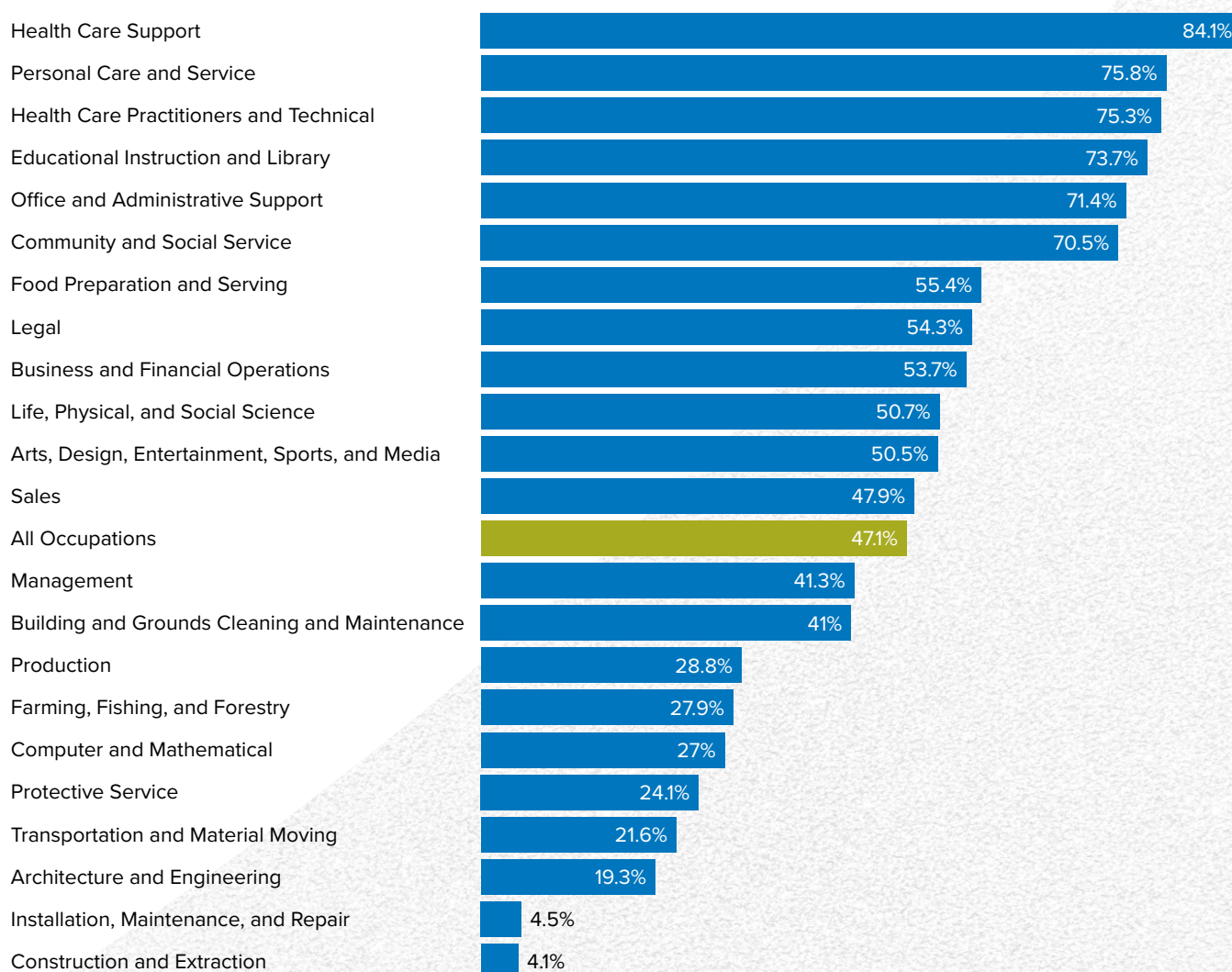
As women have entered the workforce in greater numbers, they have become essential contributors to organizational success. However, women's employment representation varies significantly by occupational group. Women account for more than 70% of employment in six major occupational groups, including health care support, personal care and service, health care practitioners and technical, educational instruction and library, office and administrative support, and community and social service. On the other hand, women account for less than 30% of employed people in production; farming, fishing, and forestry; computer and mathematical; protective service; transportation and material moving; and architecture and engineering. At the extreme end of the spectrum, women represent less than 5% of employment in installation, maintenance, and repair as well as construction and extraction occupations.



⁹ Calculations based on data series published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), including LNS12000002 (Employment Level - Women, Thousands of Persons, Seasonally Adjusted) and LNS12000000 (Employment Level, Thousands of Persons, Seasonally Adjusted). Both data series can be viewed and downloaded from [Federal Reserve Economic Data \(FRED\)](https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS12000002).

¹⁰ A good example is so-called "marriage bars," which were commonplace in the U.S. until the mid-to-late 1960s. In most cases, a marriage bar was an explicit policy imposed by an employer that barred married women from working. For example, a school district might impose a rule requiring female employees to retire upon getting married.

FIGURE 3



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE

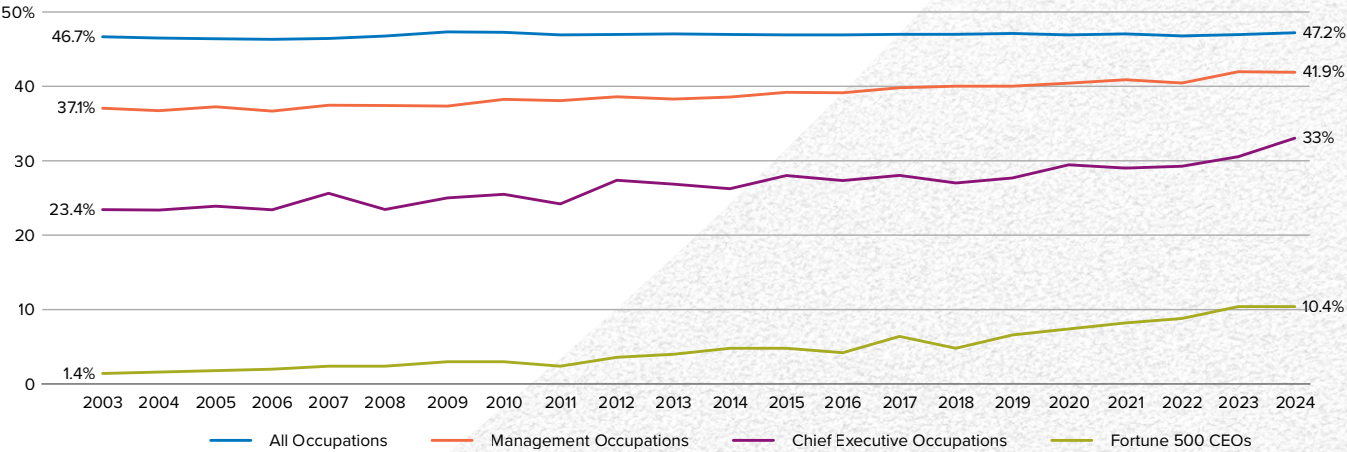
Source: Average values based on June 2024-May 2025 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). Data is not seasonally adjusted.

One key takeaway from Figure 3 is that while women are critically important across major occupational groups that span a diverse array of skill sets, the patterns observed reinforce some common stereotypes about women in the workforce. Women continue to play a dominant role in health care, administrative, and education-related occupations, but remain relatively rare in certain science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, as well as other occupational groups that have historically been dominated by men.

This includes management occupations, where women accounted for just 41.3% of employment on average. Figure 4 digs deeper into this issue by reporting the annual average representation of women in overall employment, in management occupations,¹¹ in chief executive occupations,¹² and among Fortune 500 CEOs from 2003 through 2024. The central finding of note is that women continue to be underrepresented in management roles, especially at more senior levels.¹³ For example, on average in 2024, women accounted for 47.2% of overall employment but just 41.9% of workers in the management group, 33% of chief executives, and 10.4% of Fortune 500 CEOs.

Average Representation of Women in Overall Employment and Progressively Higher Levels of Management, 2003-2024 SHRM

FIGURE 4



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Source: 2003-2024 CPS basic monthly extract data downloaded from IPUMS CPS (cps.ipums.org). The share of female Fortune 500 CEOs was calculated using historic data from the Fortune 500 list from Catalyst. Data is not seasonally adjusted.

On the other hand, Figure 4 also reveals that the representation of women in management occupations is growing steadily over time, especially at more senior levels. For example, while the annual average representation of women in overall employment was effectively unchanged between 2003 and 2024, female representation in the management group grew from 37.1% to 41.9%. Female representation among chief executives rose by nearly 10 percentage points during the same period, and the share of female Fortune 500 CEOs increased from just 1.4% to 10.4%.

¹¹ In the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system, the management occupational group is identified by SOC code 11-0000, and all detailed occupations beginning with “11” are part of this group.

¹² The “chief executives” occupation is identified by SOC code 11-1011; therefore, members of this occupation are also members of the broader management group. Importantly, in this context, the title “chief executives” does not refer specifically to chief executive officers; rather, it is a broader term intended to capture top-level executives in general.

¹³ [Women in the Workforce: Underrepresentation in Management Positions Persists, and the Gender Pay Gap Varies by Industry and Demographics](#), U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023.

PROVIDING PATHWAYS FOR PROGRESSION

As demographic trends continue to constrain labor supply, competition for skilled talent remains high. To fully harness the potential of women in the workforce, organizations must remove structural barriers to advancement and establish clear, intentional pathways for progression. Organizations that expand their leadership pipelines by investing in women's advancement will be better positioned to thrive in the years ahead.

LEADERS NEED TO SEE A CLEAR PATH TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Gaps in women's representation across managerial occupations highlight a need to assess what career progression means for leaders and how the career experiences of women leaders differ from men in similar positions. For HR teams, understanding whether leaders believe their organization offers opportunities for career advancement is a key step toward developing innovative and cost-effective strategies to secure their leadership talent pipelines.

Fewer women leaders see a clear path to advance in their career at their current organization compared to their male counterparts. This is true for women at the manager and supervisor level (66% of women versus 74% of men) and the director level and above (74% of women versus 83% of men).

Fewer women in leadership roles said they see a clear path to advance in their career at their organization compared to men in similar positions. 

TABLE 1

Do you see a clear path to advance in your career at your current organization?

Management Level	Women	Men
Managers and Supervisors	66%	74%
Directors and Above	74%	83%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports leaders who said they do see a clear path to advance in their career at their current organization.

*A total of **3,010** leaders were surveyed, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 750**), female directors and above (**N = 745**), male managers and supervisors (**N = 769**), and male directors and above (**N = 746**).*

When career mobility feels limited, organizations risk losing highly qualified leaders to external opportunities, making it essential that all leaders, especially women, feel they can grow within their current roles. Organizations recognize the importance of creating clear pathways for women's advancement to address labor shortages, but it is equally crucial to understand how women leaders perceive these opportunities. This understanding enables organizations to tailor strategies that make career progression feel real and attainable, ultimately strengthening leadership retention and development.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES DRIVE PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER PROGRESSION

A key driver of these perceptions is access to meaningful learning and development opportunities. Competitive pay and benefits remain important, but many leaders are prioritizing opportunities to grow their skills when defining career success.

When leaders were asked to weigh a hypothetical trade-off — higher pay but reduced access to learning and development — most did not view it as a step forward. Among women, only 21% of managers and supervisors and 24% of directors and above saw this as a step ahead in their careers. Among men, these numbers remained similarly low (26% of managers and supervisors and 31% of directors and above).

In contrast, when presented with a scenario in which their pay remained the same but access to learning and development increased, more leaders reported viewing this trade-off as a step forward in their career. Nearly half of women leaders (47% of managers and supervisors and 45% of directors and above) said increased access to learning and development programs would represent career progression.



More leaders said increasing access to learning and development programs would be a step toward achieving their career goals.



TABLE 2

How would you evaluate each of the following scenarios in terms of its impact on your advancement?

Management Level	Pay increases, but access to learning and development programs decreases.	Pay stays the same, but access to learning and development programs increases.
Female Managers and Supervisors	21%	47%
Male Managers and Supervisors	26%	48%
Female Directors and Above	24%	45%
Male Directors and Above	31%	45%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports leaders who said this would be a step toward achieving their career goals.

*A total of **3,010** leaders were surveyed, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 750**), female directors and above (**N = 745**), male managers and supervisors (**N = 769**), and male directors and above (**N = 746**).*

These findings highlight that career growth today is not only about titles or salary increases, but also about access to the tools and resources needed to succeed and advance in one’s career over time. For organizations, expanding learning and development is not just a retention tactic but a fundamental component of building strong, future-ready leadership pipelines. Investing in upskilling and reskilling both prepares organizations for the evolving world of work and signals a genuine commitment to employee advancement.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

To strengthen internal leadership pipelines, organizations must identify high-potential leaders early and prioritize investing in opportunities aimed at enhancing their leadership capabilities. CHROs indicated leadership and manager development was their top priority for 2025,¹⁴ but our survey results suggest many women leaders lack access to these programs and other resources geared toward becoming more effective leaders.

FEWER WOMEN LEADERS HAVE PARTICIPATED IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Effective leadership is critical to drive organizational business outcomes. Purposeful leadership development programs can help give emerging and midlevel leaders the tools needed to overcome the pressing challenges of the modern workplace.¹⁵ Despite the prominence of formal leadership development programs as a strategic focus, only 48% of organizations surveyed offered them. Slightly fewer women leaders than men indicated they have ever participated in a formal leadership development program. Among women leaders, only 42% of managers and supervisors (versus 52% of men at this level) and 57% of directors and above (versus 66% of men at this level) had participated in a leadership development program.

Regardless of management level, fewer women said they have ever participated in a formal leadership development program. 

TABLE 3

Have you ever participated in a formal leadership development program?

Management Level	Women	Men
Managers and Supervisors	42%	52%
Directors and Above	57%	66%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports leaders who said they have participated in a formal leadership development program.

A total of 3,010 leaders were surveyed, including female managers and supervisors (N = 750), female directors and above (N = 745), male managers and supervisors (N = 769), and male directors and above (N = 746).

¹⁴ [CHRO Priorities and Perspectives](#), SHRM, 2025.

¹⁵ [The Power of Purpose in Leadership Development](#), SHRM, 2025.

Given that fewer women leaders reported having participated in leadership development programs, it is imperative that organizational leaders and HR professionals take steps to ensure employees have equal access to these opportunities within their organizations. Ensuring women leaders have access to leadership development programs and opportunities to apply what they've learned will be important to help reduce the discrepancies seen in the career trajectories for women and men leaders.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS ENHANCE LEADERSHIP READINESS

Leadership development programs are more than a checkbox; they offer tangible benefits that help leaders succeed. Leaders participating in formal leadership development programs at the time of the survey indicated it gave them the opportunity to learn new soft skills (56%) and enhance and improve existing soft skills (51%). HR professionals agreed, with 46% rating leadership development programs as somewhat effective and 49% as very effective at increasing participant skill development.

Over 50% of women and men said learning and development programs have  allowed them to learn and enhance their soft skills.

TABLE 4

Finish the following sentence, selecting all that apply: **Participating in a formal leadership development program gave me the opportunity to ...**

Learn new soft skills	56%
Enhance and improve existing soft skills	51%
Learn directly from higher-level leaders	50%
Expand my peer network	49%
Connect more closely with higher-level leaders	48%
Learn about roles that may be of interest to me	46%
Seek a promotion	44%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports responses from leaders who were participating in a formal leadership development program.

A total of **686** leaders were participating in a leadership development program at the time of the survey, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 99**), female directors and above (**N = 182**), male managers and supervisors (**N = 141**), and male directors and above (**N = 254**).

These programs allow participants to broaden their visibility across the organization. Leaders reported the opportunity to learn directly from higher-level leaders (50%), expand their peer network (49%), connect more closely with higher-level leaders (48%), learn about roles that may fit their interests (46%), and seek a promotion (44%) as additional benefits. As a result, leadership development programs play a critical role in developing talent and accelerating advancement for those with access.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IS CRITICAL FOR KEY EMPLOYEE OUTCOMES

Leadership development programs not only help leaders build essential skills but also significantly increase their likelihood of staying with their organizations. In fact, 86% of leaders participating in formal leadership development programs said they are more likely to stay at their organization because they were offered these opportunities. HR professionals at organizations that have formal leadership development programs agreed, with HR professionals indicating these programs are somewhat effective (58%) or very effective (36%) at improving participant retention, reinforcing the importance of these programs as potential talent retention tools.

Beyond retention, HR professionals also noted leadership development programs were somewhat effective (46%) or very effective (48%) at increasing participant morale and satisfaction, somewhat effective (47%) or very effective (48%) at increasing participant engagement, and somewhat effective (46%) or very effective (49%) at increasing participant skill development. Importantly, HR professionals found leadership development programs were somewhat effective (57%) or very effective (19%) for recruiting women, underscoring their value as tools to attract and retain women leaders.



HR professionals said formal leadership development programs are effective at increasing several organizational outcomes.



Over **90%** of HR professionals at organizations that provide leadership development programs said these programs are **somewhat effective** or **very effective** at increasing participant retention, morale and satisfaction, engagement, and skill development.

TABLE 5

How would you rate the effectiveness of your organization's formal leadership development programs for increasing the following outcomes?

	Participant Retention	Participant Morale and Satisfaction	Participant Engagement	Participant Skill Development	Recruitment of Women Workers
Somewhat Effective	58%	46%	47%	46%	57%
Very Effective	36%	48%	48%	49%	19%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports HR professionals' views on the effectiveness of leadership development programs.

*A total of **1,141** HR professionals were surveyed, including a subset of respondents (**N = 491**), that indicated their organization provides formal leadership development programs.*

These findings highlight that leadership development programs serve as more than just skill-building initiatives — they are critical components of an organization's talent attraction and retention strategy. By investing in these programs, organizations not only equip leaders with the competencies needed for success but also improve attraction and retention. Expanding access to leadership development is therefore essential for organizations seeking to build strong, diverse leadership pipelines and reduce turnover among high-potential employees.



CREATING PATHWAYS TO LEADERSHIP THROUGH EXECUTIVE SUPPORT

Executives' leadership and support plays an important role in demonstrating their commitment to advancing leaders within their organizations. In fact, when asked what actions executives could take to advance women leaders within their organizations, 53% of leaders and 62% of HR professionals identified increasing opportunities for professional development. Building on this foundation, creating clear pathways to leadership also requires organizational leaders to actively engage with emerging leaders as they progress within an enterprise. Implementing formal sponsorship programs aimed at improving access to executive leaders can be a powerful tool to empower and advance high-potential leaders within organizations.

FOSTERING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EXECUTIVE AND RISING LEADERS

Executive mentorship and sponsorship programs are some ways organizations can provide leaders with the resources and guidance they need to overcome challenges as they progress within their organizations.¹⁶ Unlike mentorship, executive sponsorship programs are aimed at matching high-potential employees to executive leaders who help broaden their visibility throughout the organization. Existing research supports evidence that when emerging leaders have access to executive leaders as sponsors, they are more likely to be informed about job opportunities that lead to promotion; however, fewer women reported having these types of relationships with higher-ups.¹⁷

Despite efforts to cultivate inclusive workplaces, people often gravitate toward those who share similar characteristics when building workplace relationships. As such, the low representation of women in leadership roles may create implicit barriers for emerging women leaders in search of sponsors to advocate on their behalf.¹⁸ Organizations looking for ways to advance women leaders may want to consider implementing formal women-focused executive sponsorship (WFES) programs. WFES programs are specifically designed to support rising women leaders by matching them to executive sponsors with the express purpose of helping them advance in their careers.



¹⁶ [The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth](#), SHRM, 2025.

¹⁷ [Gender Inequities in the Workplace: A Holistic Review of Organizational Processes and Practices](#), Human Resource Management Review, 2023.

¹⁸ [A Lack of Sponsorship Is Keeping Women from Advancing into Leadership](#), Harvard Business Review, 2019.

Women-Focused Executive Sponsorship Programs Can Enhance Skills Development

Research by SHRM Linkage found that women perform better, remain with their organizations longer, and are more likely to advance professionally as a result of participating in WFES programs.¹⁹ Despite these benefits, only 7% of organizations surveyed said they offer WFES programs. SHRM research found that among women participating in WFES programs, 90% of managers and supervisors and 96% of directors and above said that WFES programs helped them develop the skills needed to advance in their career.

Over 9 in 10 women leaders participating in a WFES program said the program has helped them develop the skills needed to advance in their career. 

TABLE 6

Has participating in a **women-focused executive sponsorship program** helped you develop or enhance the skills and experience needed to advance in your career?

	Managers and Supervisors	Directors and Above
Yes	90%	96%
No	10%	4%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports female leaders who were participating in a women-focused executive sponsorship program.

A total of **241** women were participating in a women-focused executive sponsorship program at the time of the survey, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 83**), and female directors and above (**N = 158**).

Executive sponsorship programs provide rising leaders with opportunities to learn from and build connections with senior leaders, offering invaluable insights as they navigate challenges and move up within organizations. This research highlights how WFES programs — in addition to being effective skill-building tools — are also critical for fostering the relationships and support networks that empower women leaders to succeed. Expanding access to such programs can therefore be a powerful strategy for organizations seeking to strengthen leadership pipelines and improve retention.



¹⁹ [Advancing Women Leaders: Changing the Game for Women in the Workplace](#), SHRM Linkage, 2019.

WFES Programs Can Empower Women Leaders

In addition to skill building, WFES programs provide women leaders with critical support systems that help them navigate challenges and advance their careers. In fact, nearly 60% of managers, supervisors, directors, and above who have a mentor or sponsor said they feel more equipped to overcome professional setbacks.²⁰ Women leaders in WFES programs said their executive sponsor has supported them in a multitude of ways, including serving as a mentor (49% of managers and supervisors; 53% of directors and above), a strategizer (46% of managers and supervisors; 53% of directors and above), a connector (39% of managers and supervisors; 58% of directors and above), an opportunity giver (37% of managers and supervisors; 43% of directors and above), and an advocate (18% of managers and supervisors; 21% of directors and above).²¹

Women leaders in WFES programs said their executive sponsor supported them in several ways. 

TABLE 7

Finish the following sentence, selecting all that apply: *My executive sponsor supported me by ...*

	Managers and Supervisors	Directors and Above
Mentor: Providing advice, support, and coaching	49%	53%
Strategizer: Sharing “inside information” about advancing and helping me strategize how to get ahead	46%	53%
Connector: Introducing me to influential people and connecting me to their peers	39%	58%
Opportunity Giver: Giving me high-visibility opportunities	37%	43%
Advocate: Advocating for my promotion	18%	21%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

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A total of **241** women were participating in a women-focused executive sponsorship program at the time of the survey, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 83**), and female directors and above (**N = 158**).

²⁰ [The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth](#), SHRM, 2025.

²¹ [A Lack of Sponsorship Is Keeping Women from Advancing into Leadership](#), Harvard Business Review, 2019.

WFES programs offer a powerful, targeted way to close advancement gaps for women by providing tailored support and guidance. Organizations that implement these programs can empower women leaders to overcome systemic barriers, accelerating their career growth and fostering a more inclusive leadership pipeline.

WFES Programs Are Effective Retention Tools

As organizations seek ways to strengthen their leadership talent pipeline and develop strategies aimed at advancing women leaders, investing in executive sponsorship programs offers a promising solution to pressing retention challenges.

SHRM research suggests WFES programs are effective retention tools. Among women who have participated in a WFES program, 84% of managers and supervisors and 87% of directors and above said they were more likely to stay at their organization because the organization offered a WFES program. Therefore, beyond skills development, WFES programs serve as key retention levers, which can reduce costly turnover among high-potential women leaders and help organizations optimize their talent. Organizations investing in these sponsorships send a clear message that they value and support their talent.

Over 8 in 10 women said they are more likely to stay at their organization because of WFES programs. 

TABLE 8

Are you more likely to stay at your current organization because there are women-focused executive sponsorship programs?

	Managers and Supervisors	Directors and Above
Yes	84%	87%
No	6%	8%
Unsure	10%	4%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports female leaders who were participating in a women-focused executive sponsorship program.

*A total of **241** women were participating in a women-focused executive sponsorship program at the time of the survey, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 83**), and female directors and above (**N = 158**). Due to rounding, totals may not sum to 100%.*

To address ongoing talent shortages and the underrepresentation of women in leadership, organizations must build diverse and resilient leadership teams. Embedding WFES programs within broader talent development frameworks creates an integrated approach that develops both critical competencies and strategic relationships. This dual focus not only supports the advancement and retention of women leaders but also helps organizations strengthen their leadership pipelines to meet future workforce demands and foster truly inclusive workplaces.

MAXIMIZING INTERNAL TALENT MOBILITY TO STRENGTHEN LEADERSHIP PIPELINES

The ongoing talent shortage makes internal talent mobility a business imperative; however, few organizations look internally to fill open positions. The median percentage of organizations that fill nonexecutive positions internally is 7%, but the median percentage for executive hiring is 100% external.²² Organizations can significantly reduce pressure on external recruiting and improve the retention of high-potential talent by establishing clear pathways for employees to flow into roles that organizations fundamentally need.

One often-overlooked opportunity is **lateral career transfers**, when an employee transitions to a new role within the same organization without a change in pay grade or authority level. These moves help organizations stay agile by matching skills to evolving business needs. They also support career progression by giving employees access to new challenges, broader networks, and cross-functional experience that better prepare them for enterprise leadership roles.

Helping women progress doesn't stop at formal development programs or executive sponsorship. Embedding lateral mobility into broader talent strategies can expand pathways to leadership, strengthen diverse talent pipelines, and build a more resilient workforce.



²² [2025 Recruiting Executives Benchmarking: Insights to Maximize Recruitment](#), SHRM, 2025.

FEWER WOMEN LEADERS HAVE MADE A LATERAL CAREER TRANSFER

SHRM research shows around 44% of leaders have made a lateral career transfer over the course of their professional lives. However, fewer women leaders reported having ever made one compared to their male counterparts, regardless of management level. Only 39% of women managers and supervisors said they have made a lateral career transfer, compared to 45% of men in similar roles, while only 42% of women directors and above have made one, compared to nearly half of men (49%).

Fewer women leaders said they have ever made a lateral career transfer. 

For the purposes of this survey, a **lateral career transfer** is when an employee moves to a new role within their current organization without changing pay grade or authority level.

TABLE 9

Have you ever made a lateral career transfer?

Management Level	Women	Men
Managers and Supervisors	39%	45%
Directors and Above	42%	49%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports leaders who said they have made a lateral career transfer.

A total of **3,010** leaders were surveyed, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 750**), female directors and above (**N = 745**), male managers and supervisors (**N = 769**), and male directors and above (**N = 746**).

Encouraging and enabling lateral career mobility, especially for underrepresented groups, can help organizations unlock untapped potential, build more diverse and resilient leadership pipelines, and better align talent with evolving business needs.

Why Leaders Recommend Lateral Career Transfers

“Moving laterally within your organization or industry gives you the chance to explore different career paths without completely starting over. It allows you to test the waters in new roles or departments while still leveraging your existing knowledge and experience.”

— Senior manager in the transportation and material moving industry

LEADERS RECOMMEND LATERAL CAREER TRANSFERS AND FIND VALUE IN THEM

Having explored the benefits of lateral career transfers, it's important to understand how leaders themselves perceive these moves. Overwhelmingly, leaders who have made lateral career transfers indicated they would recommend that others make at least one lateral transfers in their careers. Over half of both female and male managers, supervisors, directors, and above advised making one or more lateral transfers throughout a career. Leaders recommended lateral career transfers as a way to diversify skills, broaden organizational knowledge, introduce new challenges, and prevent career stagnation.

Most leaders would recommend making at least one lateral career transfer over the course of one's career. 

For the purposes of this survey, a **lateral career transfer** is when an employee moves to a new role within their current organization without changing pay grade or authority level.

TABLE 10

Based on your experience, would you recommend that others consider making a lateral career transfer?

Management Level	I would recommend making only one lateral career transfer.	I would recommend making one or more lateral career transfers.	I wouldn't recommend making any lateral career transfers.
Female Managers and Supervisors	37%	54%	10%
Male Managers and Supervisors	36%	55%	9%
Female Directors and Above	39%	53%	8%
Male Directors and Above	41%	53%	7%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

Table reports responses from leaders who have made a lateral career transfer.

*A total of **1,324** leaders who were surveyed said they have made a lateral career transfer, including female managers and supervisors (**N = 293**), female directors and above (**N = 315**), male managers and supervisors (**N = 349**), and male directors and above (**N = 367**). Due to rounding, totals may not sum to 100%.*

Importantly, moving laterally within an organization can help emerging leaders overcome career advancement challenges by opening new pathways that expand their networks across the organization, increase visibility among executive leaders, and develop the core competencies needed to progress to more senior roles.

Why Leaders Recommend Lateral Career Transfers

“I would recommend lateral career transfers as they offer opportunities for skill diversification, networking, and broader exposure within the organization, fostering personal growth and opening doors to future advancement.”

— Senior executive in software development

By encouraging employees to pursue lateral opportunities, organizations can build more agile, well-rounded talent pipelines. When leaders actively promote and normalize these moves, they help foster a culture in which development is multidirectional and not solely upward, increasing the breadth and adaptability of future leadership.



LATERAL CAREER TRANSFERS ENCOURAGE LEADERS TO STAY

Overall, 60% of leaders said their desire to stay with their organization increased after making their lateral career transfer. Just over half of women in manager and supervisor roles (54%) said their desire to stay increased after making their most recent lateral career transfer, compared to 59% of male managers and supervisors. Additionally, more than three-fifths of women (63%) and men (65%) at the director and above level said their desire to stay increased after their most recent transfer.

More than 50% of leaders said their desire to stay at their organization increased after their most recent lateral career transfer. 

For the purposes of this survey, a **lateral career transfer** is when an employee moves to a new role within their current organization without changing pay grade or authority level.

TABLE 11

Did your desire to stay at your organization change after making your most recent lateral career transfer?

	My desire to stay increased after making my most lateral career recent transfer.	My desire to stay did not change after making my most recent lateral career transfer.	My desire to stay decreased after making my most recent lateral career transfer.
Female Managers and Supervisors	54%	28%	18%
Male Managers and Supervisors	59%	25%	16%
Female Directors and Above	63%	24%	13%
Male Directors and Above	65%	22%	14%

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: REDUCING BARRIERS AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER PROGRESSION, SHRM, 2025. VISIT [SHRM.ORG/RESEARCH](https://www.shrm.org/research) TO LEARN MORE.

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Leaders who have made lateral career transfers indicated they felt more appreciated, valued, and respected after changing positions, underscoring the importance of creating more ways for leaders to advance within their organizations.



Why Leaders Stay After Making a Lateral Career Transfer

“My desire to stay at my organization increased after my most recent lateral career transfer because I feel more valued, respected, and appreciated by my supervisor than I previously felt. Also, changing positions within my organization has allowed me to learn and grow as an employee. I now feel more connected to my organization and feel as though making a lateral career transfer has given me experience that will help me prepare and become better qualified for future opportunities and promotions.”

— Vice president in the professional, scientific, and technical services industry

Improving internal talent mobility is essential for organizations seeking ways to retain top talent. Lateral career transfers present an opportunity for emerging leaders to develop new cross-functional skills in pursuit of their career goals, giving leaders a chance to explore different career paths without having to start over. However, nearly 1 in 5 women managers and supervisors (18%) reported a decreased desire to stay after their most recent lateral transfer, indicating the need for targeted support during these transitions.

Maximizing internal talent mobility through lateral career transfers is essential to building strong, diverse leadership pipelines amid a competitive talent landscape. Organizations that actively promote and support lateral career moves provide employees with critical growth experiences while aligning workforce capabilities with evolving business needs. For women leaders, expanding access to lateral career mobility opportunities can reduce barriers to advancement, strengthen retention, and enhance organizational resilience. Embedding lateral mobility within broader talent strategies ensures the presence of more inclusive, adaptable leadership ready to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No. 1: Build Early Leadership Identification and Development Pipelines

Strong leadership pipelines start well before workers step into management roles. Importantly, fostering a workplace culture that champions the skills and perspectives of people from a variety of backgrounds will be key to nurturing talent going forward. Identifying high-potential employees early and offering them targeted growth opportunities ensures a steady stream of capable leaders ready to take on critical positions. Early investment also demonstrates a commitment to employee development, boosting engagement and retention.

Actionable Steps

- 1. Establish Clear Criteria for Potential:** Develop transparent, competency-based criteria to identify emerging leaders, considering both performance and leadership potential.
- 2. Provide Individualized Development Plans:** Create personalized growth plans based on each employee's strengths, development areas, and career aspirations.
- 3. Train Managers to Spot and Nurture Talent:** Equip managers with the tools and training to identify and advocate for high-potential employees within their teams.
- 4. Track Long-Term Outcomes:** Monitor participation in early pipeline programs and measure the rate at which participants advance into leadership roles.

No. 2: Improve Access to Leadership Development Programs

To address critical talent needs and close leader skills gaps, organizations must promote workplace cultures that value continuous learning and development for their workforces. Although nearly half of organizations offer formal leadership development programs, fewer women reported having participated in one. Leadership development and executive sponsorship programs are essential tools to strengthen internal leadership pipelines by allowing emerging leaders to gain the core competencies needed to become effective leaders. Importantly, these programs help organizations retain top talent by showing employees that their professional development is a priority. By ensuring that emerging leaders have access to these opportunities, organizations can build a robust pipeline of future leaders.

Actionable Steps

- 1. Keep Leaders Informed:** Ensure employees are aware of the opportunities available. Communicate proactively via internal emails, employee portals, or team meetings, and encourage employees to participate by highlighting how these programs support personal and professional growth.
- 2. Provide Dedicated Time for Learning:** Ensure leaders have protected time in their schedules to fully engage with development opportunities without competing work demands.
- 3. Offer Flexible and Accessible Learning Formats:** Provide leadership development through online courses, microlearning modules, and other flexible formats that allow employees in all roles and work arrangements to participate meaningfully and build the skills they need to succeed.

- 4. Create Inclusive Sponsorship Opportunities:** Develop formal executive sponsorship programs that connect emerging leaders with senior leaders in the organization to help guide and advocate for emerging leaders as they advance in their career.
- 5. Track Participation and Outcomes:** Use metrics to measure how many leaders are participating in these programs and evaluate their career progression over time.

No. 3: Develop and Improve Internal Lateral Career Opportunities

To stay competitive in the ongoing talent shortage and address leadership development challenges, organizations must prioritize ways to reduce barriers to internal talent mobility. Creating pathways for leaders to enhance their visibility to senior leaders and develop cross-functional skills through lateral career transfers can be powerful tools for businesses to retain high-quality leaders while fostering their career growth. By experiencing multiple facets of an organization, leaders are better prepared to drive innovation and successfully lead teams, while organizations benefit from retaining high-quality leaders.

Actionable Steps

- 1. Design Clear Internal Mobility Pathways:** Organizations should create clear frameworks that showcase how leaders can transfer into internal roles as they progress in their careers and make sure leaders are aware of interdepartmental job openings through regularly updated internal job boards or newsletters.
- 2. Build a Culture That Values Mobility:** Celebrate lateral transfers through internal communications to reshape perceptions of career progression. Encourage managers to identify areas where employees can apply transferable skills to better align talent with evolving business needs and highlight the benefits of lateral transitions in career discussions with direct reports.
- 3. Track and Measure Mobility Outcomes:** Monitor participation in lateral career transfers, subsequent skill development, retention rates, and career advancement to demonstrate the value of mobility to leaders and employees.



CONCLUSION

The persistent labor shortage means that finding ways to alleviate talent acquisition and retention challenges will continue to be a dominant priority for organizational leaders and HR professionals for the foreseeable future. Given these challenges, improving the internal mobility of women leaders is one area organizations can focus on to strengthen their internal leadership pipelines. Despite gains in employment representation, women are the largest untapped talent pool in the U.S. labor force, and women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions. As such, it is a critical business imperative that organizations create policies aimed at reducing barriers that emerging leaders, particularly women, face when it comes to career advancement.

To overcome challenges securing critical talent, the findings in this report provide organizations with concrete, actionable steps to develop a healthy internal leadership pipeline and ways to improve internal talent mobility within their workforces. Organizations would do well to ensure that employees, regardless of gender, have equal access to learning and development opportunities to augment their skill sets. Importantly, encouraging executive leaders to build relationships with high-potential employees and implementing targeted executive sponsorship programs can foster an inclusive workplace culture. Doing so sends a clear message to employees about an organization's commitment to career advancement, with HR professionals and leaders indicating these programs are effective retention tools.

Further, organizations seeking ways to improve internal talent mobility would be wise to evaluate whether encouraging lateral career transfers can alleviate talent acquisition challenges. By improving the ability to move laterally, organizations can retain top talent while leaders are afforded with more opportunities to grow professionally within the same organization. Implementing these recommendations doesn't just reduce barriers for women in leadership — all employees, regardless of gender, benefit from improvements to internal talent mobility.

RESOURCES

[Your Leadership Pipeline Starts with Inclusion \(SHRM Linkage\)](#)

[Purposeful Leadership Model \(SHRM Linkage\)](#)

[Unlock Your Organization's Potential by Empowering Your Team \(SHRM Linkage\)](#)

[Going Beyond Mentorships: 4 Steps to Develop a Powerful Executive Sponsorship Program](#)

[Toolkit: Developing Organizational Leaders](#)

[Labor Force Snapshot: Women in the U.S. Labor Force](#)

[The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth](#)

[Recruiting Executives: Priorities and Perspectives](#)

[2025 SHRM State of the Workplace](#)

[Dismantling Stereotypes in the C-Suite: Build a Diverse Exec Team](#)

METHODOLOGY

Leader Sample

A total of 3,010 U.S.-based leaders were surveyed from May 29, 2024, to June 20, 2024, using a third-party online panel. Of the 1,495 women leaders, 750 were employed at the manager or supervisor level and 745 were employed at the director level or above. Of the 1,515 men leaders, 769 were employed at the manager or supervisor level and 746 were employed at the director level or above.

HR Sample

A total of 1,141 U.S.-based HR professionals were surveyed from May 13, 2024, to May 14, 2024, using the SHRM Voice of Work Research Panel. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes in a wide variety of industries across the U.S.



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