

The Myth of the Ideal Worker: Does Doing All the Right Things Really Get Women Ahead?

Article By:

Brande Stellings

Women, what if much of the career advice you've been given for getting ahead in the workplace is simply wrong? What if, despite doing "all the right things," you still find yourself not earning as much or advancing at the same pace as your male colleagues?

Catalyst's report, [*The Myth of the Ideal Worker*](#), the latest in its series on high-potential employees, examined the career advancement strategies of women and men to find out what strategies each used and which strategies seemed to make a difference in terms of compensation and promotion. The findings may surprise you. Some of the conventional wisdom about women in the workplace has got it all wrong.

Knowing what will and will not work is vitally important, particularly in the legal profession where women's advancement within law firms has flatlined. The National Association of Women Lawyers ("NAWL") [annual survey of women in AmLaw 200 law firms](#) shows that **women's representation in the equity partner ranks is 15%** - the same percentage since NAWL began the survey six years ago. These numbers are not dissimilar to women in US business generally. The annual Catalyst census of women's representation of *Fortune* 500 Board directors and executive officers has also [stalled out](#) in the 14-16% range.

So, which career advancement strategies are most effective? Which ones have no impact?

We've all heard the maxim that women don't ask – with its implicit assumption that if women do ask, they will receive. The Catalyst report found, however, that women were *more* likely than men to ask for career-building experiences and training, and *just as* likely as men to negotiate for higher compensation or job placement during the hiring process for their current job. Nevertheless, the men in the study (which follows the career paths of over 4000 MBA graduates from around the world) made more money and advanced farther and faster than their women counterparts. The \$4600 pay gap that separated men from women in their first jobs out of the gate from business school? It grew to over \$31,000 several years down the road – even when women were more likely than men to ask for more.

A lot of explanations are proffered about why these compensation and advancement gaps exist. The Catalyst reports have tested for a lot of those common assumptions and in the process busted some

myths. Contrary to conventional wisdom, our high-potential pipeline study found these gaps are not due to lower aspirations, motherhood, part-time status, or industry. The problem isn't with the women, it's with organizational and social structures and the gender stereotypes that pervade them.

The Catalyst report found two tactics that made a measurable difference for women's advancement in the study. The first is making one's achievements visible. Women who were more proactive self-promoters were more likely to have risen faster and increased their salaries, and were more professionally satisfied. In other words, it pays to toot your own horn.

Of course, we know that advice is not as simple to follow as it sounds. Self-promotion can be tricky, especially for women who run the risk of triggering the gender tripwire of stereotypes. A couple years ago at the NAWL General Counsel Institute, a law firm partner panelist told the audience about her experience writing up her accomplishments in her partner compensation memo. She was asked, "Don't you think you should be more modest?"

Nevertheless, it's important for women to find a style that works for them, and to make their achievements known to their bosses and their colleagues, to seek feedback, and to ask for credit and for promotions when due. It's not enough to do good work. People have to see you and your accomplishments. Importantly, doing so will help attract a sponsor, which is critical to advancement.

The second tactic that predicted women's advancement was gaining access to powerful others. Identifying and networking with influential people within a firm, building a network of contacts with important people and working on high-profile assignments impacted women's advancement in a way that other strategies – such as blurring work-life boundaries, getting training, and career planning – did not.

This tactic also made a difference for the men in our study. For the most part, however, the study found that similar approaches to career management yielded different outcomes for women and men. Even when women do "all the right things," they still won't advance as far or get paid as much as their male peers. Maybe the issue isn't that women don't ask, but that men don't have to.

To learn more about the latest research on career advancement strategies and hear from women leaders in the business and legal world about what strategies worked for them, **join me at the NAWL General Counsel Institute on November 8, 2012 for a panel discussion, The Myth of the Ideal Worker: Does Doing the Right Thing Really Help Women Get Ahead?** [For more information - Please Click Here.](#)

© 2025 Catalyst Inc.

National Law Review, Volume II, Number 260

Source URL: <https://natlawreview.com/article/myth-ideal-worker-does-doing-all-right-things-really-get-women-ahead>