

Consultant: Think Differently about Work Flexibility and Elevating Women

The Interview

Lisa Cavanaugh is Vice President of Leadership Development Experiences for a boutique consultancy. She leads a team in developing and executing best-in-class leadership development and experiential learning strategies and programs.

Current State

Cavanaugh says the pandemic hurt women in the workforce. Far more women than men had to leave the workforce, mostly related to childcare options because virtual schooling and childcare are harder to find.

“Companies have really got to come to grips with the fact that women still carry the bulk of work at home and create more flexibility,” Cavanaugh said. “Many women with successful careers where they are leaders in an organization, like me, have a husband or partner who is the stay-at-home parent. But attitudes are slow to change in society. My husband has been the primary home parent for years, but each school year it takes six months before the school stops calling me at work rather than my husband at home.

“I don’t think elevation of women in leadership roles will change dramatically until companies are willing to provide childcare or more subsidies for childcare and provide space for elder care and generally just create more flexibility,” Cavanaugh said. “The US is far behind other countries in this. The pandemic has increased the focus on flexibility, but still more women have left the workforce, so there must be more systemic change.”

Mentoring vs. Sponsorship of Women

Unconscious bias will always come into play when men hold most senior-level roles, Cavanaugh said, because they prefer people who look and act like them. “That does not make them bad; that is hard-wired into all of us. That is one of many reasons why diversity in hiring and promotion decisions is important: to help equal out unconscious biases.”

There is a lot of talk about women needing more male mentors and sponsors, Cavanaugh said, but there are issues right now with both.

“Many men are reluctant to build close professional relationships with women to avoid appearances of impropriety. It is an outgrowth of #MeToo. In my own role, I was coaching a man recently and one of the interesting things in that relationship is that he would not be seen with me outside the office. Dinners or evening events were out of the question. He was concerned about what his wife might think.

“On the other side of the spectrum, in my various roles I would learn that my CEO or CFO had gone to dinner with customers and had not invited me because they were going to a club that would not be appropriate for me to go — or so they thought. I also do not get invited to golf outings and the like,” Cavanaugh said. “Now, I will also say that I have worked with men who invite women to outings or dinners or sponsor women and have those deeper relationships. Not all men avoid it, but it is definitely an obstacle that has to be overcome.”

Cavanaugh prefers sponsorships to mentorships. “Women need high-level people who are actively promoting the woman’s skills in the C-Suite. And I think we need to think more broadly about sponsorships, not just within an organization but outside. Millennials are doing work differently. They are looking for sponsors or mentors within a sector rather than just in the organization, so, we need to think deeper. How can we connect young women with women and men in power in their industry so women have greater opportunities to find really good sponsorship?”

Flexibility

Cavanaugh said there must be “flexibility about flexibility.” By that, she means that the types of flexibility should be open-ended and adjustable depending on the evolution of a family. For instance, a woman with an infant or pre-K child may prefer working at an office and having assistance in finding and paying for childcare or having on-site childcare. That is because when working at home with a child that age, the child still wants the parent and that can be very distracting for the work. But as the child gets into school, splitting time between home and office, or exclusively at home with the ability to pick the kids up from school or take them to aftercare, becomes a better option.

She said the work flexibility issue needs a lot more study. She believes government support, offered in many other countries, especially in Europe, may be necessary. “Despite the talk about flexibility, the basic premise of work is still largely 9-to-5 or 8-to-5 or some bulk of time during the day,” Cavanaugh said. “That worked in the Henry Ford era. We have not really gotten a grip on what works for knowledge workers in the modern era. We need to get a better understanding

of how people in a modern society can work best and adjust beyond a set schedule. This will take a while because labor laws are focused on specific work hours. We have a long way to go on the topic of work flexibility.”

Insights

Cavanaugh offers many valuable insights on the development of women leaders and flexibility of work.

Women continue to be severely underrepresented in leadership roles at most employers. Though 75% of organizations say women are included among their top internal succession candidates for CEO and C-Suite roles, only 17% of organizations have women CEOs, according to our research.

In addition, two-thirds of organizations have 20% or less of their C-Suite comprised of women and 55% have less than 20% women as senior leaders (VP level). There are far more women in manager/supervisor roles, then the percentages drop off a cliff at higher levels.

In more than 75% of organizations, women experienced childcare, home-schooling conflicts and remote work challenges during the pandemic. Women applied for extended leave because of pandemic-related issues in 35% of organizations. Women resigned their positions due to COVID-related issues in 30% of organizations.

Work flexibility is the key and Cavanaugh is right that the concept of remote work or in-office work is too simplistic. She is also correct that flexibility is often associated with women, but in modern society, these are family and parental issues — not women's issues. Organizations should think about what is fair and equitable for everyone and enable families, in whatever shape or form, to have the flexibility necessary to integrate professional and personal lives.

- Claude Werder, SVP and Principal HCM Analyst, Brandon Hall Group

- Rachel Cooke, Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst, Brandon Hall Group

RESEARCH NOTE

What's Changing for Women in the Workplace
Leadership Consultant



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