

Glass ceilings and workplaces

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Whilst statistics from the Institute for Employment Studies for **June 2023** showed that two thirds of employment growth over the last quarter has been among people over 50, this has been driven largely by higher employment for men, and particularly men aged 65 and over. The IES reports that “the employment rate ‘gap’ between older men and women is *widening* for the first time on record - with the gap having narrowed from 12.0 to 8.0 percentage points in the decade leading up to the pandemic, but now widening to 9.1 percentage points in the latest data.”

The BSI has published a report titled Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling to explore the reasons why some women are leaving the workplace earlier than they would have through personal choice. The report is based on a survey of more than 5,000 women from four continents. It explores the factors driving women to leave, grouping these into six key areas: external forces; culture and environment; stereotypes and expectations; role models; biology and family responsibilities; and menopause.

Within the UK, over one in five women (21%) cited caring responsibilities (for parents or children) as a barrier to remaining in the workplace. The report highlights the circular logic in play here: women earn less than men (the gender pay gap in operation) and this, combined with societal expectations, means that it is women who are more likely to be the ones to leave work to care for family. This makes it harder for women to return to work and reach leadership positions (the first or traditional glass ceiling), which, in turn, then makes it more likely that it will be women who leave the workplace for good when further caring needs arise.

One in five women in the UK (20%) mentioned health or wellbeing considerations for the menopause as a barrier to continuing in work. Given that more than half of UK women surveyed (54%) believe that it would be difficult to raise these issues with an employer, this may mean that many women are exiting the workplace without a conversation ever having taking place as to the real reasons why. 71% of UK women were supportive of employers having formal policies to address personal health and wellbeing issues – such as menopause, health issues relating to menstruation, difficult pregnancies and miscarriages. Only 4% reported being aware of such policies within their organisations; this of itself may help to explain some of the difficulties women feel in raising these issues within the workplace.

When looking at ways in which the Second Glass Ceiling can be lifted, the report emphasises the importance of education and dialogue. A supportive and flexible culture are important to allow discussions to take place in a positive and inclusive environment. And those discussions can then lead on to the development of appropriate wellbeing initiatives and policies to raise awareness and challenge stereotypes.

With many employers struggling to recruit (and the costs associated with recruitment hitting the bottom line), retention of existing staff becomes ever more important. Tailoring retention strategies to your particular workforce is key; understanding what is of value to your staff (and recognising that this changes over time) is the first step in this process.

If you would like to discuss policies or retention strategies to address any of the issue mentioned above, please feel free to get in touch.

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