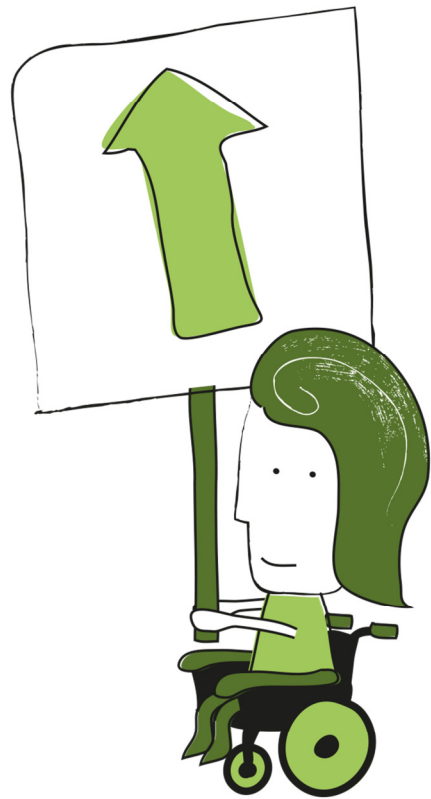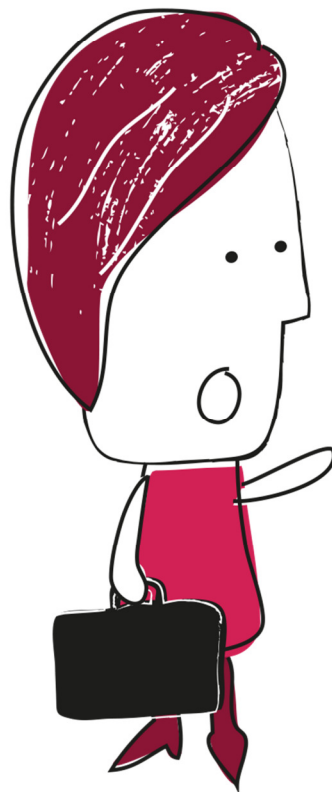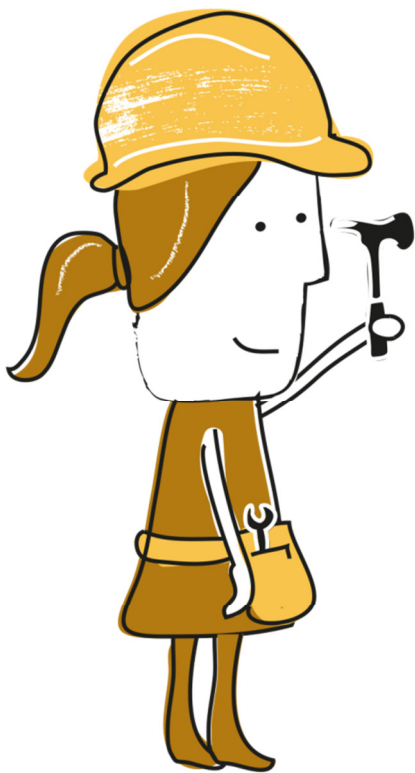# Pressures, Promotions, Pay-rises and Parity

**A study exploring the barriers to women's confidence and progression in the workplace**

# Prepared by TBR in partnership with Julie Johnson For Agile Nation

**TBR** is an economic research and development consultancy with niche skills in understanding the structure and nature of workforces at local, regional and national levels. TBR has a particular expertise in skills based research and researching workforce composition and diversity; economy wide and in a variety of sectors. TBR celebrated its 25th year in business in 2011 and is proud to continue providing invaluable evidence and knowledge from which strategic decisions can be made.

www.tbr.co.uk

**Julie Johnson** is Director of Julie Johnson Coaching, a home-based company specialising in supporting working women to fulfil their professional potential whilst also achieving personal happiness and their desired 'successful' life. She works with entrepreneurs and small business owners, as well as professionals, managers and those women wanting to create a work/life balance that suits them emotionally as well as financially.

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Operating across the convergence areas of Wales, **Agile Nation** is a European Social Fund and Welsh Government funded project. It has been designed to help employed women to develop and progress their careers, and to help businesses adopt working practices based around the commercial and employee benefits that effective diversity, flexible and remote working strategies and policies can deliver.

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## 1. Overview & aims

Approaching the end of the European Social Fund and Welsh Government funded Agile Nation project, Chwarae Teg has been engaged in a process of research and evaluation to reflect on the activities delivered though the programme, understand its legacy and impact and consider the design of future interventions.

The Ascent programme has been a key part of the Agile Nation Project, supporting women in the convergence area of Wales (see Figure 1 below) to develop leadership and management skills (which are validated through level 2 and level 3 Institute of Leadership and Management awards), build confidence and explore opportunities for career development.   There has been significant focus specifically on delivering qualifications to support women in gaining a promotion.

**Figure 1: Convergence area of Wales**
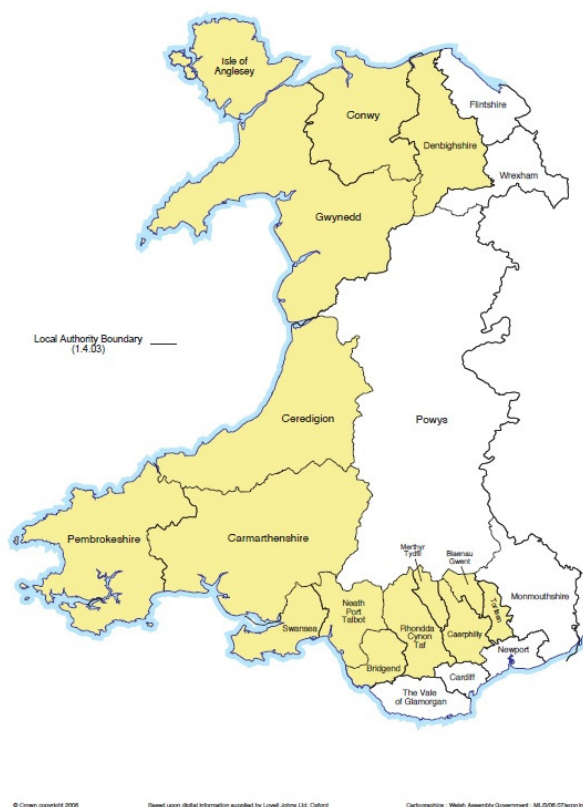


However, Chwarae Teg's 2012 *A Woman's Place*[1] report provided clear evidence of the challenges Welsh women still face in progressing at work.  More than half (59%) of women surveyed stated that they wouldn't be happy to continue in their current role. However, only 1 in 7 wanted a promotion.   With this in mind Chwarae Teg commissioned TBR, working in partnership with Julie Johnson, to review the role of confidence at work and the extent to which it was impacting upon women's labour market outcomes.

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[1] Chwarae Teg (2012) A Woman's Place
http://chwaraeteg.com/downloads/A_Womans_Place_FULL_ENG.pdf

## 2. Introduction

The majority of graduates from UK Higher Education Institutions are female, and women make up over 48% of the workforce in Wales.  Despite progress towards a more inclusive and equitable labour market, research in 2013 by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM)[2] found that almost three quarters of women felt that there were gender barriers preventing them from reaching the highest tier of management.

One key barrier identified was workplace confidence.  The same ILM research found that men are more inclined than women to apply for jobs if they feel that they only partially meet the job description; 20% against 14%.  This headline statistic hints at a complex, subtle, and delicate issue that is more difficult to define and address than some other, more established barriers faced by women at work (such as the disproportionate responsibility for caring for children and/or relatives).

Whilst some aspects of workplace performance have accepted measurements (for instance functional success measured perhaps by the profitability of projects managed or the proportion of clients seen within a determined time of arriving), confidence is not something that can be measured so easily, and often relies on self-perception that could be inaccurate (i.e. someone could consider themselves to be confident at work and yet display behaviours that conflict with their assessment and vice versa).

A further complicating factor is that people can struggle to disassociate themselves personally from a measurement of confidence, in the way that they might other performance indicators.  For example, someone can more easily justify issues related to the profitability of their projects (factors beyond the individual's control led to a reduction) or client waiting times (previous client's needs were complex and time consuming) without this becoming a reflection on their personal value as perceived by themselves.  Because of this, confidence is something that people often feel uncomfortable discussing in a professional setting.

In full awareness of the potential sensitivity of this subject, the aim of this project has been to deliver an understanding on the role of confidence at work and the impact it can have on career outcomes and progression.  The report provides a detailed account of findings, which have been drawn from consideration of existing research reports and new evidence generated through in-depth qualitative interviews with women who live and work in Wales.

### 2.1  Research questions

The overarching aim of the project was to deliver research into the barriers that inhibit women's confidence in the workplace.  In particular, the research sought to establish the extent to which a lack of confidence – amongst other factors – discourages and/or prevents women from seeking promotion at work.

The specific questions explored through the research were:

- Why don't some women want senior posts?

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[2] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2013), Ambition and gender at work, available at: https://www.i-l-m.com/Insight/Inspire/2013/May/ambition-gender-key-findings

- What helps women's confidence and progression?

- What hinders women's confidence and progression?

- What is different in the careers, experiences and support for women who do and don't progress?

## 3. Methodology

This section of the report explains the approach that the research team took to generate evidence that would contribute to Chwarae Teg's understanding of the four questions posed in section 2.1. It explains why individual semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate primary research method, and proceeds to set out how the thematic focus of these was determined. It summarises the challenges faced during the delivery of the methodology and then profiles the eighteen individuals who participated in interviews.

### 3.1 Methodological rationale

The nature of the key questions set out in section 2.1 lead naturally to in-depth interviews. The themes are sensitive and require a bond of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee; it is unlikely that this could be achieved through a series of impersonal multiple choice questions. Equally, the nature of some of the themes would make group discussion an inappropriate research methodology; participants are unlikely to feel comfortable disclosing their experience of being overlooked for promotion, for example, to an audience of strangers.

To overcome these two principal barriers, the research team delivered a series of semi-structured individual in-depth interviews that lasted between 25 and 30 minutes each; sufficient time to avoid procedural bias. The interviews followed a discussion guide, but this was used to stimulate discussion and occasionally prompt specific lines of enquiry, allowing interviewees sufficient flexibility to determine much of the structure and content of the interview according to their individual experience and insights.

The nature of qualitative research dictates that research bias cannot be altogether eliminated, but that it can and must be mitigated and minimised. A random distribution of qualitative research subjects (interviewees) across a range of characteristics is summarised in section 3.3, were used. The distribution demonstrates that a full range of different groups have participated, and where some appear overrepresented this generally reflects their overrepresentation in the female workforce in Wales (e.g. those employed in the public sector). These measures are evidence of the research team's efforts to avoid selection bias, either in the form of omission bias or inclusive bias.

Interviews were completed by three experienced researchers. The researchers themselves have a broad coverage in terms of experience, age and, importantly for this study, included male and female interviewers. The distribution of interviews across three researchers (for a relatively small sample of 25) helped the research team to avoid interviewer bias.

Once the series of interviews had been completed, the three researchers convened to discuss findings. This collective discussion, along with the collaborative approach to developing this report, ensured that the findings and recommendations were agreed by the research team and not the product of one individual; this approach helped to minimise the likelihood of reporting bias.

### 3.2  Developing the discussion guide

It was vital that the qualitative research questions were informed by existing knowledge, so as to ensure that the evidence generated did not duplicate existing evidence.

#### 3.2.1  Literature review

A desk based literature review  was completed before the qualitative interview phase began.  The parameters of the literature review were drawn from the four key questions presented in section 2.1 and the information collated from the literature review is arranged in a format consistent with these, across sections 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4.  This reinforces the significance of the four key questions as the underpinning structure for the research report.

In addition to contributing answers across the four key questions, the outcomes of the literature review also informed the content of the discussion guide.  The questions contained within the discussion guide are aligned to each of the key questions and designed to complement (either by confirming or adding to) existing knowledge.

#### 3.2.2  Review of Ascent soft outcomes

In addition to a broad range of published reports, the research team also considered an unpublished review of the soft outcomes achieved by participants of the Ascent programme.   These soft outcomes, such as improved self-confidence, are often intangible and difficult to measure accurately.  They contrast with hard outcomes, such as promotions and salary increases, which are easier to classify and measure.

The unpublished report considers participants' self-assessment of confidence and the extent to which it has increased (or decreased) across a range of workplace activities, such as communication, work-life balance, and time management.  This report utilises these research findings to contribute towards answering the second (section 4.2.1) and, more extensively, fourth (section 4.4) of the key questions.

#### 3.2.3  Defining progression and confidence

Defining whether or not someone had achieved promotion created a modest challenge.  Using a fictitious but realistic example, if somebody achieved promotion after working two years for an employer but proceeded to work in the same role for the following ten years, one could ask whether this person should be classified as someone who had been promoted or someone who had not.  The view taken in this study was that, although they had formally been promoted, their outlook was more consistent with someone who had not been promoted and this is therefore where they were more likely to classify themselves.  The research team responded flexibly to this and adopted the notion of 'career phases'; if someone felt that they had been performing an unchanged role at work for a period that they might describe as a 'career phase' then they would be classified as not having been promoted (this would apply to the fictitious example outlined above).

Although self-confidence, self-belief, and self-esteem are well recognised terms, the subtlety of their meaning and how they might be assessed, particularly in terms of self-assessment, are more challenging.   Self-belief and self-esteem are generally considered to be components of self-confidence i.e. someone with high self-belief and high self-esteem will have high self-confidence.

- Self-belief is reflected in outlook, which tends to be positive and a sense that an individual's qualities and abilities are valuable and valued.
- Self-esteem involves a greater sense of control over outcomes, reflected in greater attribution of positive outcomes to personal qualities (a notion perhaps best captured within the fourth of Nathaniel Branden's *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (1995), described as 'The practice of self-responsibility').

Asking questions of this nature directly can unsettle interviewees and provoke an emotive response that can come to dominate the narrative of the interview. Once someone has indicated that they have low self-confidence, self-belief, or self-esteem, they dwell on this in responses to other questions, and vice versa. In response to this, questions pertaining to self-belief and self-esteem were careful not to mention these terms and instead tried to elicit insight from participants in a way that captured the symptoms of high/low self-belief and self-esteem.

### 3.3 Interviewees' characteristics

The research team interviewed eighteen women as part of this project. The interviews were distributed across women that had been promoted (eight) and women that had not been promoted (ten). The interviews were also distributed across women who had participated in the Ascent programme (ten) and women who had not participated in the Ascent programme (eight). These were key parameters in the development of the cohort of interviewees and are reflected on in the analysis of the primary research outcomes.

Identifying potential interviewees and securing interviews was easier with Ascent participants than with the wider workforce. One inference to draw from this is that an association with the Ascent programme gave this project legitimacy that made interviewees more inclined to participate. Interviewees, for various reasons, regularly rescheduled booked interviews; the research team responded positively and flexibly to this and in all but one or two examples, interviews were successfully rescheduled.

Six further characteristics were captured to ensure that the participating interviewees could be profiled. These six characteristics were: age group, sector of employment, location of employment, highest qualification level, weekly hours worked, and number of colleagues – are presented graphically in Figure 2 through Figure 7.

**Figure 2: Age group**
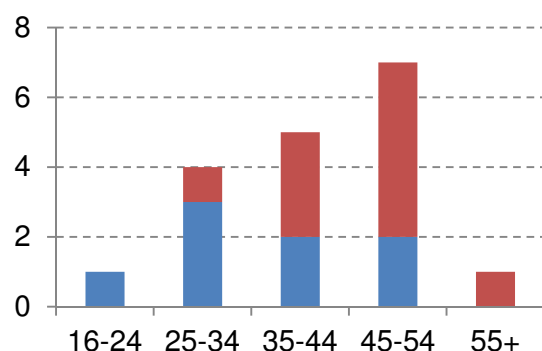


*Source: TBR 2014 (TBR Ref: W1/C1)*

**Figure 3: Sector of employment**
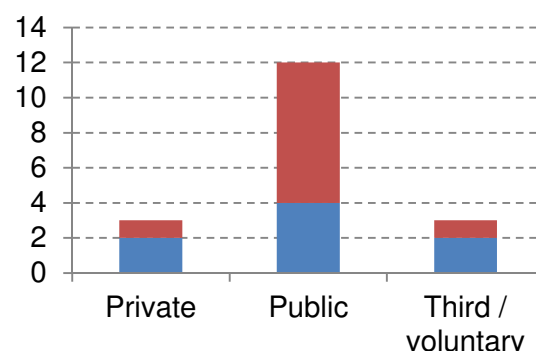


*Source: TBR 2014 (TBR Ref: W1/C2)*

Figure 2, above, illustrates the age profile of the interviewees who participated in the research. The vast majority (16 or 88%) were aged between 25 and 54. We observe that, generally speaking, the age profile of women who had been promoted was slightly younger than the age profile of women who had not. This links with the notion of career phases, where women made reference to having been promoted in the past, when they were younger, but not recently.

Figure 3, above, presents the broad sector in which the interviewees are employed. The proportion employed in the public sector is high (67%), but this is consistent with the employment of women across Wales, 50% of whom are employed in public service sectors (Figure 8, page 2). The distribution of women who had not been promoted was more concentrated in the public sector.

Figure 4, below, demonstrates the geographic distribution of interviewees. Interviewees were drawn from across Wales, but the majority were employed in South Wales. This trend was more pronounced amongst interviewees who had not been promoted than amongst interviewees who had.

Figure 5, below, suggests that the majority of interviewees have completed training at NQF Level 4 or above, which is likely to involve some form of Higher Education (e.g. Foundation degree, Bachelor's degree, Certificate/Diploma of Higher Education).

### Figure 4: Location of employment
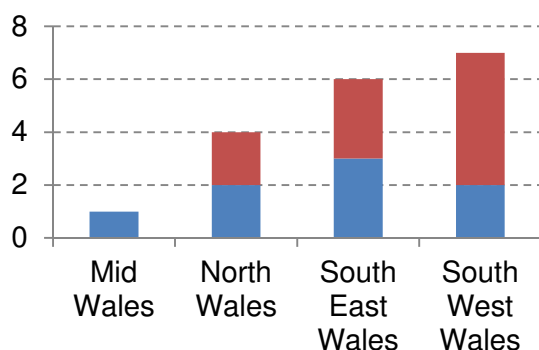


Source: TBR 2014 (TBR Ref: W1/C3)

### Figure 5: Highest qualification level
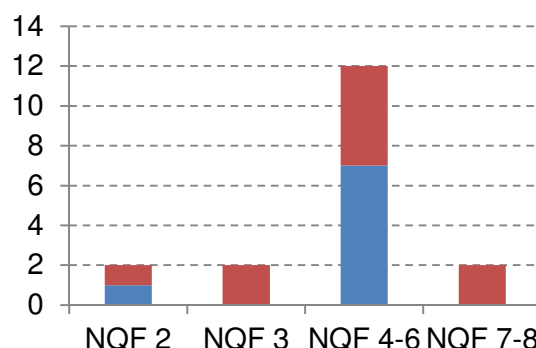


Source: TBR 2014 (TBR Ref: W1/C4)

Figure 6, below, shows that the majority of women interviewed, and all of those who had been promoted, typically worked a minimum of 26 hours per week. The majority of interviewees typically worked 37 hours per week or more (i.e. full-time). Many of the interviewees reported that they worked more hours than they were contracted to; this suggests a danger that women might be being paid to work part-time hours but end up working additional, unpaid hours due to the demands of their job.

Figure 7, below, suggests that 67% of interviewees work for either micro businesses (with fewer than 10 employees) or very large businesses (with more than 500). This distribution is consistent with a more broadly identifiable trend. If analysis is restricted to these micro businesses and very large businesses, the experience of interviewees in

respect of promotion is inverted: 75% of the interviewees in micro businesses had **not** been promoted, whereas 75% of the interviewees in very large businesses had been promoted. This is perhaps reflective of hierarchical structures found in most large organisations and relatively flat structures in small businesses.

**Figure 6: Weekly hours worked**
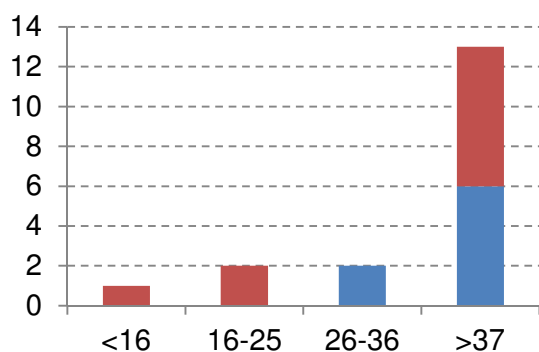


*Source: TBR 2014 (TBR Ref: W1/C5)*

**Figure 7: Number of colleagues**
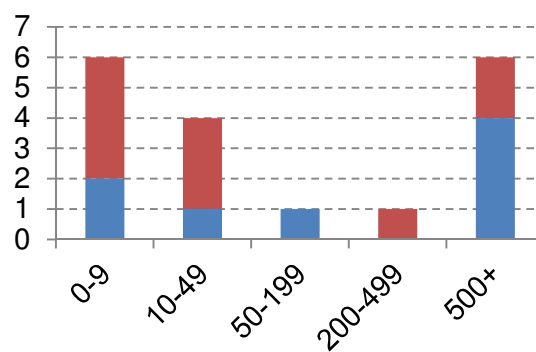


*Source: TBR 2014 (TBR Ref: W1/C6)*

■ Promoted   ■ Not-promoted

The research team also completed interviews with three sectors with significant female workforces: Further Education, the Police Force, and the National Health Service. These three sectors were represented by ColegauCymru, South Wales Police, and The NHS Centre for Equality and Human Rights. Public service sectors were selected because 50% of women in Wales work in public service sectors; as shown in Figure 8, below, which compares the sectoral distribution of employment in Wales by gender. The evidence from these interviews provided a supplementary source of information and enabled the research project to view the issues facing women at work from an organisational/sectoral perspective as well as an individual perspective.

**Figure 8: Sectoral distribution of employment in Wales, by gender**



■ Women - Wales   ■ Men - Wales
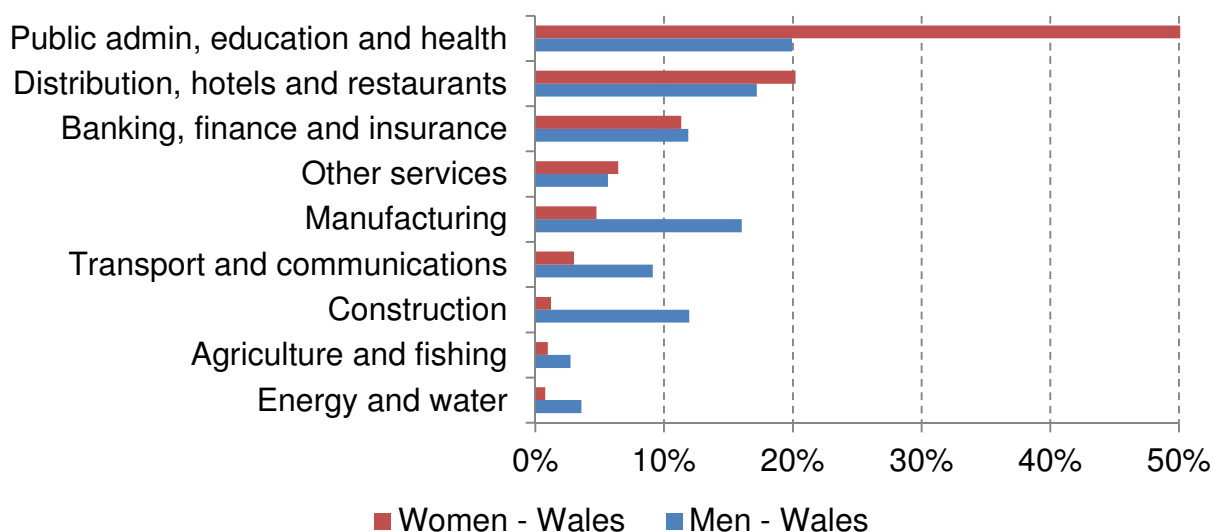
*Source: Office for National Statistics Annual Population Survey 2013 (TBR Ref: W2/C1)*

## 4. Key questions

The four sub-sections that are contained within this section refer to the key questions set out in section 2.1. Each of these sub-sections firstly considers existing evidence, which was drawn from the literature review and then new evidence, generated via the in-depth interviews. Specifically:

- Section 4.1 considers the notion that some women appear reluctant to pursue promotions at work, and this section seeks to understand what causes this reluctance
- Section 4.2 considers which workplace interventions (such as shadowing senior colleagues) are most effective when it comes to supporting women to apply for or negotiate a promotion or salary increase
- Section 4.3 considers the most influential factors that discourage or prevent women from applying for or negotiating a promotion or salary increase
- Section 4.4 reflects on the observable differences between women who have successfully achieved promotion and those who have not, in terms of personal characteristics and the consequences of those differing experiences.

### 4.1 Why don't some women want senior posts?

In conversation, people sometimes refer to a 'career ladder'. This metaphor represents a general understanding of the steps that people may take in order to progress towards senior positions. A traditional view is that people will seek to take steps up the career ladder at every available opportunity. However, a more sophisticated view recognises that there are often external considerations that mean this is not the case. For example, people may often be referred to as making a 'sideways move'. This section seeks to explain some of these external considerations and understand whether or not these are unique to – or at least more likely to affect – women.

### 4.1.1 Existing evidence

Whilst women do hold positions of authority/seniority, figures show that they tend to represent a minority of these roles.[1] A lack of self-confidence/self-belief (linked to lower expectations/career aspirations[2]) is considered to be a key factor in preventing career progression for women.

Personal commitments, such as having a family or work/life balance concerns, appear to dissuade women from wanting to take on senior roles.[3] This is heightened by the lack of 'good' childcare[4], the cultural challenge of long working hours in the UK[5] and a lack of opportunities which accommodate caring responsibilities.[6] Furthermore, women

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[1] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2013), Ambition and gender at work.
[2] Women's Business Council, (2013), The Pipeline to Senior Management: Evidence Paper.
[3] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2012), Women in Banking report; Green, E. Moore, J. Easton, H. & Heggie, J, (2004), Barriers to Women's Employment and Progression in the Labour Market in the North East of England.
[4] Green, E. Moore, J. Easton, H. & Heggie, J, (2004), Barriers to Women's Employment and Progression in the Labour Market in the North East of England.
[5] Women's Business Council, (2013),The Pipeline to Senior Management: Evidence Paper Van Wanrooy and B. Bewley, H. Bryson, A. Forth, J. Freeth, S. Stokes, L. Wood, S, (2013), The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study: First Findings.
[6] TUC, (2008), Closing the Gender Pay Gap: An update report for TUC's Women's Conference 2008.

who work flexibly often have to work in a role that does not maximise their potential in order to achieve this[7]. This limits efforts to reduce the persistent gender pay divide.[8]

Despite the fact that 44% of working women in Wales hold part-time positions (compared to only 12% of men), the survey findings from Chwarae Teg's 2013 *A Woman's Place* report suggest that many women feel that senior roles are not compatible with part-time working. It is also argued that the more senior the role, the less likely it is that flexible working practices will be available.[9]

| Box 1: A Woman's Place |
| --- |

Chwarae Teg's 2013 report *A Woman's Place* is an authoritative examination of issues facing women at work. This box draws exclusively on data from *A woman's place* and collates the content that is directly relevant to this key question.

Women considering promotion are concerned by the prospect of increased difficulty combining non-work activities (such as caring responsibilities or raising children) with increased responsibility at work. This combination can act as a disincentive to seek promotion. In Wales, *A Woman's Place* confirms that women are concerned that working at a senior grade will increase the stress they experience. There is also some suggestion that the progress of a woman's career is condensed into a shorter period of time than that of their male counterparts; linked to median age at childbirth and an impression that this can be so disruptive to career development that women need to achieve a senior position in advance of maternity. Consequently, the report suggests that the (perceived) need to adhere to this timetable can discourage women from pursuing career progression, because they feel that the required trajectory is unrealistic.

*A Woman's Place* also provides anecdotal evidence from Wales of women witnessing negative reactions to female colleagues who have taken on a managerial role on a part-time basis. In one example, employees felt that they had to pick up managerial responsibilities during times that the part-time female manager was not at work, which led to dissention within the workforce. This discouraged other part-time female employees from seeking career progression, as they feared similar resentment from their peers. An interesting interpretation of this trend was that a potential solution would be to support male staff to work part-time in managerial roles. This would reduce the gender association with part-time work and prevent the negative associations described previously being ascribed solely to women.

The report further suggests that women in Wales recognised the challenges posed by the contraction of the economy since 2008; the consequences of this were that fewer opportunities for career progression were emerging and that line managers were remaining in post for longer. Although this circumstance is not experienced uniquely by women, increased competition for roles has been found to reduce the likelihood of women applying for promotion to a greater extent than it has for men.

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, (2009), Flexible Working: Working for families, working for business: A report by the Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce.
[9] Ibid.

Previous research has led to the conversational use of the term 'glass ceiling'. This metaphor is adopted because, despite there being evidence that women regularly do not ascend to the top tiers of management, the 'ceiling' that prevents them from doing so appears not to be visible; its causes remain unknown, or at least unclear. The lack of females currently working in senior positions also means that the 'glass ceiling' is perceived to be harder to break, therefore making women less likely to apply for senior posts.[10] This trend is evident in Wales, where organisational structures featuring few women in senior roles are often considered to be 'normal'[11]; subconsciously reinforcing gender segregation within the workplace.[12]

Occupational segregation is additionally thought to be a key inhibiting factor for women seeking a promotion, particularly within male dominated sectors. UKCES' 2009 *Quantitative Evaluation of the Women & Work Sector Pathways Initiative*[13] found that women in the UK are typically crowded into a narrow range of lower-paying occupations, mainly those available part-time, that do not make the best use of their skills.[14] More specifically, two thirds of women were found to work in just 12 occupational areas – the '5 Cs': catering, cleaning, caring, clerical and cashiering, - compared to two-thirds of men who work in 26 occupational areas.[15] The gender stereotyping of roles is thought to play a part in dissuading progression by not allowing women to gain the necessary experience and therefore confidence to apply for more senior roles.[16]

Data from Chwarae Teg's (2013), *A woman's place* report suggests that 59% of women in Wales would like to change their job; although a smaller proportion (25%) of women were found to be actively seeking new opportunities. Of these, 14% were seeking promotion related to their current post, and 11% looking to change career entirely. The data does not, however, determine whether this career change would involve promotion.

Younger women – particularly those aged 16-24 – were more likely to be dissatisfied with their current role than older generations. Age was not the only differentiating factor. Women currently employed in sales and customer service roles were found to be more likely to be seeking alternative employment in the next five years than women currently employed in managerial roles (71% against 46%).

### 4.1.2  Evidence generated through interviews

The evidence generated through the interviews suggests that women appear reluctant to pursue senior posts because they:

- Are unsure how to unlock their potential (possibly through promotion)
- Misinterpret how age might constrain opportunities

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[10] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2012), Women in Banking report.
[11] Chwarae Teg (2013) *A woman's place*
[12] ibid
[13] UKCES, (2009), Policy Research Institute and Quantitative Evaluation of the Women & Work Sector Pathways Initiative.
[14] UKRC, (2010), Statistics - Women and Men in Science, Engineering and Technology: The UK Statistics Guide.
[15] Equality and Human Rights Commission, (2009), Equal Pay Position Paper.
[16] Women's Business Council, (2013),The Pipeline to Senior Management: Evidence Paper.

- Consider careers alongside – and not to the exclusion of – other life ambitions
- Concerns over workplace relationships

These three themes are explained in greater detail below.

## Unsure how to unlock potential (possibly through promotion)

When asked to what extent they were operating to their full potential, some interviewees suggested that they were working well within themselves; utilising only between 45% and 65% of their skills in their current role. One interviewee reported that she had only become aware of this through participating in Ascent. These women were typically aged between 45 and 54, working in the public sector, and had not been promoted. There was no pattern to their employer size, hours worked, or highest qualification held. Approximately half had participated in Ascent and half had not.

Interestingly, many interviewees who felt that their utilisation rate was relatively low saw promotion as the means through which to rectify this. This might reflect an organisational culture where progression is associated exclusively with line management and there is not the scope within roles to progress by specialising in a particular discipline. Whilst promotion is a possible solution to underutilisation, it is not the only solution, and may not be the most appropriate.

## Misperceive how age might constrain opportunities

Many respondents discussed age and its impact on career path and opportunities for promotion. Many women felt conscious of their age when considering future career opportunities; those aged over fifty described how they felt that, because of their age, they were unlikely to secure a job with a new employer. Women in these positions typically worked for businesses employing fewer than fifty people. More generally, some women working for smaller businesses felt that they would have to change their employer to achieve a promotion, which might compound the concern over age. The issue of age was also raised by younger women; although they did not feel personally affected, they expressed concern that they could be in the future.

*"My view was that at my age [50] careers tend to plateau. However [having participated in the Ascent programme] I now realise that I am capable of doing and giving more."*

However, the period between the age of fifty and retirement was recognised by interviewees as a key employment period for women – particularly those with children. A number of interviewees felt that when they reached the age of fifty, their children tended to either be moving out of the home, or are more independent. As such, 'space' returns that *could* be filled with greater involvement/responsibility at work. However, before they have reached this point, few women were able to predict whether they would want to 'ramp up' their career, or use the time to pursue personal goals/projects/activities that are more accessible/realistic with older/adult children.

## Consider careers alongside – and not to the exclusion of – other life ambitions

The existence of a personal career plan was variable; some respondents had a clear view of what they would like their future career to look like, others were much less specific. Childcare, and particularly the cost of childcare, was raised by many women

as a challenge.  In some cases, this was having a decisive impact on working patterns and hours worked.  The cost of childcare is something that is recognised as affecting women disproportionately, because women represent the majority of sole parents in the UK.  Even in dual parent households, arranging childcare can be seen as a woman's responsibility: research published in 2010 reports that over three-quarters of mothers state they are primarily responsible for childcare in the home[17].  Even if the cost of childcare is incurred by the household, it can be seen as a cost that the mother is responsible for generating.

There was a general sense that respondents saw their career plan as a component of a life plan; their career had to be compatible with the other activities that they would like to achieve.  This contrasted with a sense that men might typically consider their career plan in isolation, and then fit any other activities around their career plan.

*"I would like to be respected within my peer group and combine a successful career with a fulfilling home life."*

## Concerns over workplace relationships

Interviewees who had been promoted talked about a certain feeling of isolation that they had experienced when they were promoted, and that there were sometimes negative associations that accompanied women with successful careers.  Interviewees who had not themselves been promoted also observed this amongst colleagues, and some reflected that their exposure to this negative response had discouraged them from seeking promotion.  These women were typically aged between 35 and 54, based in South Wales, highly qualified (NQF Level 4 as a minimum) and working 37+ hours per week.

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[17] Campbell-Barr, V. & Garnham, A.  (2010) Childcare: A review of what parents want

**4.2 What helps women's confidence and progression?**

This section considers the most effective methods through which women can be supported to achieve their potential. It considers various support requirements that women might have, but focuses on confidence and how this might best be improved.

**4.2.1 Existing evidence**

Recent studies have suggested that the use of targeted campaigns to encourage more women to apply for promotions and development support through for example, mentoring schemes, could help to encourage more women to participate at a senior level.[1]

Encouraging self-reflection through leadership coaching and mentoring programmes is felt to be important in improving women's confidence[2] and in helping women to understand how they can overcome barriers to progression.[3] A recent Catalyst survey however, found that women who have mentors are less likely to be promoted than women with sponsors (i.e. mentors who can use their influence/financial sway to help protégés obtain high-level assignments and positions). However, this survey also suggests that men are more likely to have sponsors than women.[4]

In addition to mentoring and sponsorship support, having the support of other women in the workplace is felt to be a key factor in increasing women's confidence.[5] In particular, informal networking and socialising amongst female peers is thought to help women to gain the confidence to negotiate pay and promotion, more so than using legislation/policy for this purpose.[6]

Reducing the gender association with flexible working could also empower women to subsequently seek improved terms and conditions.[7] The current high demand for more flexible working practices throughout the workforce could support women in negotiating pay/promotion as it is understood that to address the gender pay gap, more people will need to enter the workforce and there will need to be a greater choice in jobs.[8]

The Institute of Leadership and Management's *Ambition and Gender* report suggests that having a strong and set career plan to follow helps to foster confidence and ambition for women.[9] The disproportionate impact of starting a family dictates that women's careers tend to be more disrupted and less linear than men's careers. A more

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[1] Green, E. Moore, J. Easton, H. & Heggie, J, (2004), Barriers to Women's Employment and Progression in the Labour Market in the North East of England.
[2] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2013), Ambition and gender at work; Edwards, M. Burmester, B. Evans. M. Halupka, M. & May, D, (2013), Not yet 50/50: Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service.
[3] Green, E. Moore, J. Easton, H. & Heggie, J, (2004), Barriers to Women's Employment and Progression in the Labour Market in the North East of England.
[4] http://career-advice.monster.com/career-development/getting-promoted/sponsor-women-career-development/article.aspx
[5] Darke, T. (2013), The Sunday Times Editors letter: 3rd November 2013.
[6] Wattis, L. Yerkes, M. Lloyd, S. Hernandez, M. Dawson, L. Standing, K. (2006) Combining Work and Family Life: Removing the Barriers to Women's Progression. Experiences from the UK and the Netherlands.
[7] Chwarae Teg, (2013), *A woman's place.*
[8] HM Government (2011) Consultation on Modern Workplaces: flexible working.
[9] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2011), Ambition and gender at work.

structured career plan that reflects this reality could therefore help improve women's confidence. This would involve employers taking a long-term perspective to career planning for women, as opposed to simply trying to meet the woman's and the organisation's immediate needs.[10]

The active recruitment of female graduates into male dominated sectors such as banking is also considered to have a positive impact on the confidence levels of women.[11] This could be linked with the perception that women under thirty are less likely to see confidence as a barrier than older groups, particularly those aged between forty and forty-nine.[12] Research suggests that this is linked directly to the impact of a break in continuous employment. People (and in this case women) under thirty are less likely to have taken a break in employment and therefore more likely to feel confident that they are equivalent to their peers (male and female). A break in continuous service often reduces people's confidence as they worry that the work environment will have moved on in the time that they have been absent, and this is more likely to affect women because they are more likely to take a career break. To some extent, therefore, seeing confidence as more of a barrier to progression as women get older is a rational reflection on personal experience that will come to affect those under thirty as they grow older.

It is possible that those aged below thirty who are currently disregarding confidence as a barrier to progression are at a stage in their career where they are yet to identify and acknowledge gaps in their own skills and experience. It is not the case that they have consciously recognised that confidence will reduce later in their career; simply that they do not yet know what they do not know. In this case, it appears that they, along with their male counterparts, are still at stage one of the Conscious Competence Cycle (see

[10] Green, E. Moore, J. Easton, H. & Heggie, J, (2004), Barriers to Women's Employment and Progression in the Labour Market in the North East of England.
[11] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2012), Women in Banking report.
[12] Green, E. Moore, J. Easton, H. & Heggie, J, (2004), Barriers to Women's Employment and Progression in the Labour Market in the North East of England.

Figure 9, below).

In stage one, people are not aware of their lack of professional competence and continue to carry out duties at work oblivious to errors that they may be making.  In stage two, people become more conscious of these shortcomings and recognise areas that require professional improvement.  This leads to these being addressed and the individual moving through to stage three; they regain confidence as they recognise the genuine competencies that they possess, rather than the 'false' confidence experienced during stage one.  The final stage in the conscious competence cycle is stage four, where people have retained the competence achieved during stage three but are not necessarily aware that they possess this.  There is a danger here that confidence reduces because people are not aware of their capabilities, despite these being considerable.

**Figure 9: Conscious competence cycle[13]**
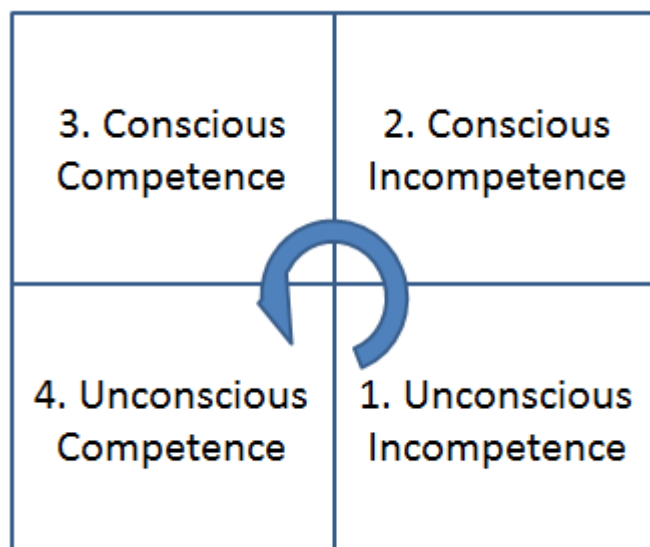


More generally, receiving managerial and organisational support for career development is felt to be a key mechanism to promoting women's confidence.[14] This is understood through encouraging more widespread adoption of flexible working practices and getting rid of presenteeism (i.e. the need to be seen to be at work at all times or before/after hours) attitudes.[15] Greater acknowledgement of the barriers facing women however, is needed to support the implementation of such practices.[16]

The importance of acknowledging barriers is also echoed in the Agile Nation's Ascent Programme's internal report: *Soft outcomes' findings*, where women who experienced work-life balance issues were more likely to report a decrease in their confidence levels.[17] In the *Soft Findings* report, those who experienced an increase in their confidence typically mentioned that this was the result of:

- Enjoying a training course and feeling more motivated
- Receiving support to identify strengths and areas for improvement
- Strengthening communication and delegation skills
- Refreshing existing skills and knowledge (and a reminder that they have such skills)
- Gaining a better understanding of the challenges faced in the workplace and personal relations
- Receiving support with setting realistic goals and with time management techniques
- Receiving support to deal with difficult situations and stress
- Gaining a different perspective from someone outside of their own organisation
- Networking/peer learning opportunities

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[13] *http://www.expertprogrammanagement.com/2012/08/the-conscious-competence-learning-model*
[14] Edwards, M. Burmester, B. Evans. M. Halupka, M. & May, D, (2013), Not yet 50/50: Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service.
[15] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2012), Women in Banking report.
[16] ibid.
[17] Rees, L. (2013), Agile Nation's Ascent Programme's internal report: Soft outcomes' findings.

- Encouragement to change working hours.[18]

### 4.2.2  Evidence generated through interviews

The evidence generated through the interviews suggests that the most effective ways to support women to apply for or negotiate a promotion or salary increase include:

- Embracing personal characteristics
- An employer with a commitment to learning and development
- A personal commitment to learning and development
- Support programmes designed to deliver practical and psychological benefits
- Recognition that development needs are individual and rarely uniform

These five themes are explained in greater detail below.

#### Embracing personal characteristics

Figure 10 presents a word cloud of the responses that interviewees provided when asked to describe their demeanour at work.  Although adjectives such as assertive *did* appear in responses, the most frequently identified characteristics (represented by larger words in the word cloud) were softer terms, such as approachable, friendly, and honest.

**Figure 10: Interviewees' demeanour at work**



A negative consequence of this included occasional references to colleagues who had tried to take advantage of this good nature by manipulating or bullying them.  Being more resilient and better able to manage conflict was raised by a few respondents as a development aim.

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[18] ibid.

One large, public sector employer noted that the notion of a fixed set of key personal characteristics is, in some respects, the wrong way to approach workforce analysis, as it suggests that employees should be homogenised. Instead, employers should look to identify complementary skillsets that can encompass a wide variety of characteristics.

Some respondents reflected on the differences between men and women at work, and resolved that they would like to help other women at earlier stages in their careers to identify and address some of the psychological challenges that they may face. These women were typically aged 35 or older with mixed experiences of promotion, working in South Wales and, interestingly, had not participated in the Ascent programme. It is difficult to draw inferences from this; it could be that Ascent participants had already identified a desire to support the professional development of women and therefore did not express this as a realisation within the interview. This suggests that, having been encouraged to pause and reflect on their own experience, the women interviewed are able to identify particular challenges that they faced and want to ensure that younger generations are better equipped to face these challenges. This sense of solidarity in developing the careers of younger women ('professional matriarchy') could be a powerful counterbalance to the status quo, where many men in positions of power continue to display an (often subconscious) instinct to recruit in their own image.

*"Some employers can display entrenched attitudes and people group together to defend the status quo, which is isolating for those prepared to challenge."*

Respondents were less specific about the precise nature of these challenges, but alluded elsewhere in their interviews to notions of the Impostor Syndrome[19], to potential resentment from other colleagues (often female) when taking a managerial role removes them from the team environment, and to dealing with the isolation that can be experienced when established cultures feel relatively impenetrable to women (male colleagues arranging trips to the golf club, for example).

### Employer commitment to training and development

The outlook of the current employer was significant to the majority of respondents and employers that produced clear career development routes were seen as more favourable. Importantly, although the presence of a development structure was generally valued, this was not necessarily because interviewees wanted to progress up a career ladder. Developing skills for personal validation and satisfaction reinforces the value of respondents, both in terms of self-worth and in terms of value to their employer.

*"I am listened to and my opinion counts, which is what I want from an employer"*

In many cases, interviewees were happy in their current role and would prefer to focus on improving within that role so that they felt more confident in their abilities and better able to manage competing demands upon their time. Similarly, interviewees were often professionally motivated by a desire to deliver good performance and achieve successful outcomes in their current role (without the need for this to necessarily lead to a promotion). These interviewees encompassed the full spectrum of characteristics described in section 3.3; aged anywhere between 25 and 54, employed in all three

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[19] Impostor syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of personal inadequacy that persist despite evident success.

sectors, located throughout Wales, working from 16 hours per week up to full-time, qualified at all different levels, and working for firms of all different sizes. A sense of fairness within the organisation was also important to respondents; even if they didn't personally wish to pursue promotion, they wanted their organisation to treat colleagues fairly and based on their individual merit.

One respondent, working full-time in the voluntary sector, felt that female employees (including female managers) placed a higher value on training, and were more likely to believe that participating in training genuinely made someone more employable. There was a sense that some male employees (including male managers) were more dismissive of training, adopting something of a 'there's nothing any training could teach me' mentality.

In addition to the interviews that the research team completed with women, it also undertook three interviews with organisations in sectors that employ large numbers of women. These interviews provided some useful background context. In the Further Education sector, progression routes are rarely obvious and this reinforces the need for staff to be flexible in order to be in a position to capitalise on career development opportunities as they appear. In the Police Force, as police officers progress into senior positions, the skills required of them evolve quite significantly. The initial focus may be on preventing crime and apprehending criminals, but senior management is more focused on business strategies and leadership. This evolution in skills from practical through technical into leadership and managerial is not unique to the Police Force; a parallel could be drawn with the teaching profession, where time in the classroom decreases as teachers/lecturers take on more responsibility. There is potential for cross sector approaches to supporting the transition from technical skills into leadership and managerial skills; the growth in MBA programmes is evidence of this at a senior level, but it is possible that a similar qualification at the intermediate tier may also be effective.

The distribution of female employees within South Wales Police has changed in recent years. A higher proportion of officers are now female, and positive roles models in senior positions (former Chief Constable CC, former Deputy CC, and current Assistant CC) have all been female. Lastly, the NHS does have some mainstreamed management programmes, such as a graduate recruitment programme, but detailed development programmes tend to be commissioned by individual trusts.

## Personal commitment to training and development

Training requirements varied across interviewees, but the level of training required for future development was generally at the advanced level (rather than at the elementary or intermediate level). More formal, advanced training in line management and personnel management was referenced by various interviewees as something that they would like to pursue in future.

> *"I've worked as a line manager for a couple of years now, so I've picked up management and delegation skills, but I would like some more advanced, specific training."*

Linked to this is recruitment; a small number of interviewees reflected on the importance of being able to recruit people with complementary skillsets, and how this was often more difficult than it might appear.

Other interviewees – nearly all of whom had both completed the Ascent programme and were aged between 25 and 34 – made reference to the virtue of continually challenging themselves. This is a less specific training requirement, but perceptive in the sense that it recognises the need to continue to be challenged at work and not drift into routine that can be demotivating.

Furthermore, interviewees talked of the importance of a positive working environment that created a desire to be at work and contributing to shared objectives. Some of the current workload (cuts to services, making redundancies etc.) was unpleasant, but these had largely become accepted as inevitable.

Occasionally, interviewees reflected on career development that had perhaps proved to be more challenging than they were expecting. Sometimes this involved a formal promotion; in other cases it involved taking responsibility for a slightly different area. These women were all employed in the public sector, typically working full-time hours for large employers. They had perhaps taken on a role with a confidence that they could take it in their stride, only to find that the role was more difficult than they had envisaged. Before they take any future steps up the career ladder, they will try and be better prepared.

### Support programmes designed to deliver practical and psychological benefits

It's clear that specifically designed programmes of personal development support have a positive impact. For example, the majority of respondents who had participated in Ascent were able to isolate specific activities at work that had benefitted as a consequence of the participation. These benefits were often practical, such as:

- Improved time management. This led to increased productivity at work, with individuals able to schedule tasks more effectively, use their time more efficiently, and also benefit from reduced stress having ironed out peaks and troughs in workflow.

- Improved personnel management. An introduction to new line management techniques helped individuals to understand how best to support and encourage staff that displayed low motivation and reduced morale. Greater delegation and less interference in the minutiae of team members' work were often integral to this.

- Improved knowledge of entitlements to flexible working. Participants reported that they and others on the course felt more empowered to request flexible working (such as flexible hours, home working, temporary reduction in hours) having had their entitlements explained to them.

- Improved interpersonal communication. Participants often recognised that their internal communications at work improved; they began to communicate face-to-face with colleagues and not by email, and they encouraged others to do the same. This improved morale and a shared sense of purpose amongst the team.

Respondents also talked positively about the psychological benefits of participating in support programmes. Whilst quantifying and demonstrating the value of these benefits is more difficult, many respondents talked about improved self-confidence.

In one instance, this was vital as the confidence that participation instilled in the individual concerned helped her overcome the trauma of compulsory redundancy. In another, it gave the individual the confidence to challenge senior staff members when she felt that they were overlooking something important.

*"The shared nature of the course was really valuable. This made people more willing to express feelings and emotions."*

Some interviewees that had not participated in Ascent had accessed other training. However, this tended to be designed to enhance technical skills and/or knowledge and was not targeted exclusively at women. Although interviewees were able to articulate the benefits of this training, it was often quite a time since they completed it and the focus was invariably on developing specific skills.

## Recognition that development needs are individual and rarely uniform

The means through which promotion was secured varied considerably across interviewees. Some had applied through formal processes, others had been promoted without a formal application procedure, and others had been promoted as a consequence of implementing feedback provided by their line manager.

There were occasional examples of interviewees feeling that they had been coerced into taking on a management role because they were the most suitable candidate, even if they didn't necessarily seek the role. Some women felt compelled to accept the role because they were concerned that alternative candidates would do an inferior job and would damage the organisation.

Very few individuals referred directly to a patron/mentor that had assisted their career development. Those that did often identified a personal connection that had strengthened their professional bond. In isolated cases, patrons/mentors had accurately isolated specific training needs and ensured that these were addressed to enable career progression.

### 4.3 What hinders women's confidence and progression?

This section considers the most challenging barriers that women tend to encounter as they consider career progression. It considers the various barriers that women may face, but focuses on confidence and how this might be improved.

### 4.3.1 Existing evidence

A 2013 YouGov survey found that only 39% of women would ask for a pay rise or promotion at work, if they felt they deserved it, compared to 52% of men.[1] An explanation for this may be different approaches to negotiation. Research[2] has found that when it's unclear whether wages are negotiable, men are more likely to negotiate than women. However, when it is clear that there is a possibility that wages are negotiable, the difference disappears. This leads to the interpretation that women are more confident negotiating pay in an environment where the 'rules' are clear (whereas men are more comfortable with ambiguity).

Confidence is undoubtedly a major issue in preventing women from applying for a promotion or negotiating higher pay/promotions. A recent study by Hobbs found that 76% of women felt that they needed to be more confident in their abilities if they wanted to achieve their professional goals.[3] However the same survey found that women lack confidence not only in their own ability to succeed, but also in the ability of other women to develop their career; only 5% of women would prefer to work for a female boss compared to 34% of women who would rather work for a male boss (the remaining 61% had no preference).[4] A consequence of this may already have been identified; the keenness of experienced women to help develop the careers of younger women (the first key issue in section 4.2.2). This might be motivated by a desire to overcome the perception that career development will be best assisted by a male line manager.

The economic recession has had a significant impact on the number of both men and women progressing to more senior roles.[5] While record numbers of people are 'under-employed' and working fewer hours than they would like, women are considered more likely to be impacted by under-employment – taking on roles below their potential.[6] Freezes on recruitment, promotion and pay rises have also become more commonplace, alongside increases in redundancies, which have halted the career progression of both men and women throughout the economy.[7]

In Chwarae Teg's (2013), *A woman's place* report, work-life balance was identified as an important consideration for women, and women currently occupying part-time roles were appreciably more likely to report a positive work-life balance than women

[1] Summers, h. (2013), Women lack confidence to seek pay rises, The Sunday Times, 3rd November 2013
[2] Leibbrandt, A and List, J.A (2012) Do Women Avoid Salary Negotiations? Evidence from a Large Scale Natural Field Experiment, NBER Working Paper No. 18511
[3] Darke, T. (2013), Editors letter: The Sunday Times, 3rd November 2013.
[4] Britten, F. (2013), What you need: is your job giving you what you want? The Sunday Times, 3rd November 2013.
[5] Zahidi, S. & Ibarra, H, (2010), The Corporate Gender Gap Report 2010.
[6] TUC, (2012), Under-employment crises: A TUC analysis of under-employment across the UK.
[7] Van Wanrooy, B. Bewley, H. Bryson, A. Forth, J. Freeth, S. Stokes, L. Wood, S, (2013), The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study: First Findings.

occupying full-time roles. There was a general perception that pursuing career progression would involve sacrificing some work-life balance. This perception appears to have some basis in reality, as women in more senior professional roles had a more negative perception of their work-life balance than women in shift-oriented service occupations.

Despite the potential for flexible working patterns to improve work-life balance, evidence also suggests that people who take advantage of flexible working practices, such as remote working, may be overlooked for further training/ promotion within the workplace.[8] This may be caused by a lack of visibility. Although this could apply equally to men and women, women are more likely to seek flexible working.

The perception that leaders possess a certain set of innate skills that men are more likely to possess than women endures, and leads to women not experiencing similar progression to men.[9] Unlike their male counterparts, evidence suggests that women themselves often feel that they do not have the right skills to advance. This appears more pronounced within male-dominated sectors.[10]

Stereotypes of leaders being male and women's roles being family orientated[11] are also felt to hinder women from applying for leadership roles. The Institute for Leadership and Management's (ILM's) *Women in Banking* report[12] suggests that gender division and the idea that men prefer to recruit/promote men means that as long as there are more senior men than women, women are unlikely to be promoted.[13]

### 4.3.2 Evidence generated through interviews

The evidence generated through the interviews suggests that the most influential factors that prevent women from negotiating a promotion or salary increase include:

- Prevailing economic conditions
- Limited training budgets/inequitable allocation of training budgets
- Persistent gender stereotypes
- Negative perceptions of flexible working
- Employer disinterest in career development and ineffective line management

These five themes are explained in greater detail below.

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[8] Jones, K. & Jones, E, (2011), Flexible Working Practices in the UK: Gender and Management Perspectives; Thompson, J. & Truch, E, (2013), The Flex Factor: Realising the value of flexible working.
[9] Edwards, M. Burmester, B. Evans. M. Halupka, M. & May, D, (2013), Not yet 50/50: Barriers to the Progress of Senior Women in the Australian Public Service; TUC, (2008), Closing the Gender Pay Gap: An update report for TUC's Women's Conference 2008.
[10] DG Enterprise and Industry, European Commission (2008) Evaluation on Policy: Promotion of Women Innovators and Entrepreneurship.
[11] Rake, K. & Lewis, R, (2009), Just below the surface: Gender stereotyping, the silent barrier to equality in the modern workplace?
[12] Institute of Leadership & Management, (2012), Women in Banking report and slides.
[13] ibid.

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## Prevailing economic conditions

Many respondents made reference to the challenging financial climate, particularly as a consequence of UK government austerity measures. This either made their current role insecure because of short-term contracts and workforce remodelling consultations or led to them being required to take on an increased and more varied and/or challenging workload. Even if their current role remained unaffected, interviewees felt that there were fewer opportunities for career progression as a consequence of challenging public spending envelopes.

> *"Cuts to local authority budgets mean there are no longer clear progression routes. Tiers of management have been removed and this reduces the opportunities available"*

These challenges did not necessarily provoke irritation or dissatisfaction; some interviewees were slightly resigned to this, others were actually positive, and commented on how they were happy in their current role and felt that it added value. Other interviewees that had achieved promotion found that this had actually, in and of itself, provided motivation for them.

The roles performed by women within large public sector bodies was a cause of concern for interviewees, both in terms of the seniority of the roles and nature of the roles. Senior management roles were perceived to be protected from budget cuts, and these were more likely to be filled by men. Statutory roles were also perceived to be protected from budget cuts; in chartered professions, for example. These roles were also more likely to be filled by men.

## Limited training budgets/inequitable allocation of training budgets

The current financial position of many organisations impacts upon training budgets. Some larger organisations continue to offer training internally. However, external training will only be supported (in terms both of time and finance) if a specific training need is identified within an annual review. Even then, the support received is unlikely to be comprehensive (i.e. the employee will have to contribute some of their own time/money).

A small number of interviewees – typically employed by large public sector organisations and aged 45 or over – made reference to development support that they had received when their employer had a larger training budget. This included paying for degree programmes and international development attachments. In cases where opportunities were available, individuals had to push hard to be considered for them, even (perhaps especially) at senior levels; if they waited to be asked, it was unlikely that opportunities would come their way.

Some of the training opportunities were not always held in high regard; particularly those which were short, unaccredited programmes that were linked to their current role but that interviewees felt were unlikely to directly unlock any career progression opportunities.

> *"As a consequence of budget reductions, training must now incur minimal/no cost to the employer. So it needs to be offered free of charge and delivered locally."*

It is perceived that the allocation of training budgets can sometimes be inequitable. Some employers will seek to confine the training budget to senior management; others will use it in a way that is not meritocratic or driven by need, but instead bestow it upon favoured personnel. This is something that interviewees felt should be scrutinised more carefully, because the training procured for senior managers can be incredibly costly.

Some interviewees, who were typically highly qualified and working full-time across a range of employment sectors and employer sizes, also reported that they had had to retrain and acquire new skills not as a means of career progression, but as a means of remaining in employment. This felt frustrating and demotivating for the individuals concerned.

## Persistent gender stereotypes

Many respondents made reference to persistent societal gender inequalities and the impact that issues such as these had at work. For example, women continue to take on a greater share of household tasks and childcare, with the consequence being that they are more likely to require flexible working.

When asked whether their employer exhibited a bias in favour of male employees, virtually none of the respondents felt that their employer did. Despite this, interviewees acknowledged that women were underrepresented in senior management positions. This is an intriguing combination; the women interviewed appear to feel that men are overrepresented in senior management positions, but that this is not because progression is biased in their favour.

Some respondents made reference to feedback that they had received stating that they were "too ambitious" and had not assimilated the corporate culture in which they worked. It is impossible to discern whether this is an example of unhelpful gender stereotypes discouraging and disempowering women, or whether in this case a legitimate corporate culture exists to ensure consistency and this hasn't been acknowledged or appreciated by the individual.

*"It is not always helpful to be perceived as a very able female; this is seen as not feminine or appropriate."*

Challenging the status quo was raised as an issue. To do so (to present a challenge to the 'usual way') was generally, although not universally, received with suspicion. Women who had challenged the status quo felt that they had to do so to give themselves a chance of career progression, but that doing so made them appear disruptive to those who conformed with the decision making process. Some interviewees with experience of promotion also suggested that, having achieved a senior role and being a woman, they still felt that they had to push harder and shout louder to get the recognition that they deserved.

## Perceptions of flexible working

The associations with flexible working continue to be somewhat negative; with a general perception that people who work part time lack dedication and ambition. One respondent reported being told that "no-one with high potential, who wants to get on, works part-time hours", despite her working part-time to overcome a health condition.

This is a massive obstacle for women to overcome and a few interviewees, all aged between 35 and 44 years old, recognised that their spouse being in a position to take on childcare, the school run, and housework had been decisive to career progression. This was particularly important for interviewees who did not work a standard '9-5' schedule (this is particularly important given that shift work is a common feature of many of the '5 C' sectors – see section 4.1.1, page 8).

*"In this industry it's not Mon-Fri 9-5. I work evenings and weekends and the only reason I can do that is because my husband is there to look after our daughter. This has definitely enabled me to progress."*

Working part-time was generally considered to hinder career development. One interviewee who worked part-time sought to counteract this perception by reminding colleagues of the activities that they undertake when not at work, to reinforce that although she is not in the office, she's not 'at home with her feet up'. Another interviewee intimated that her "working pattern is dictated by what's possible [for me given my other commitments] rather than what's best for me".

*"It would be a lot harder to move up in the business as a part-time member of staff"*

Some respondents reported that they would be keen to explore the possibility of job sharing as a means to achieve their future career ambitions. As with part-time work, there appears to be some negative association with job sharing that then erroneously presents as a gender issue (because job-shares often involve two women). A broad ambition to improve career progression for women would be to neutralise (or at least dilute the strength of) the association between flexible working practices and gender.

In contrast to the awareness of entitlement to flexible working, one respondent presented a different view. This was that the law may exist, and it may be adhered to, but even responsible employers will find a way of penalising employees that they feel have disrupted the status quo.

## Employer disinterest in career development and ineffective line management

There were many examples of employers not having a career development programme, and many interviewees in this position felt that the only way to achieve promotion was to leave. Those that had successfully achieved promotion by moving to a different employer had sometimes drawn upon personal networks (including ante-natal and post-natal support groups) and sometimes utilised volunteering to create opportunities for themselves.

Many respondents, particularly those working for large employers, made reference to regular personal development reviews or career development guidelines. While the value of these was never completely dismissed, interviewees tended more often than not to view them as a box-ticking exercise that rarely has a tangible impact on opportunities for training or promotion.

*"My manager is very good on a personal level, but training is not on her radar."*

Too many capable employees fail to reach their potential because their line management either does not possess the skills to develop them or is not granted the

autonomy to develop them. This was identified by various interviewees, who reported that their employer did have formal development programmes, but that the extent to which these were offered varied significantly depending on line managers. Some line managers appeared to lack the confidence to develop their staff because they feared that they would seek to replace them in their role. One respondent reported that while she enjoyed the freedom of working for a line manager who took little interest in her work or development at the time, she looks back at that with regret, because she was not developed or challenged and became less effective as a consequence.

*"My confidence has taken a knock because of my manager's lack of focus and direction."*

An interesting observation reported by a few respondents was that developing staff was not a standard key performance indicator (KPI) for most businesses. The women that made this observation were always highly qualified (minimum NQF Level 4) and working full-time hours; their other characteristics, in terms of age, location, experience of promotion, and size of employer did not follow a pattern. The benefits of career progression are typically thought to be accrued by the individual, and the rationale for employers monitoring this might therefore appear weak. However, the benefits to employers (for example, tenure with the employer, individual motivation, positive outlook projected to clients and suppliers) are real and this supports the concept of encouraging employers to measure staff progression as a KPI.

**4.4  What is different in the experiences for women who do and don't progress?**

The preceding sections 4.3 and 4.4 consider the drivers of career progression; what can be influential in giving women the confidence to progress and what discourages or dissuades them from doing so.  This section considers the consequences of the two different outcomes and how the impacts of achieving and not achieving promotion affect women.

**4.4.1  Existing evidence**

One viewpoint is that it is down to chance or luck that women who have the ability to lead get the chance to perform in such a role within FTSE 100.[1]  It is argued that being an unusual candidate for a job, (e.g. by having a slightly different educational background) has helped promote some women to the board level of organisations where 'normally' they would not have reached that level.[2]

In the Convergence area of Wales[3], the Agile Nation's Ascent Programme's internal *Soft outcomes'* data suggests that previous qualification level, hours spent on training, disability/health condition or being a lone parent has very little impact on the likelihood of participants gaining a promotion (as participants across these factors were found to be equally as likely to have/have not gained a promotion)[4].  However, key variations were evident in relation to age, sector, working hours and region:

- Participants aged 35-44 were the least likely to have been promoted (10%), but those aged 45-54 were the most likely to have gained a promotion (24%).
- Participants working in the third/voluntary sector (24%) or private sector (20%) were more likely to have gained a promotion than those working in the public sector (8%).
- Participants working either less than 25 hours (29%), or 37+ hours (19%) were more likely to have gained a promotion than those working between 26-36 hours (11%).
- Participants working in South East Wales were found to be far less likely to have gained a promotion (11%), than their peers in North Wales (27%), or South West Wales (21%).  (Although this may in part be explained by the fact that one quarter (25%) of the participants in South East Wales worked in the Public Sector, compared to 17% in North Wales and 18% in South West Wales).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when participants on Agile Nation's Ascent Programme were asked on a scale of 1-10 how confident they felt in applying for a promotion – where 1 was the least confident and 10 was the most confident – those who gained a promotion were found to be more confident both at the outset and at the end of the training.  Of

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[1] Sealey, R. & Vinnicombe, S. (2013) The Female FTSE Board Report 2013: False Dawn of Progress for Women on Boards?
[2] ibid.
[3] The Convergence area contains the 15 Local Authorities of Isle of Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Gwynedd, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, and Torfaen.
[4] This study encompassed 254 women who had completed the Ascent programme; 96 from South-East Wales, 93 from South-West Wales and 65 from North Wales, chosen at random.  254 women represent 12.5% of the total number of women to have completed the programme.

those who gained a promotion, those working 16-25 hours were found to be the least confident at the outset (5.0 on the scale of 1-10), but the most confident at the end of the training (9.0 on the scale of 1-10).

Looking at other aspects which may support this confidence, there appears to be very little difference (within an average of 0.5 at both the outset and end of training) in the responses provided by those who did and did not receive a promotion for the following statements:

- I am confident that I have skills to offer
- I am aware of my strengths and weaknesses
- I am motivated to learn new skills
- I am confident that I can manage my time
- I am comfortable that I can actively take part in a group

Key differences however are evident when looking at the responses given for:

- I am motivated to achieve my goals
- I can communicate with confidence
- I am happy with my work/life balance

Overall, respondents who were successful in gaining a promotion reported higher responses at both the outset and end of training for each of these factors than their counterparts who had not gained a promotion.

### 4.4.2  Evidence generated through interviews

The evidence generated through the interviews enabled some interesting distinctions between the experiences of women who have and have not been promoted.  These included:

- Promotion as an isolating experience
- Suspicion around the causes of promotion
- Attribution of success
- Professional outlook and relationships
- Self-direction and reward
- Perceptions of opportunities

These six themes are explained in greater detail below.

### Promotion as an isolating experience

Interviewees that had been promoted talked about a certain feeling of isolation that they had experienced when they were promoted, and that there were sometimes negative associations that accompanied women with successful careers.  These negative associations often came about when social norms were disrupted and were often expressed by both men and women; questioning whether working late was appropriate for a woman with a young family in a way that a man in an equivalent situation would not be scrutinised, for example.  They reported that they had sought promotion for a

long time as they felt it would bring them greater career satisfaction. However, once they achieved their objective, the promotion proved not to be everything they had dreamed of; they missed being a member of a team and the camaraderie that it brought. Their role as a line manager led to a more formal relationship with colleagues and, in some cases, a deterioration in friendships.

*"I would need more confidence to take another step up. I know now that I came into this role quite gung-ho, but the experience of doing it has given me a reality check."*

Interviewees who had not themselves been promoted also observed this amongst colleagues, and some reflected that their exposure to this negative response had discouraged them from seeking promotion. Research by Professor Frederick Herzberg argues that many factors that might commonly be considered incentives to work – including salary, status, and relationships with colleagues – are rather things that people were unwilling to be without. Herzberg termed these hygiene factors (or maintenance factors) and argued that the true motivators were entirely different and included achievement, advancement, recognition, and responsibility[5].

Some interviewees reported that they had relentlessly pursued promotion as a way of proving their worth to themselves. During this process, they were single minded and tended not to consider colleagues' perceptions of them. Having achieved promotion(s), they paused to reflect and sometimes started to doubt themselves; having not previously considered whether or not their colleagues thought their career progression to be warranted, they started to doubt themselves. There are some similarities between this observation and the well-established 'Impostor Syndrome'.

*"Before [participating in the Ascent programme] I clearly thought I knew far more than I did. It gave me the understanding of management I needed to secure a promotion."*

Interviewees whose time was split between delivering frontline services and engaging in business planning made clear that they derived greater satisfaction from the frontline role than from the managerial aspect. The notion that taking on a management role might lead to reduced job satisfaction is a further disincentive to women seeking promotion.

## Suspicion around the causes of promotion

Respondents who had either not been promoted or struggled to achieve promotion made reference to how other colleagues (female and male) that were able to 'talk the talk' were more likely to be allocated more interesting, stimulating tasks at work.

*"I'm not one for bragging myself up and so my work is overlooked."*

Working on these tasks often got the attention of management and increased the likelihood of promotion, so a willingness to seek professional attention can help to achieve career progression. To some extent this might require confidence, but people who overstate their ability or contribution at work are often driven more by feelings of insecurity than by feelings of confidence and, as a consequence, use bravado as a

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[5] Herzberg F, Mausner B, Snyderman B (1959) *The Motivation to Work*

means of disguising this insecurity.  This is often referred to as 'the Dunninger-Kruger effect'; the less competent people are, the more they overestimate their abilities.[6]

## Attribution of success

Interviewees were asked specifically about whether they attributed their success to hard work and ability or to good fortune.  This assessment links directly to the key characteristics of self-esteem, with self-acceptance and self-responsibility (taking responsibility for - or 'owning' - actions and choices) being two of the six key pillars of self-esteem.[7]  People with higher self-esteem attribute their successes to their actions and decisions, people with lower self-esteem tend to attribute their successes to external factors, such as good fortune.

*"I feel like I got the job more by default, and I lack confidence in my ability to motivate others."*

Interviewees provided a mixed set of responses that were generally divided between those that had and had not been promoted.  Those that had been promoted were more of the view that a successful career is "anybody's game" and that their achievements were a reflection of their capabilities.  Although the interviewees that had not been promoted did not suggest that individual success was completely random, they did have appreciably less confidence in the notion that career progression was due to individual merit.

## Professional outlook and relationships

Interviewees who had been promoted had a more positive outlook on work and the role it played in their lives.

*"I focus on what I'm good at and that makes me a better team player."*

Because this research project did not interview promoted women before and after their promotion, it is very difficult to discern whether this positive outlook is a cause or an effect of promotion; we can only observe that there is a correlation.

Interviewees who had not been promoted were more likely to identify and dwell upon differences between themselves and their colleagues.  This might be a personal trait that they had that they felt was incompatible with the culture at their workplace.  Alternatively, it might be that they felt that their flexible working pattern was envied by colleagues.

Interviewees who had been promoted tended to be much more focused on a narrow definition of what was required of them at work.  They felt able to identify what was required of them, and then show sufficient discipline to exclude other considerations.  They were unlikely, for example, to be concerned by how their colleagues perceived them and were motivated by a desire to achieve positive change for their employer.

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[6] Kruger, Justin; Dunning, David (1999). "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments". Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 77 (6): 1121–34.

[7] Bradfield, N (1994) The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem (New York: Bantam Books) Extract available from: http://nathanielbranden.com/self-esteem-in-the-information-age

Interviewees who had not been promoted were motivated more by a desire to achieve respect amongst their peer group and achieve a happy and sustainable work/life balance.

## Self-direction and reward

Interviewees who had been promoted were more likely to have conviction in their ability to make a decision without consulting other colleagues.  They were also confident that when they identified a desired outcome, they were invariably able to achieve this outcome.  Interviewees who had not been promoted were more circumspect, reflecting on how they often referred to colleagues for reassurance and a second opinion before taking a decision.

*"At first I would ask my boss to sign off all of my decisions.  But now, seeing that people are happy with the decisions I make gives me confidence in my decision making."*

Interviewees who had not been promoted frequently reported a sense of injustice.  They felt that they had often worked additional hours and invested time and energy in developing skills with a view to being promoted.  When this additional work was not rewarded they became disheartened and disenchanted with their working environment.  The training needs of people in this position are now more likely to be psychological than technical; they need renewed motivation at work and to build greater resilience to setbacks.

## Perceptions of opportunities

Interviewees were more accepting of not having been promoted if they worked for smaller businesses.  In these cases, the interviewees were conscious that there wasn't a career structure through which they might progress.  Seeing the full spectrum of commercial activity made individuals realise that opportunities emerging would be dependent on the overall performance of the business.

This contrasts in two clear respects from interviewees employed by large businesses who have not been promoted.  Firstly, this cohort are much more likely to have witnessed colleagues being promoted; this reinforces the perception that promotion is a realistic opportunity, and can demotivate staff if they are overlooked in favour of a colleague that they feel is an inferior candidate.  Secondly, staff members employed at junior and intermediate tiers often see the potential for promotion as an internal issue; they are less likely to concern themselves with the overall vitality of the organisation.  The workforce is large enough and there is sufficient turnover of staff that opportunities for progression can materialise even if the employer faces a reduction in turnover or funding.

*"Working for a large employer is advantageous in that more vacancies do emerge, and often these are open to internal applicants only."*

## 5. Conclusions

Women's experience of work continues to be affected by stereotypes. Although this has improved in recent years, there are particular associations – such as primacy in childcare – that persist. More subtle differences, such as expectations in respect of behavioural characteristics at work, also endure. For example, negative associations with flexible working are attached to women. Achieving less of a gender bias in part-time work, flexible hours, and job share arrangements could help to reduce this and enable all members of the workforce to balance career satisfaction with other aspects of their lives.

Self-esteem, along with self-belief, is generally considered to be a component of self-confidence, i.e. someone with high self-belief and high self-esteem will have high self-confidence. Self-esteem involves a sense of control over outcomes, reflected in greater attribution of positive outcomes to personal qualities. Self-esteem is an important consideration for women at work, and the evidence from interviewees is mixed. Some displayed high self-esteem; they attributed their success to their ability and hard work, and some displayed low self-esteem; they attributed their success more to good fortune.

Employers clearly have a key role in enabling progression, but women are also clear that a key enabler is their personal situation. There is an apparent gender difference in the role of a career plan; men tend to place this first and expect other aspects of life to adapt accordingly, whereas women attach greater importance to these other aspects of life and their career plan needs to adapt accordingly. As such, consideration may need to be given to interventions that address/consider work and home.

There were respondents who did not see promotion as the route to greater job satisfaction. Equally, having been promoted, others who thought it would improve job satisfaction found that it did not. Internal career development programmes were considered useful, but not always as a means of achieving personal career progression, more as a reassurance that staff were being treated fairly. There was some cynicism about how strictly they are adhered to.

Respondents who feel that they are currently underutilised tended to see promotion as a means of making better use of their skills. Promotion might be the best way to resolve this issue, but it is unlikely to be the only way; alternative ways of increasing utilisation could be explored and advocated, if appropriate. Respondents provided evidence of promotions leading to isolation and self-doubt, which are established phenomena. This reinforces the point that career progression is not necessarily the most appropriate means of achieving job satisfaction. There are examples of women who have been coerced into taking on a promotion when they perceived it not as being in their best interests, but in the best interests of their employer.

Supporting women to ensure that they only accept promotion on terms that suit them is important but complex. Accepting a promotion that is incompatible with life outside work can lead to people struggling to balance competing demands, command the respect of colleagues, and maintain confidence in their own abilities. However, turning down a promotion because the terms and conditions do not precisely meet the requirements of the individual might be perceived as a lack of ambition and hinder career development. The role of confidence is important; recent research has shown that people with genuine confidence in the own abilities are more likely to prosper at work. This

research suggests that possessing genuine confidence despite limited competence is more likely to achieve career progress than possessing outstanding competence and limited confidence. Attempting to fake confidence is futile, because colleagues pick up that this is insincere; a lack of confidence or fake confidence is also more likely to be noticed than a lack of competence. This suggests that anyone who is reflecting on their position at work should aim to increase their confidence ahead of their competence, as a means of achieving career progression[8].

Respondents universally accepted that training budgets are smaller than they once were and that the training opportunities on offer would reflect this. However, it is vital that training budgets are utilised equitably. The quality of line management and the importance attached to developing staff must both be improved for women to develop. There are potentially interesting interventions to pursue here with employers in terms of the way they monitor the efficacy of their development structures. Whilst the negative impact of poor line management is not unique to women, research consistently suggests that whilst men do not hesitate to apply for roles outside of their grasp, women need to be encouraged to apply for roles that are well within their grasp.

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[8] http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/04/the-confidence-gap/359815/

**6. Recommendations**

Taking into account the findings and conclusions of the research, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Line managers should assess not only the skills that are utilised by employees in their current role but also their transferrable skills and previous experience. This would ensure that employees are offered suitable development opportunities and that the business fully benefits from the talent it has.

2. When advertising new vacancies, HR representatives should state whether the pay is negotiable. As the research shows, ambiguity around whether pay can be negotiated is a prohibitive factor for female applicants. Improving clarity in this area could address women's confidence barriers. Where upper and lower pay limits are stated, it needs to be made clear whether this is for pay negotiation purposes or to show how the incremental pay scale.

3. More awareness needs to be raised with employers and society about the positive contribution women aged 50 and over bring to the workplace. Specifically their contribution to the economy, and how their life experiences and transferable skills positively impact on the workplace.

4. Training and development plans need to ensure that with support, staff have the opportunity to map out their own progression in line with organisational objectives. Line managers need a better understanding of what motivates their individual staff members; it has been shown that increases in pay and vertical promotion are not always the main drivers for in work motivation. This would support women who are not as confident in applying for a promotion or who do not want a promotion to still discuss their learning and development needs. These career plans should be flexible to accommodate life events (such as having children and caring for relatives).

5. Awareness needs to be raised with employers about the value of offering senior part-time positions and challenging perceptions that part-time workers are not as committed to their job. The negative connotations associated with part-time work and the presumption that working fewer hours demonstrates a lack of commitment clearly persists. As women make up the majority of part-time workers this remains a barrier to women's progression.