

 OliverWyman



LIFT OFF TO LEADERSHIP

Advancing Women in Aviation



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FOREWORD

Welcome to *Lift Off to Leadership*, a study by Oliver Wyman and the International Aviation Womens Association (IAWA) on the leadership experiences of aviation women. For decades, the aviation industry has been challenged in attracting and retaining diverse employees. And below the surface, a wider gap exists: A substantial lack of women in leadership positions — an alarming situation that has persisted for far too long.

This report provides insights on the aviation leadership experiences of women versus men and what might be limiting women from consideration for larger and more challenging roles. With aviation in restart mode and looking for fresh ideas to build

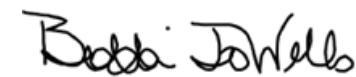
back, the time has never been better to take action to ensure women are welcomed, valued, retained, and promoted like their male colleagues.

Our goal with this report is to provide an understanding of the systemic differences influencing women's aviation careers and guidelines for sustainable change. Until aviation addresses the full range of barriers that are keeping women from succeeding, the industry not only will be at a disadvantage in the battle for talent, but its ability to survive, thrive, and manage risk will be in jeopardy.

We hope you find this report thought-provoking and welcome your comments. We thank the 450+ women and men who participated

in the survey and the women we interviewed who shared their valuable experiences.

We also are in the process of expanding this survey to include more participants in Europe and the United Kingdom. If you might be interested in participating, please go to this [link](#).



Bobbi Wells
President, International Aviation
Womens Association



Oksana Bardygula
Vice President, Oliver Wyman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aviation industry lags behind many others in terms of gender equality and inclusivity. Women currently hold only 14 percent of C-suite roles and account for just three percent of CEOs across the top 100 aviation organizations worldwide. As a result, aviation is missing out on critical leadership talent. Attracting, retaining, and promoting the most diverse workforce possible is vital to the industry's future sustainability, performance, growth, and safety.

To understand why there are so few women leaders in aviation — and

why that number is not increasing — Oliver Wyman and the International Aviation Womens Association (IAWA) undertook a survey of 450 women and men in aviation leadership roles and interviewed successful female leaders. This research provided specific insights into the disparate experiences of women and men as each group progresses through their aviation careers.

Our study found that women face more barriers than men from the start of their careers and consider leaving the industry in larger

numbers at mid-career. This creates a leadership gap, which aviation must address by focusing on the challenges that arise throughout women's careers. We identified three areas in particular where meaningful and lasting changes are required to impact gender balance and inclusivity: escalating culture change, redesigning systems, and closing the sponsorship gap.

NAVIGATING A TOUGH TRAJECTORY

Today's aviation industry culture does not enable women to thrive in their careers. Relative to men in the industry, women report more negative experiences, slower career advancement, and fewer opportunities to take on senior or challenging roles tied to the bottom line. As a result, women are more likely to consider leaving the industry than men and to be **pushed** out by negative experiences, rather than **pulled** away by new opportunities.

Aviation organizations must make inclusive leadership a requirement from the top down. Senior leaders in aviation must commit to leadership gender balance as a priority, build a culture that deliberately includes women, and set leadership inclusion

and diversity goals that are tied explicitly to incentives. Embedding inclusive leadership at all levels and addressing the systemic issues at play will help ensure aviation welcomes and retains the best talent.

WOMEN PLANNING THE FLIGHT PATH

Aviation's existing inclusion and diversity programming is clearly ineffective in creating an environment that attracts and retains women and helps develop their careers. Since aviation leadership is predominantly male, men most frequently decide what initiatives will enhance gender balance. Women often are left out of conversations about why they join, remain in, or leave the industry, as well as what solutions are needed to address their unique career development needs.

True improvement requires bringing women into the conversation.

Women must have a greater presence and voice in revamping aviation culture and ensuring leadership programs address real barriers. Top leaders must take responsibility for implementing, tracking, and championing new programming and be ready to quickly change tactics if initiatives are not delivering results.

SPONSORS PROPELLING THE CLIMB

No one achieves a senior leadership position without sponsorship support. Women are often not part of informal networks and groups dominated by men and so have greater difficulty developing the trust and relationships that would otherwise arise naturally from such

networks. Increasing the number of women at the top requires more targeted and deliberate effort on the part of senior aviation leaders.

Aviation must **double down on sponsorship**, by developing formal sponsorship programs that explicitly serve women and encouraging leaders to diversify their advocacy. Although coaches and mentors have value, only sponsors can help women identify career-enhancing opportunities and advocate on their behalf; the role of sponsor must be specific and distinct. The most

successful industry women we spoke with consistently pointed to powerful male sponsors as critical in their development/career trajectories.

A LAUNCHPAD FOR TODAY

The aviation industry was not built with women in mind but now faces an imperative to develop a more sustainable workforce, elevate the industry's safety record, and deliver better performance by committing to the changes needed to bring about gender balance. This will require

prioritization and commitment from the very top of each organization, starting with the CEO and senior leaders, who must make inclusion and diversity business priorities. The industry cannot afford to continue to lag in this area. Without taking action now, aviation faces a highly competitive environment, a shrinking talent pool, and a loss of access to the innovation, creativity, and risk management that more diverse leadership provides. The future of the aviation industry is at stake.

“The aviation industry is not sustainable if **more than 50 percent of the population doesn't see aviation as a successful career.**

There are just not enough men to fill the aviation industry's needs. This is important, because our industry drives GDP.”

Airline General Counsel

INTRODUCTION

Despite several decades of effort, the aviation industry still has too few women in management and leadership. In the US labor force, women account for 31 percent of general/operations managers and 28 percent of chief executives.¹ In aviation, however, women hold only 10 percent of C-suite roles (excluding human resources) at the top 100 airline groups globally.² And while women account for 6.4 percent of CEOs across the S&P 500, they make up just three percent of airline CEOs.³ As a result, the industry is missing out on talent that is critical to industry

sustainability and that could improve performance, enhance safety,⁴ strengthen decision making,⁵ and contribute to growth.

Not only are there fewer women in aviation leadership, women in the industry face more barriers than men from the start of their careers. Women are promoted more slowly and consider leaving the industry in larger numbers mid-career. Without women at the top, obstacles for women are often unknown and go unaddressed, thus perpetuating the problem.

To understand why the number of women in aviation leadership is not increasing, Oliver Wyman and the International Aviation Womens Association (IAWA) surveyed 450 aviation leaders, of which 75 percent were women, at all levels — front line, mid-level, senior, and C-suite (Exhibit 1).⁶ We then conducted follow-up interviews with female leaders to gain more insight into the experiences of women as they progress through their aviation careers.

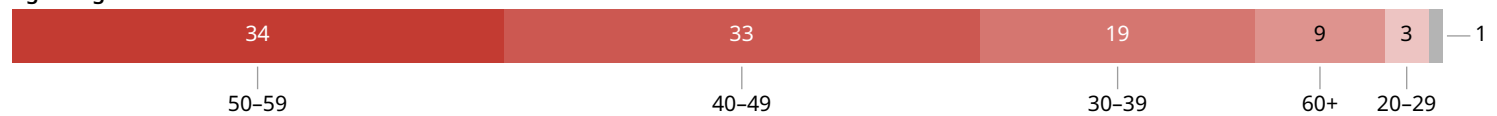
“A shift in culture is required that can’t be legislated, and it needs to be top to bottom. **Our workforce is more diverse, but this ‘peters out’ as you go higher up.** There needs to be a willingness to set standards and metrics that drive progress. What does the candidate pool need to look like? How do we source the candidate pool and ensure the process is not driving them away?”

Managing Director
US-Based Airline

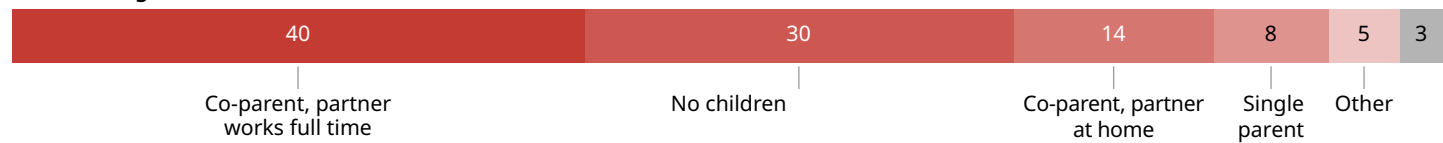
Exhibit 1: Selected survey demographics

In percent

Age range



Parent/Caregiver status



Ethnicity



Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

The survey and interviews underscored critical barriers and potential solutions that could help redress gender imbalance in aviation leadership. As discussed in the following sections, the aviation industry needs to move quickly and proactively to address these key areas:

Escalating culture change: Create a more inclusive culture from the top down: make inclusive leadership a requirement, prioritize gender balance as a strategic imperative, build a culture that pointedly includes women, and explicitly track and incent change.

Redesigning systems for balance: Deliberately include women (especially from underrepresented groups) in developing solutions to achieve gender balance in leadership. It is important that women's voices, sharing lived experiences, inform the development of targeted initiatives that specifically address women's career development needs.

Closing the sponsorship gap: Ensure women and men fully understand the role of sponsorship and that women have a clear line of sight on how to develop sponsors within their

network. Equally, train and hold senior leaders accountable for the diversity of their sponsees and the intentionality of their sponsorship choices.

Ultimately, real change requires that top leadership treat inclusion and diversity as a business imperative and create accountability for real results. Our research and recommendations are discussed in detail in the following sections, offering actionable and meaningful steps that could deliver tangible results and make a difference in the leadership journeys of women in aviation.

Aviation's current gender balance, particularly in leadership, is simply not acceptable and compromises the industry's ability to field the best possible talent. Industry leaders must commit to changing organizational and cultural norms and promoting environments where women feel welcomed, are valued, and can be successful.

“I want to hear a public declaration that we support equity, equal representation, etc. I think those things are great, but I want them to **put skin in the game. I want my organization to lead this effort, not me. If it picks up the mantle, others will follow suit.”**

Programming Director
Air Traffic Control



IN

VS.

OUT CULTURE

Women and men experience their careers in aviation differently — from their earliest days in the industry to the most senior levels. Overall, women report slower career advancement and fewer opportunities to take on senior roles tied to the bottom line. They are more likely to feel pushed out of the industry because of negative experiences. To reap the benefits of diverse talent, leaders must take a hard look at aviation systems and culture to identify and eliminate behaviors and values that favor one gender over another.

Women are underrepresented across the aviation industry, but the gap widens with seniority. Leaders often bemoan a lack of women candidates for senior positions, but this may be due in part to the premature exit from the industry of many talented women: Of the women we surveyed, 59 percent have considered leaving aviation.

Talented men leave as well, but at lower rates and for different reasons: Women are more likely to be **pushed** out because of adverse experiences, while men are more often **pulled** away by the lure of better opportunities (Exhibit 2). Addressing the negative experiences and greater obstacles to career advancement women face is critical to retaining and growing the talent the industry urgently needs.

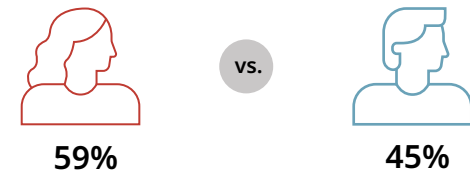
Both the women and men we surveyed report receiving encouragement and recognition in their careers, although men’s overall experiences are more positive. Positive acknowledgement and reinforcement early on make a difference: Nearly two-thirds of female survey respondents who have reached senior leadership or C-suite level roles report being encouraged to go after “stretch” roles early in their careers, compared to about half of women who are still in front-line and mid-level leadership roles.

Unfortunately, early support for women does not appear to be sustained, as less than 30 percent of women in senior leadership and less than 40 percent in C-suite roles report receiving encouragement in the latter part of their careers.

Exhibit 2: Why women and men consider leaving aviation

Survey responses by gender

Percentage of men and women who have considered leaving the aviation industry



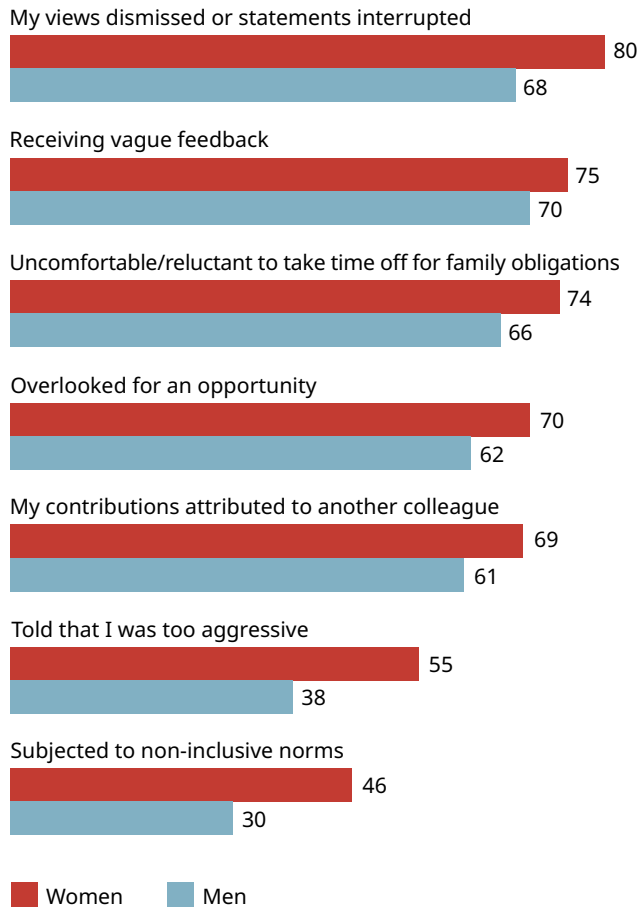
Top reasons for considering leaving

01 Implicit bias discrimination	01 Interested in another career/industry
02 Lack of career opportunities	02 Lack of career opportunities
03 Lack of flexibility (work/life balance)	03 Insufficient pay

Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

Exhibit 3: Negative experiences throughout a career

Percent of survey responses by gender



Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

“We need to take the opportunity to showcase our abilities in public areas, so that people can **see us as the right person** and not just the token woman. Sometimes gender does bring the best qualifications, because of our experiences.”

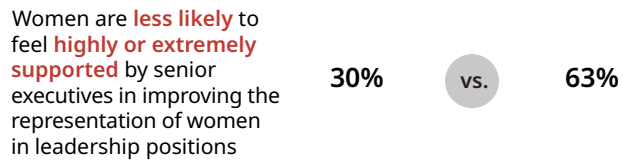
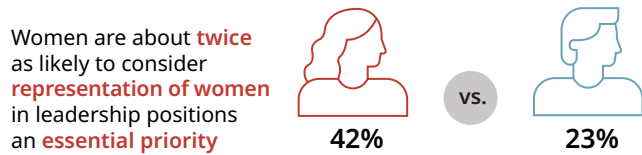
University Department Chair
Aeronautical Science

Compared to men, women are more likely to encounter a range of negative experiences throughout their careers (Exhibit 3), with some becoming more pronounced at senior leadership levels, such as the feeling of being overlooked for opportunities (71 percent for women versus 54 percent for men). From being interrupted and having

ideas dismissed or misattributed, to being viewed as overly aggressive or subjected to non-inclusive norms, women’s negative experiences add up over the course of a career. Exhausted by the additional energy needed to confront these challenges while trying to push through to leadership roles, mid-career women often consider opting out entirely.

Exhibit 4: Women in leadership: differing perspectives

Survey responses by gender



Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

Although survey respondents, regardless of gender, were aligned in how deliberately and actively they approach career planning, a third of women report taking longer to reach leadership positions relative to their peer group. By comparison, 92 percent of men surveyed advanced more quickly or at the same pace as their peer group.

Similarly, while women and men aspire equally to career advancement, women are more likely to believe that opportunities to take on new roles will be limited, particularly if those roles involve profit and loss responsibilities (for example, as a business unit or function leader).

In addition, significant gaps exist between women and men in their

prioritization of, involvement in, and recognition of senior executive support to change the status quo (Exhibit 4). Women are more likely to prioritize representation of women in leadership but are less likely to have a role in improving representation. Men on the other hand are more likely to believe that the representation of women in leadership roles is already well supported.

Further, senior executive compensation typically is tied to metrics around company values and high-level goals, yet 93 percent of survey respondents do not know if there is a link between compensation and their company's stated inclusion and diversity goals. This lack of transparency undermines accountability.

“There is a need to **plan succession with diversity**, instead of waiting for the next leaders to apply. Even individuals six years out, you need to have mentorship for those individuals. If you are putting diverse candidates into your succession plan, then you are **intentionally thinking about this change.**”

Vice President
Aircraft Engine Manufacturer



RECOMMENDATION

MAKE INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP A REQUIREMENT

An inclusive culture supporting career advancement for all, with equal opportunity for women, starts at the top. Organizations can explicitly define and train all leaders on what it means to be an inclusive leader and how to build and benefit from diverse teams, by recognizing each individual's unique skills, needs, and lived experiences.

Leadership traits must be redefined in a way that is gender inclusive. Most survey respondents believe

that their organization's current leadership style negatively impacts women being promoted to senior leadership roles. Leadership styles that are inclusive and collaborative are most effective at building engagement and high-performing teams — and preferred by those we surveyed, regardless of gender.

Adopting leadership models explicitly centered on gender-neutral traits levels the playing field in terms of identifying, evaluating, and promoting effective leaders. At the same time, companies can demystify career advancement and make desirable leadership traits more known and explicit — helping to shape culture, expectations, and behavior at every level of the organization.

In addition, organizations must acknowledge and address bias —

both explicit and implicit — and make systemic changes to remove the potential for bias that can adversely impact women's careers.⁷

As an example, salaries for new hires should be based on a fixed set of gender-neutral criteria and not former salaries, to avoid proliferating women being paid less. Similarly, promotion criteria and processes should be explicitly stated to avoid unwritten rules and hidden barriers. Finally, gender balance targets must be set, tracked, and tied to incentives for leaders, including compensation and promotions.



LEADERSHIP COURSE CORRECTION

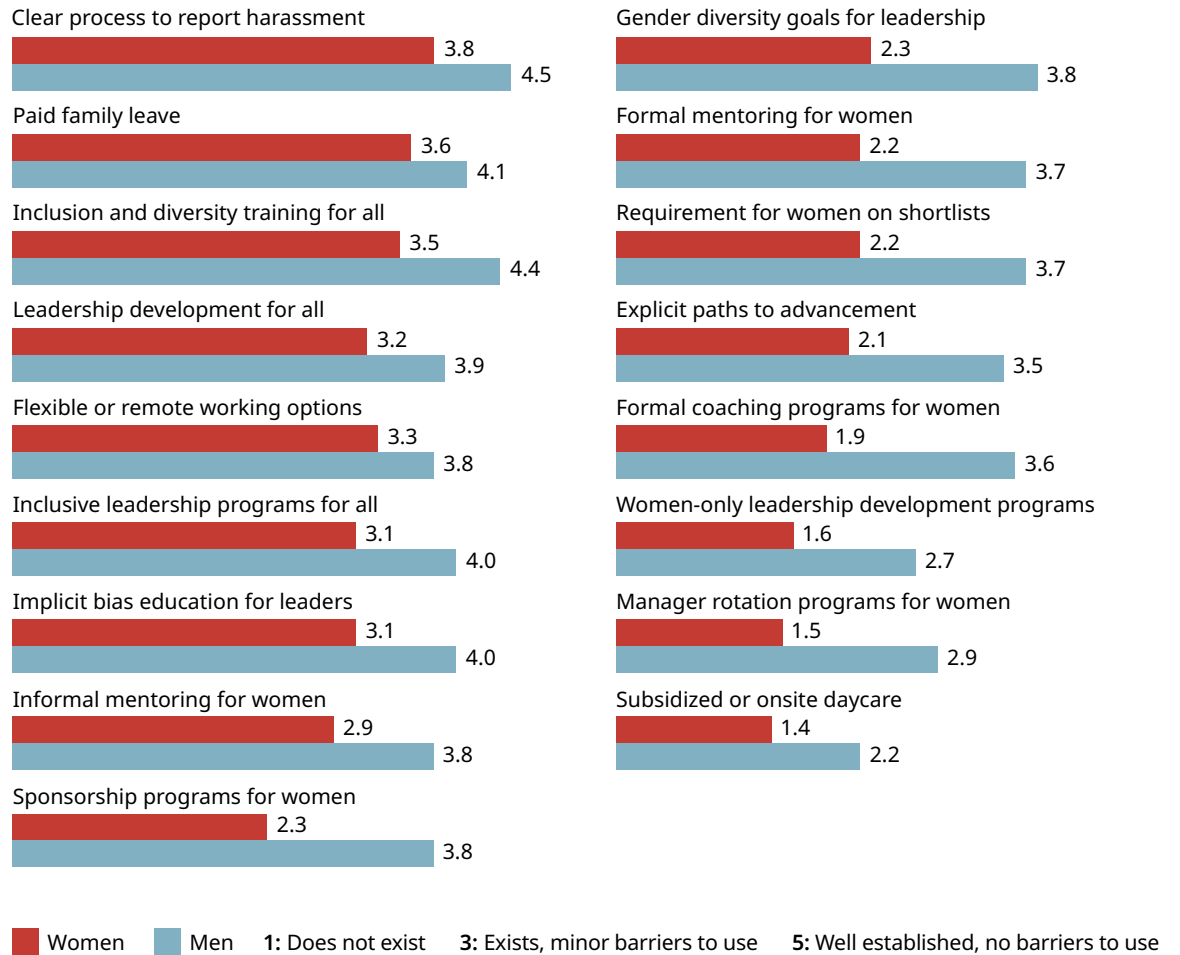
Existing inclusion and diversity programming is clearly not working, given the low number of women in aviation, particularly at leadership levels. Women must have a greater presence in the rooms where decisions are made and a voice in the design of initiatives that are intended to address their unique career development needs.

Over the past decade, aviation has put significant energy and investment into inclusion and diversity programming. Our research suggests that men in the industry broadly believe their companies are doing a good job of offering effective and accessible programs to help develop and promote gender equity (Exhibit 5). Women acknowledge that these programs exist, but their experiences don't necessarily reflect that such initiatives are effective.

The bottom line is that policies alone do not change behavior: There is a clear disconnect between the **intent** and the **impact** of efforts designed to encourage and elevate women. Leaders must acknowledge and understand this disconnect so that they can better address systemic issues and develop more effective career programs for women.

Exhibit 5: Accessibility of women's career and leadership initiatives

Average of survey responses by gender



Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

“Start with the pipeline and be intentional. Younger women don’t think they have a place in aviation until they see it — for example, that ‘you can have this job and be a mom’.”

Vice President
US-Based Airline

There also is misalignment on what should be the top priorities for women’s leadership programming. Given that today’s aviation leaders are predominantly male, the most prevalent initiatives are those that men believe will solve (or have already solved) the problem, such as clear processes to report harassment and paid family leave. These are certainly important, but they are viewed by women as “table stakes” — not as true game-changers that can enable their success. Instead, women want a systemic focus on growth that takes into account the unique barriers

they face. These include sponsorship programs explicitly for women and flexible/remote working options that make work more feasible.

There are generational differences to consider as well. Women under age 40, who are more likely at an earlier stage of their careers, most value formalized, consistent support, in the form of specific sponsorship for women, formal mentoring, and explicit paths to advancement (Exhibit 6). Younger women do not believe these initiatives are sufficiently accessible. They also report that

programs not targeted specifically to women tend to ignore them.

Overall, women over age 50 value inclusive leadership and leadership development programs without regard to gender. However, women over 50 who have not moved beyond front-line or mid-level leadership roles place a higher value on formal sponsorship. Given that most women do not have an opportunity to be sponsored through natural affinity or alliances, formal programs could bridge the gaps that leave many locked out of advancement.

“Invite us into the room. Allow me to provide feedback and not just be a person that ‘checks the box’.”

Manager
US-Based Airline

Exhibit 6: Women’s preferred initiatives to improve gender balance, by generation

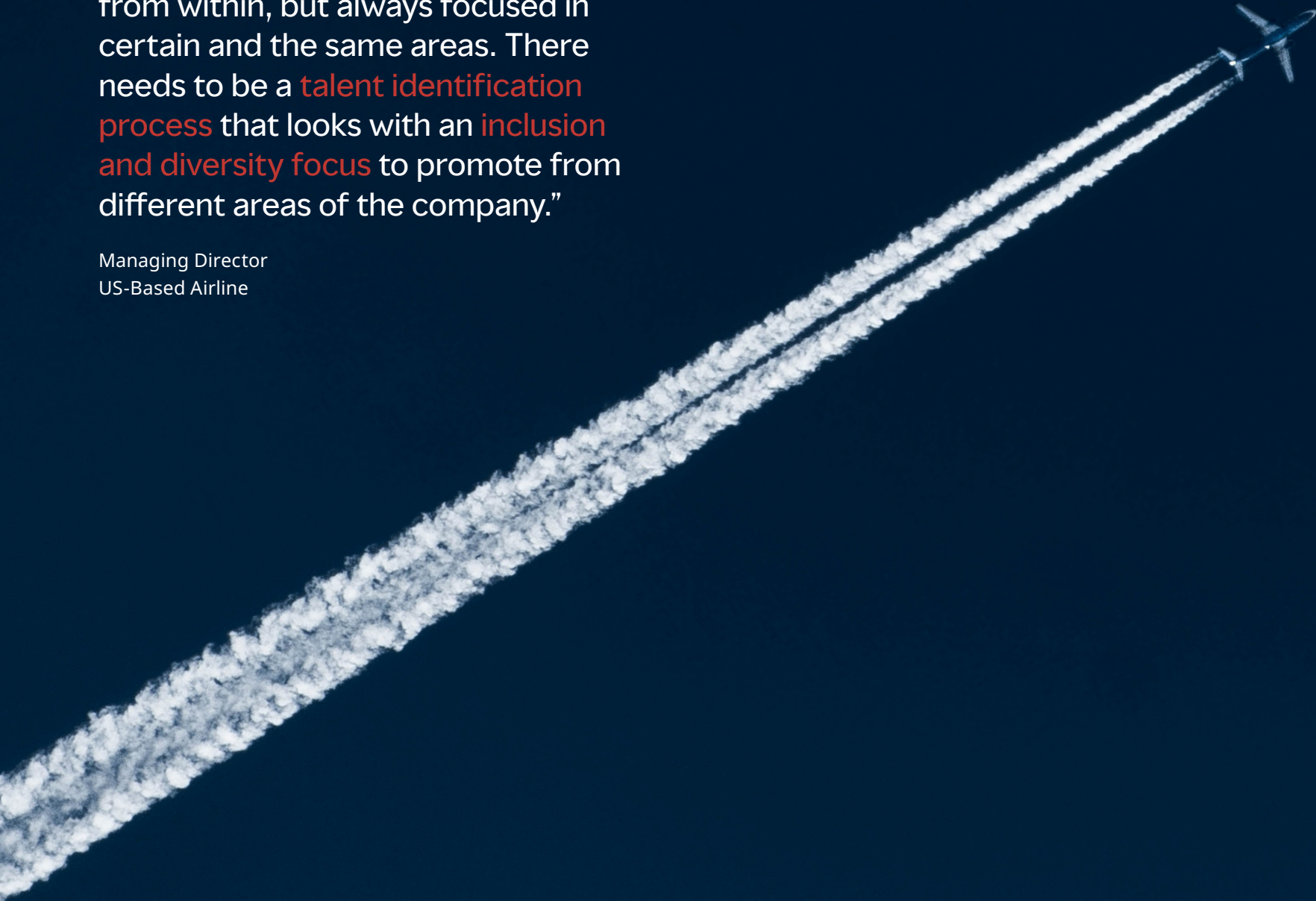
Ranked based on survey responses by women only, selecting all that apply

Initiative	Women aged 20-39	Women aged 50+
Sponsorship programs for women	1	7
Paths to advancement are written and explicitly communicated	2	14
Formal mentoring programs for women	3	9
Informal mentoring for women	4	5
Well communicated and consequential processes for reporting discrimination, harassment, or other negative experiences	5	2
Requirement that women candidates be considered for all senior roles	6	10
Formal coaching programs for women	7	8
Implicit bias education for leaders	8	11
Flexible or remote working options	9	4
Paid family leave	10	6
Inclusion and diversity training for all employees	11	12
Gender diversity goals, with specific metrics for senior leadership representation	12	13
Leadership development programs for all	13	3
Women-only leadership development programs	14	16
Subsidized or onsite daycare	15	17
Inclusive leadership programs for all leaders, irrespective of gender	16	1
Manager rotation programs for women	17	15

Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

“There is a focus on promoting leaders from within, but always focused in certain and the same areas. There needs to be a **talent identification process** that looks with an **inclusion and diversity focus** to promote from different areas of the company.”

Managing Director
US-Based Airline



RECOMMENDATION

BRING WOMEN INTO THE CONVERSATION

The aviation industry and its programs and processes continue to be largely designed by men. This means that even if there is a desire to make the industry more inclusive, it can be hard to know what to change if the people in charge cannot “see” what’s wrong — because it’s not wrong for them. Only by openly assessing systems change with both genders represented are permanent culture shifts likely to happen. Without women at the table, obstacles to their success will be difficult to understand and the best solutions will remain out of reach.

Our survey findings indicate there is a need to design career support initiatives that proactively target diverse female talent and focus on their needs at every career level. Equally critical is acknowledging existing programs that are ineffective. Women must be involved in developing and evaluating diversity and leadership initiatives, to ensure that they reflect women’s unique needs and viewpoints — and so will be specifically effective for women.

Aviation organizations also must creatively educate leaders on the reality of the status quo and what must be done to change it. This could range from focus groups and task forces to simply getting out into the organization and asking directly: “What is it like for you at this company? What works? What’s difficult?”

It is important to recognize that while women’s experiences need to be the basis for inclusive programming, this does not mean defaulting to “by women, for women,” without visible male leadership and endorsement. Development teams should be representative and diverse, but senior management must lead from the front, with responsibility for not only establishing initiatives but for tracking progress against goals and being accountable for solutions if programs fall short.

ABUNDANTLY VISIBLE

To accelerate culture change, an intentional push is needed to make women abundantly visible in the industry and their voices in leadership discussions the norm — not the exception. This can be accomplished by purposefully making women more publicly present, such as on interview panels, delivering keynote presentations, being profiled in company communications, presenting to the Board and C-suite, and leading challenging projects.

With today's social media and digital reach, aviation leaders have many

more touchpoints to reach employees and customers. Every one of those moments is an opportunity to reflect the organization's culture — such as who is included and who is not.

Aviation needs to use all available platforms to make it clear that women belong everywhere in the industry as equals and that they are valued by the organization, up and down the line. A concerted effort must be made to bring women into the boardroom to address senior leadership on important topics (and not just gender topics) and to ensure the organization knows this is happening. The purpose of these efforts is to create an environment where it is normal to see both women and men in all different areas making equal and valuable contributions to an organization's success.

This is not a zero-sum game — where someone must lose access to allow new voices at the table. Instead, it is an opportunity to expand the size of the table. Whether that's adding additional panelists to a presentation or recognizing new positions on an executive team, expanding the diversity of voices in the room brings fresh perspectives and experiences that can only add value.

Representation also is important to developing the pipeline of women who might be interested in entering the industry. By seeing people like themselves as abundantly visible, both broadly and in leadership, women in all walks of life might better perceive aviation's career possibilities.



UNCOMPROMISING CHAMPIONS

A message that came through clearly and repeatedly in our study is that advocacy matters. Both women and men value sponsorship, mentorship, and coaching, but women have greater difficulty accessing these resources. Increasing the number of women at the top of the industry both requires more explicit sponsorship of women and the greater involvement of all senior leaders in sponsorship.

“I had **champions that saw my potential**, who had a seat at the table, who helped build the network that let me in — **mostly men.**”

Vice President

Aircraft Engine Manufacturer

No leader rises to their role unaided: C-suite leaders across industries cite the critical role of mentors and sponsors who aided them in their journeys to the top. Yet women in aviation often lack access to the relationships that are vital to career advancement, including coaching, mentorship, and sponsorship — each of which provides a somewhat different kind of support.

Coaching generally focuses on developing specific competencies.

Mentoring provides a sounding board for ideas and longer-term knowledge transfer/personal skill development.

Sponsorship involves in-depth, proactive support and advocacy. Because sponsors speak out on behalf of their sponsees, sponsorship is most critical for women seeking senior leadership positions or access to the C-suite. Only sponsors can advocate with key influencers and act as a guide to challenging roles or projects.

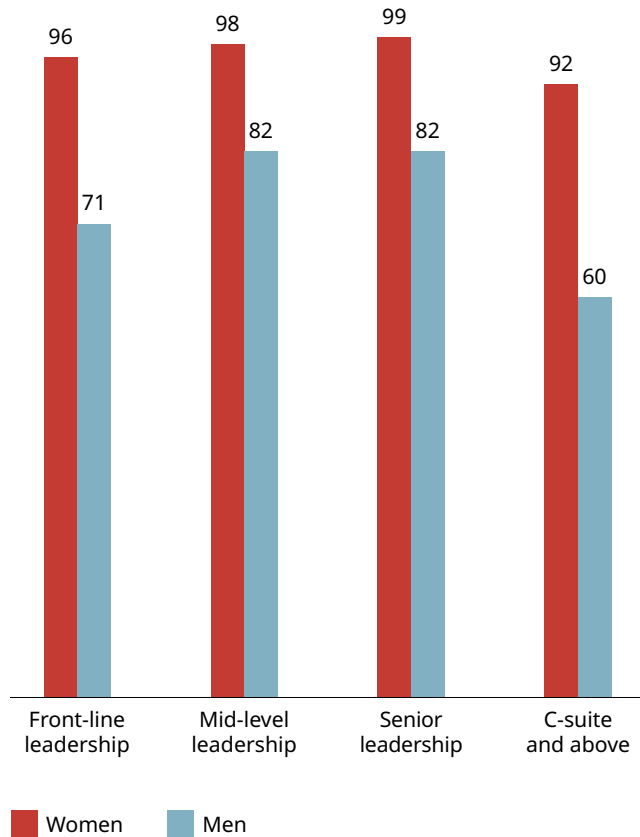
The role of sponsors is often poorly defined or confused with mentorship, typically leaving women “over-mentored and under-sponsored.”⁸ Essentially, women receive lots of advice but not the direct and vocal support that comes from a leader

putting their personal clout on the line. Without aviation leaders who are willing to be advocates, women fail to get the necessary visibility and support required to advance to the top echelons.

Unfortunately, 65 percent of the women we surveyed have never had a sponsor. Survey respondents of both genders cite a lack of sponsorship as a top-three career challenge for women in aviation. Both women and men also agree that investment in sponsorship programs should be the **top industry initiative** to improve the retention and advancement of women.

Exhibit 7: Share of leaders who view themselves as role models for women

Percent of survey respondents by gender




Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

“Men advocate for each other and not for women. **If you don’t have an advocate, you don’t go anywhere.** If men do advocate for women, it is middle management jobs and not senior. **Promotion is based on who you know.”**

Manager
US-Based Airline

A related problem is the specific lack of male sponsorship for women. Women in aviation leadership almost universally view themselves as role models for junior women and seek to extend a helping hand (Exhibit 7). It is heartening that a large share of men in our survey at most leadership levels also view themselves as potential role models for women, laying a foundation for

more explicit programming. But the gap widens alarmingly at the C-suite level, where women need sponsors and advocates the most. Too often, leaders choose to sponsor those who have similar backgrounds, interests, and experiences. But in choosing sponsees that are too homogeneous, leaders risk further marginalizing women (and other underrepresented groups).



“The help has to come early, so that you don’t feel alone. **You don’t look like the people at the top**, so there is an assumption you don’t work like them either. Official mentorship is big.”

Managing Engineer
Airport Infrastructure

RECOMMENDATION

DOUBLE DOWN ON SPONSORSHIP

To achieve an increase in sponsorship for potential women leaders, organizations should implement formalized sponsorship programs targeted specifically at women. These programs should describe the role of and expectations for sponsors, educate women on how to cultivate and build sponsorship networks, and create opportunities for women to work with senior-level sponsors.

Simply assigning sponsors without a broader program often leads to ineffectual relationships and sponsors in name only, while intentional programming can help

build strong bonds and set these relationships up for success. Given the stagnant state of gender balance in aviation leadership, formal sponsorship programs require immediate over-investment to drive measurable results.

Senior leadership also should be trained and encouraged to diversify their informal networks and to become more intentional about who they sponsor and how they structure their sponsorship activities. Without this intentionality, too often leaders unconsciously lean on affinity bias, sponsoring those who look like themselves or who share common hobbies (such as networking at the golf course), which can leave women out of the mix. Instead, leaders should create opportunities to get to know more diverse sponsees.

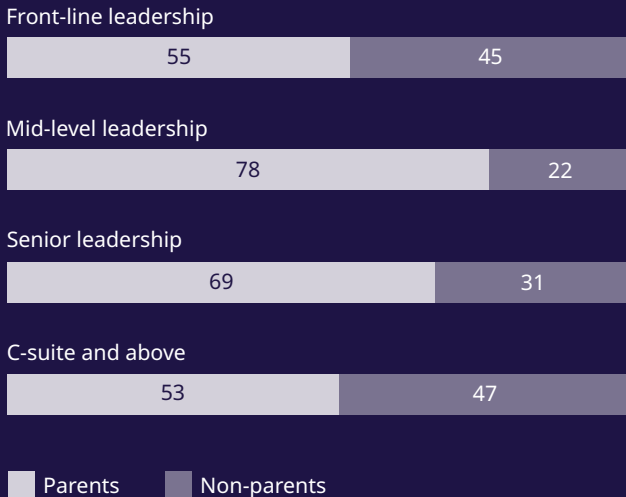
Although women sponsoring and mentoring other women is valuable,

the lack of women at the very top rungs of aviation limits women's access to influential backers, meaning that male leaders must be part of the solution. Successful senior industry women we spoke with consistently pointed to powerful male sponsors as critical to their career trajectories. The best sponsors boldly advocate, put aside traditional networking avenues, and are intentional in supporting their sponsees' career advancement.

Notably, while sponsorship provides significant value to the sponsee, these relationships are not a one-way street: Sponsorship can give leaders a better understanding of what is working and what is holding talented women back. Leaders can then use that information to evolve the culture and organization in innovative ways, as well as to strengthen their own followership and leverage across the organization.

THE MOM FACTOR

Exhibit 8: Women’s parental status by seniority
Percent of female survey respondents



Note: Excludes women who did not describe their parental status
Source: Oliver Wyman/IAWA Lift Off to Leadership Study

For women in the aviation industry, motherhood often brings about negative experiences at work. The upward career path for women in aviation is a narrow one; even more so if women have childrearing or caregiving responsibilities. When putting the recommendations of this study into practice, leaders must avoid addressing the challenges of only one subset of women.

Working mothers and caregivers face an amplification of barriers and a lack of flexibility to accommodate both career success and family life. As shown in Exhibit 8, while many women in front-line leadership may not yet be mothers, the majority in mid-level leadership are. Yet women with children do not move on to more senior roles at the same rate: Childless women in our survey were a third more likely to reach C-suite positions compared to mothers.

Working mothers that we surveyed prioritize sponsorship programs targeted to women and flexible working options as critical to their success. Learnings on remote working from the COVID-19 pandemic might be a basis for successfully incorporating more flexibility into scheduling, hours, and location of work, which could ease the burden for working mothers and make aviation careers more attractive.

Changes to help working mothers are likely to benefit all parents and caregivers. But given that family pressures and expectations are still greater for women than men, organizational changes should focus first on increasing the ability of all women to advance their careers in the industry.

“It is a male-dominated workforce, and we still expect women to be the primary caretakers for elderly parents and children. Perhaps we can’t see ourselves moving up because we have these other things to take care of. Organizations and society are not designed to support us in dealing with these competing priorities.”

General Manager
US-Based Airline





FINAL THOUGHTS

The aviation industry is behind other industries in advancing women into leadership. To reverse this trend and maximize the rewards of a more diverse culture, aviation leaders must embark on an accelerated and intentional program of systemic change. Aviation's success in the critical area of safety is a leading example of how intentional programs can be implemented to drive superior results.

The industry's trajectory toward gender balance in leadership will be defined by the priority, focus, behavior, and choices made by C-suite leaders. The CEO owns the culture of the organization; creating an inclusive environment where all employees can thrive can only be a CEO-led initiative. This report showcases actions that could help increase the number of women in aviation leadership. Ultimately, however, only leading from the front and treating inclusion and diversity as a business priority will truly unlock change.

As with any business priority, to realize meaningful and sustainable change in women's leadership roles, aviation organizations and leaders must:

Declare your ambition: Organizations must determine what success looks like and work toward it. This includes publicly making gender balance a priority, setting targets and timelines,

and then making a real commitment and investment.

Assign accountability: Clearly assigned accountability must cascade across the business. Gender balance targets must be defined and tied to incentives, including compensation and promotions.

Embed change across the business: Inclusion and diversity must be embedded in processes and culture across the business, not left to human resources alone or a special interest group. Leaders at all levels should be tasked to "build a balanced bench," expand the talent pipeline, and support women's advancement through deliberate succession planning. All projects and teams should have an explicit goal of representation, including in their leadership.

Measure impacts: Critical to any business goal are metrics to track

progress and pivot as needed. That same rigor applies to diversity goals. Beyond representation at every level, progress indicators could include the number of women candidates considered for open positions, the percent of diverse sponsees each senior leader develops, or how many direct operating or profit and loss roles are led by women each year.

Aviation's efforts up to now to address gender balance have been ineffectual. A stronger commitment is needed: Industry leaders must begin making the hard changes required to bring more women into the industry and keep them there. The inclusion of women across aviation and in aviation leadership is imperative to the industry's long-term success.

ENDNOTES

- 1 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Women in the Labor Force Databook, April 2021.
- 2 Lewis Harper, [Women have 14% of top airline jobs in slow trend towards parity](#), FlightGlobal, November 23, 2020.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 On the link between safety and inclusion, see, for example, [Creating inclusion](#). Angie Peacock, Aerospace Magazine, Royal Aeronautical Society, May 2018.
- 5 As an example, a study by Cloverpop that analyzed 600 business decisions made by 200 teams found that inclusive teams made better decisions up to 87 percent of the time.
- 6 The majority of survey respondents were from North America, but an expansion of the survey to other global regions is underway. This report will be updated in a future release to reflect regional differences. Note that there are important nuances in the experiences of underrepresented groups of women, such as women of color in certain geographies and LGBTQ+ women, that warrant further and deeper exploration to ensure the leadership track is open to all.
- 7 Generally, “explicit bias” refers to people being aware of and acting on their prejudices and attitudes (overt discrimination); “implicit bias” is unconscious but can lead to decision making based on stereotypes or outdated norms.
- 8 Herminia Ibarra, *A Lack of Sponsorship is Keeping Women from Advancing into Leadership*, Harvard Business Review, August 19, 2019.

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We are continuing to gather survey responses for Europe and the United Kingdom. If you might be interested in participating, please go to this [link](#).

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IAWA is an international organization for women who hold positions of impact in the aviation and aerospace industry. Founded in 1988, IAWA brings together women of achievement and promotes their advancement throughout the world. Through annual global conferences, regional receptions, and connects, IAWA provides a forum to share views on matters of importance to the industry, as well as to women in general. IAWA members serve as role models for other women seeking advancement and growth in the industry. We also encourage young women to enter the aviation and aerospace industries through IAWA's Scholarship Program. For more information, visit www.iawa.org.

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