



## 17 Truths about Women's Leadership

Insights from the 12th Annual Women's Leadership Conference  
June 16-17, 2016 | New York

**“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”**

– Eleanor Roosevelt

### INSIGHTS

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Progress is stagnant for women in the workplace, particularly in US-based S&P 500 companies—only 4.6 percent of CEOs are women, and women hold only 19.9 percent of board seats.<sup>1</sup> We need to make cultural changes both in the workplace and in society, or nothing will change. In the meantime, women need to help other women succeed, and seasoned women leaders need to nurture and develop less experienced women. Companies can help by using employee resource groups (ERGs) to shape business strategy, lead diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, disrupt views on aging, and engage men.

<sup>1</sup> “Pyramid: Women in S&P 500 Companies,” Catalyst, July 1, 2016 (<http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-sp-500-companies>).

**When more than 200 practitioners and experts met to talk about advances for women in the workplace, we took notes. Here are highlights.**

### **Diversity and inclusion can no longer be nice-to-have functions.**

In the past, companies viewed D&I as add-ons to their regular business strategy. Now companies are realizing that they need to weave D&I into all aspects of how the organization operates if they want to stay relevant. Leaders and employees need to look like their company's customers, and a company's products and services need to appeal to the populations in the countries where it operates.

1. D&I should inform all business strategy. One bank formed an enterprise-wide D&I council with members across many business functions and geographies—it uses this council as well as its ERGs to guide business decisions. For example, these groups help create solutions for stronger communities in locations where the bank operates (e.g., providing access to capital to populations with no or limited access to lending and banking services) as part of its corporate social responsibility strategy; help research where and how to market new products and services as well as speak with customers to find out what new products are needed; and help shape talent and acquisition practices (the best way to hire veterans) and learning and development initiatives (after discovering that Latina women leave after reaching a certain level, it created a development program to encourage them to stay).
2. Having diverse leaders and employees and building an inclusive culture where employees feel psychologically safe to speak up can lead to increased productivity and innovation.

### **Coaching is a powerful tool for advancing women.**

Companies that are known for being great places to work—especially for helping women grow their careers—offer coaching through women-only leadership programs, one-on-one and peer coaching, and networking. Coaching is most frequently used for retention, preparing for a promotion, and transitioning to a new position.

3. An adept coach will ask targeted questions to help disrupt a woman's way of thinking about herself. The right questions help the coachee unlock potential, own her own power, and banish self-doubt.
4. One coach said she has to work more closely with women on developing confidence than she does with men. She finds that the women she works with frequently express that they lack the confidence to take risks, be less than perfect, and ask for expanded roles and raises. She blends building up these traits with the elements of thinking strategically and developing business acumen.

5. The biggest issue: how to offer coaching to people in lower levels of the organization. Companies are finding cost-effective ways to reach large pools of employees through virtual learning, webcasts, and posting articles or other information in a centralized database, such as SharePoint.

For more information on coaching, stay tuned for our upcoming report, *2016 Global Executive Coaching Survey*, focusing on the state of executive coaching, which is constantly evolving to support dynamic business and leadership needs. This benchmarking study, delivered biennially since 2006, supports and informs the design of competitive executive coaching programs in organizations globally. The findings of the 2016 report are based on survey responses from organizations worldwide, expert interviews, and in-depth case studies of proven coaching practices of 11 companies from around the world.

Our insights will cover:

- Growth of targeted coaching methods
- Trends in coaching rates globally in a postrecession era
- Strategies for developing a coaching culture
- Growth of internal coaching practices

### Women have strong executive presence.

Gaining executive presence is the one of the primary reasons people seek coaching. Executive presence can be defined as the qualities of a leader that engage, inspire, align, and move people to act.

6. Executive presence consists of three dimensions: character (integrity), substance (credibility, wisdom, and vision), and style (communication and interaction with others to get things done). Each of these dimensions includes five additional qualities (see Figure 1 on page 4).
7. According to an assessment on executive presence, peers, direct reports, and managers see little difference between men and women on 60 percent of 90 items measured. Where there are differences, women are often rated higher.<sup>2</sup> On average, women are viewed as stronger than men in the social-emotional and relational qualities (integrity, concern, humility, resonance, interactivity, and inclusiveness) as well as in appearance. Men are rated higher overall on traits such as restraint, practical wisdom, and vision.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Bates, *All the Leader You Can Be: The Science of Achieving Extraordinary Executive Presence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2016), pp. 199-200.

<sup>3</sup> Bates, p. 200.

Figure 1

Character	Substance	Style
<b>Authenticity</b> (being real, being transparent)	<b>Practical Wisdom</b> (practical insight and judgment)	<b>Appearance</b> (looks the part, belongs)
<b>Integrity</b> (fidelity to one's values)	<b>Confidence</b> (self-possessed, decisiveness)	<b>Intentionality</b> (sustaining focus)
<b>Concern</b> (considerate, caring for/about)	<b>Composure</b> (calm, steadiness in a crisis)	<b>Inclusiveness</b> (welcoming of diverse points of view)
<b>Restraint</b> (moderation reasonableness)	<b>Resonance</b> (attunement to others)	<b>Interactivity</b> (listening, stimulating dialogue)
<b>Humility</b> (openness to learning)	<b>Vision</b> (strategic thinking, inspiring)	<b>Assertiveness</b> (addressing issues)

Source: Bates; Bates ExPI (Executive Presence Index), the only research-based assessment that measures executive presence, which Bates defines as the leader's ability to engage, inspire, align, and move people to act.

8. There is no significant difference in how others perceive the confidence of men and woman as measured by the assessment. In fact, the peers, managers, and direct reports who completed the assessment viewed women the same or higher in confidence than men, in most instances. So, while a woman's view of her own level confidence may hold her back, others likely don't share that view.<sup>4</sup>
9. Women CEOs and other top female executives have four traits in common: resilience, innovation, persistence, and empathy, according to extensive research for a forthcoming book.

<sup>4</sup> Bates, p. 213.

## Don't forget about the men.

Most leadership in corporate America is white, male, and apparently heterosexual. As a result, men who belong to all three categories are often overlooked in D&I. Involve men in D&I conversations because they can help create inclusive workplaces.

10. There is an assumption that men don't care about diversity. They are often not involved in D&I because they lack information on gender equality or aren't aware of the ramifications of gender bias.
11. Companies should make a concerted effort to engage men in D&I because even in groups that appear to be homogeneous, such as white males, there are differences—they just may not be visible, such as religion, schooling, and backgrounds.
12. Men often retreat to the sidelines because they are afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, are afraid of reverse discrimination, and fear losing the approval of other men. Instead of alienating men, companies should try to empathize with them because it can be very hard for them to break out of their traditional male norms. Because they are subject to gender conditioning, they often feel they have to live up to certain stereotypes, such as viewing asking for help as a weakness, having to hide their feelings and empathy for others, and feeling the need to act tough, “man up,” and enjoy only stereotypically male things. These stereotypes have become so ingrained in society that they are viewed as male norms.
13. Men can help remove barriers to gender equality by defying the aforementioned traditional masculine norms and visibly supporting a sense of fair play.
14. Men who were mentored by women are much more aware of gender bias and tend to have a greater sense of empathy.

## It is time to disrupt society's views on aging.

Ageism is rampant, and women get the brunt of it. Women leaders need to disrupt society's views on aging.

15. Don't just accept your age—own it. Fight to change the perception of aging so we can change the culture. This is important because people are living longer, and the fastest-growing age segment is people over 85.<sup>5</sup>
16. Many older people want to work beyond the traditional retirement age because work gives their lives meaning. Therefore, it is up to women in the workplace to change society's view of older people, and help everyone realize that more seasoned workers are as competent and able to do the job as anyone else.
17. People used to say: “Can I work for a woman?” Now they're saying: “Can I work for a younger person?”—as in, “Will I be able to mentally accept having a boss who is twenty years younger than me?”

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5 “Health Disparities Strategic Plan: Fiscal Years 2009-2013,” National Institute on Aging (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/about/health-disparities-strategic-plan-fiscal-years-2009-2013>).

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These insights represent highlights from discussions held by 200 senior executives who attended the Women's Leadership conference. The views expressed are those of the presenters and participants of the conference. Presenters include executives from a cross-section of companies and industries:

Jimmie Paschall  
**Wells Fargo**  
EVP, Enterprise Diversity  
and Inclusion

Lisa Shipley, PhD  
**Merck**  
VP, Pharmacokinetics,  
Pharmacodynamics &  
Drug Metabolism

Bobbi Dangerfield  
**Dell, Inc.**  
Vice President, IT  
Integration Office

Sharonne Hayes, MD  
**Mayo Clinic**  
Director, Diversity and Inclusion,  
Professor of Medicine and  
Cardiovascular Diseases

Sonya Holt  
**US Government**  
Implementation Lead, Director's  
Advisory Group

Luann Pandy, PhD  
**Medtronic**  
SVP, Global Quality

Joann Lublin  
**The Wall Street Journal**  
Management News Editor  
**Earning It: Hard Won Lessons  
from Trailblazing Women at the  
Top of the Business World**  
Author

Mary Young, DBA  
**The Conference Board**  
Principal Researcher,  
Human Capital

Robin Gerber  
**Leadership the  
Eleanor Roosevelt Way**  
Author

Amy Abel, PhD  
**The Conference Board**  
Managing Director,  
Human Capital

Denise Kasper  
**Capital One**  
Executive Coach

Elizabeth Moran  
**ADP**  
Senior Director, Global Talent  
& Development

Cindy Pace  
**MetLife**  
Assistant Vice President, Global  
Diversity & Inclusion

Gisele Garcia Shelley  
**The Conference Board**  
Program Director, Executive  
Coaching Council

Sheryl Robinson  
**BD**  
Worldwide Director,  
Regulatory Affairs

Renee Johnson  
**Booz Allen Hamilton**  
Director, Diversity & Inclusion

Michelle Kilroy  
**Southern Company**  
Director, Talent Management and  
Workforce Intelligence

Deborah Kullman  
**Eaton**  
Vice President and  
General Manager, Chassis  
Driveline Controls

Eileen Simon  
**MasterCard**  
Chief Franchise Integrity Officer

Gretchen Stroud  
**Hilton Worldwide**  
Vice President, Global  
Learning and Talent

Elizabeth Salib, PhD  
**Catalyst**  
Director, Research

Sophia Muirhead  
**The Conference Board**  
SVP, General Counsel and  
Corporate Secretary

Lavanya Sayam  
**Because a Girl Can  
Write - Standing Tall in  
an Unequal World**  
Author

Leezel Tanglao  
**CNN Money**  
Assistant Managing Editor

Yvonne Wolf  
**GSK Vaccines**  
Sr. Director, Enterprise  
Organizational Development  
Talent, Leadership and  
Organisation Development  
Centre of Excellence

Suzanne Bates  
**Bates**  
CEO

Jo Ann Jenkins  
**AARP**  
CEO

J.P. Pawliw-Fry  
**Institute for Health and  
Human Potential**  
President and Founder

Pamela Wagoner  
**WR Grace**  
(former) CHRO

Tacy Byham, PhD  
**DDI**  
CEO

Dawn McGinley  
**3M**  
Diversity & Inclusion  
Strategic Leader

Sarita Soldz  
**Ashland Inc.**  
Director of Marketing, Valvoline  
Instant Oil Change

Stephanie Linnartz  
**Marriott International**  
EVP and Chief Marketing and  
Commercial Officer

## SNAPSHOT

### Coaching corner: advice from the experts

Here are highlights of some practical advice offered to women throughout the conference.

- Rely on the courage of your convictions. Don't listen to the negative and judgmental comments of others—do what your heart tells you to do.
- Look for a chance to innovate in your new management role. Play to your strengths, and be sure to have a fallback plan, such as a promise from an executive that you can move to a new position (instead of being fired) if the risk doesn't work out.
- Never give up, even when you're turned away repeatedly, and don't be afraid to take a less-than-desirable job once you get that "yes." One woman who wanted to switch from a career in theater to one in television wouldn't take "no" for an answer from a television executive, and took a job as a production assistant at a start-up cable station. Thirteen years later, she was named CEO of the cable conglomerate.
- Don't let setbacks get you down. They build backbone and make you stronger. Use them to leapfrog to the next thing.
- To get to higher roles, you don't need to work harder—you need to delegate more, let go of the need to be perfect, and stop mentally rehashing things that went wrong (because everyone else has moved on).
- Stop living in the mindset of: "What do they (the company, family members) want?" Instead, take the mindset of "What do I want?" Put your needs first, much like when airlines say parents should put on their oxygen masks before their child's.
- We all have self-doubt and insecurities. We need to learn how to shut these down and acknowledge them differently.



## SNAPSHOT

### You can perform well under pressure by changing your thought patterns

Pressure ruthlessly diminishes judgment, decision making, creativity, attention, and performance for everyone—even retired professional basketball superstar Michael Jordan. He’s able to perform so well when the game is on the line because he has learned methods to ensure these abilities are diminished less.

1. When we’re under pressure, our brains pump more cortisol—the stress hormone—into our system. When this happens, we become more sensitive to failure and mistakes, our short-term memory is impaired, and our focus becomes narrow.
2. Viewing pressure as a crisis changes our brain behavior and therefore our physiology. You can remedy this by viewing pressure as an opportunity—doing so lowers cortisol and changes your brain chemistry.
3. It is a myth that you need to be perfect to be successful. You just need to go into the pressure moment knowing it won’t be perfect, be prepared for the inevitable mistake, and not let mistakes affect you negatively.
4. Women react differently than men in stressful situations because of biology. Women have a bigger hippocampus than men do, so there is greater blood flow to their brains when under duress. Women also have a more fully developed prefrontal cortex. As a result, when they are under pressure, they weigh more variables, consider more options, see more context, and visualize a wider array of solutions to a problem than men do.

## SNAPSHOT

### The role of inclusion in fostering innovation

Inclusion and innovation are indeed correlated, according to the report *Inclusion + Innovation: Leveraging Diversity of Thought to Generate Business Growth* by The Conference Board. Researchers surveyed more than 200 D&I leaders and those who lead innovation around the world and determined that inclusion drives innovation by creating diversity of thought.

Other report highlights include:

- The most innovative companies were four times more likely to be highly inclusive than those with sporadic innovation.
- Making sure employees feel psychologically safe—they feel free to be themselves and voice their unique perspectives without fear—is a prerequisite for creating an inclusive environment. The most productive teams at a technology company had one thing in common: team members felt psychologically safe. Foster diversity of thought by making it safe for everyone to speak up.
- D&I and innovation leaders share some goals and use similar language; however, they mean different things when they talk about inclusion. D&I leaders focus on demographic differences such as race, gender, and age. Innovation leaders focus on inclusion related to geography, function, organizational level, and skill. Each group should broaden its definition of inclusiveness to include the other's definition.
- To spark diversity of thought, D&I leaders focus inside the organization. Innovation leaders also look outside, including crowdsourcing, contractors, and joint ventures. Both groups of leaders need to work together to tap into internal and external sources.
- At most companies, D&I and innovation leaders have limited contact. But at the most innovative companies, they collaborate often and their strategies are aligned.
- Both D&I and innovation leaders see eye to eye on the need for coaching, training, and development to increase inclusion, diversity of thought, and innovation.
- Most sources of differences are not visible (i.e., languages, learning styles, family status, life experiences, and talents). Companies need to broaden the definition of diversity to include the unseen things.

continued on page 11

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- If D&I and innovation are not aligned and don't collaborate, companies may be less innovative.
- Start the conversation between D&I and innovation leaders. Here are some questions:
  - What kinds of differences contribute to innovation?
  - Which kinds of differences are associated with the best teams?
  - Can you have too much difference on one team?
  - Does it help to have more homogenous teams as a project nears its close?
  - Which managers are better at creating an inclusive environment?

## SNAPSHOT

### An insurance company starts a global women's initiative

One insurer started a 14-month development program to boost the leadership aspirations of women. It focuses on the intersection of building business acumen and confidence and is conducted in cohorts of 20 to 24 people.

- The program begins with a four-day, in-person intensive. On the fourth day, participants partake in a work simulation, with a prompt such as "You're head of a German business unit. You have encountered XYZ issues. What do you do?" The simulation provides a baseline for what needs to be developed through coaching.
- The intensive is followed by coaching pods, each of which includes two coaches and two senior executives who teach business acumen and corporate strategy. Part of the business education piece includes having participants listen to calls with shareholders and about earnings, accelerating value, and developing business models.
- Only high-potential employees are eligible to participate. They are often promoted six to nine months after completing the program.

## SNAPSHOT

### Practice inclusive leadership by using specific behaviors

Employees feel more included when they feel a sense of uniqueness and belonging. Leaders who are the most inclusive have four traits in common:

1. **Empowerment** They enable all direct reports to develop and excel, and they trust direct reports with mission-critical work. Direct reports feel like they belong and are an essential part of the team.
2. **Accountability** They demonstrate confidence in their direct reports by holding them responsible.
3. **Courage** They put personal interests aside to do what needs to be done and act on their convictions even if it's risky.
4. **Humility** They learn from criticism and admit to and learn from their mistakes. Leaders who own up to their mistakes appear more human.

Inclusive leaders can practice these behaviors by supporting employees both openly and behind closed doors, creating a coaching culture, sharing their own struggles and challenges, displaying emotions, and helping to reframe problems as opportunities.

## SNAPSHOT

### How to start a women's leadership employee resource group

A women's leadership or empowerment group will be an asset to any company. Starting one is easier than you think. Here's how:

1. **Determine whether there is a need for a women's group** Use metrics to make your case for why the organization needs such a group, because measurement and numbers are the common language that will get the attention of top leadership. For instance, a chemical company used engagement and inclusion metrics to indicate a need for a women's ERG.
2. **Make the group official** Find an executive sponsor, draft a charter, list how the new ERG will provide value to the organization (it will help with retention and grow the succession pipeline), have a mission (e.g., "For the inclusion and advancement of women"), create guidelines, and form a steering team.
3. **Partner with HR to help grow your program** HR can provide metrics on employee retention, promotions, and leadership as well as membership and retention for the ERG. One company used metrics to help it make the case to launch a leader accelerator program for women. You don't need all the metrics at first. Just figure out which metrics will work best for your company.
4. **Build the ERG's credibility** Make sure the ERG will have a business impact and not merely serve as a social and networking group. Use metrics to show how the group has benefited the company as a whole. A women's group at a packaged products company worked with HR to launch workplace flexibility as a perk for everyone, and not just as a women's issue. Once it was able to show its positive impact, it was able to ask for further resources.
5. **Make sure the group has external visibility** This will help you recruit women because they will see that your company is a great place for women to work.

## BENCHMARKS

Conference attendees were polled on the following questions:

Chart 1

**What is the biggest challenge in your organization with respect to advancing women?**

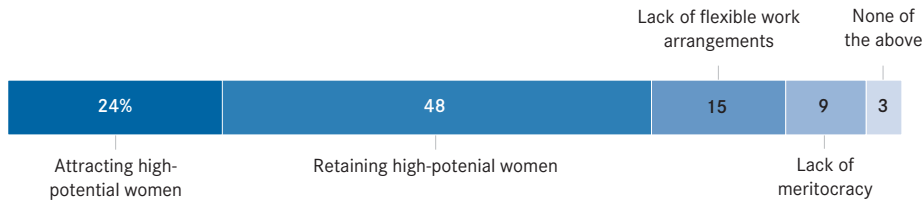


Chart 2

**Do you participate in women's networking groups?**



Chart 3

**How often do you use social networking communities (like LinkedIn) to provide professional updates?**

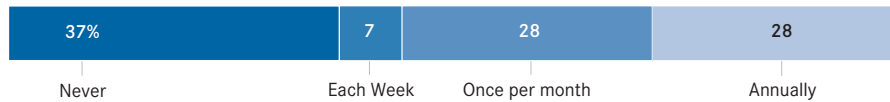


Chart 4

**Which program would you most likely use in your organization in the upcoming year?**



Chart 5

**Which flexible work arrangement would you consider to be most important?**



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

## ACTIONS TO TAKE

What actions will participants take after the conference? A postconference “action survey” highlights a range of objectives.

### Leadership

- Research employee resource groups (ERG) because my current company doesn't have one
- Leveraging ERG groups to not only network, but impact business results
- Use our women's ERG to help with business strategy
- Have an ERG play a stronger role in disrupting aging
- Add agenda items to our women's council, such as where to find available support within the organization
- Push for a formalized women's leadership program; build a strong women's leadership network
- When designing executive presence training, avoid the one-size-fits-all approach
- Offer leadership development to women at levels in the organization with high turnover
- Recommend that we use group coaching as a cost-effective means of continuing leadership coaching in the face of shrinking budgets
- Develop specific skills in people we're planning to promote
- Organize a tiger team to identify specific activities for younger women to help expand their potential as emerging leaders
- Identify clear goals and objectives for troop leaders within my service unit; personally send them an invitation for next year's kickoff meeting (August)
- Focus on executive presence for women
- Provide young women with advancement potential the support they need to make it to the next level
- Reevaluate our metrics; add more metrics

### D&I

- Support our new VP-HR in driving our new D&I strategic initiative through the organization
- Tie our diversity & inclusion programs to our business metrics for sustainability
- Build defined communications and mentoring programs to include our male employees and leadership in D&I
- Engage men differently (men's inclusion) as part of our women's network
- Network with male peers to change their [perception of] female advancement

- Start a Men Advocating Real Change chapter at my company
- Address the male perspective in our new Integrated Leadership for Success program
- Coach men when they unconsciously act exclusive

### Personal development

- Lean into my diversity
- Use my experiences, challenges, and successes to mentor others
- Set up three lunch meetings before end of July
- Study/learn/observe/track other highly successful woman executives
- Consider interviewing an executive sponsor
- Focus on my executive presence
- Implement ways of dealing with pressure and stress
- Observe/capture my emotions/experiences when I'm under pressure
- Respond to pressure differently: acknowledge to myself that I will not be perfect and use visualization prior to "big" pressure situations
- Don't worry about being perfect when under pressure, act anyway with no regrets
- Let go of the perfectionist in me
- Know that asking does not hurt; don't be afraid to ask for things
- Avoid drama in the workplace to get ahead
- Plan and live for my advancing years



## Related Resources from The Conference Board

### Publications

#### [Inclusion + Innovation: Leveraging Diversity of Thought to Generate Business Growth](#)

To understand the enablers and barriers to leveraging inclusion to capture new ideas, The Conference Board conducted a global survey of leaders responsible for either innovation or diversity and inclusion.

#### [Future-Skilling Your Workforce: Leveraging People Strategies for Developing Future Capabilities](#)

Companies need to future-skill their talent to increase agility and better position themselves for a volatile future. The key is having a people ecosystem that focuses on integrating talent management systems holistically.

#### [2014 Executive Coaching Survey](#)

External and internal coaching are being used to develop critical skills. This report focuses on both practices and allows organizations to benchmark against more than 140 respondents.

### Webcasts (on-demand)

#### [The Do's and Don'ts of Corporate Women's Networks](#)

As the title suggests, this webcast focuses on the do's and don'ts of corporate women's networks and how to ensure they support, rather than undermine, gender progress.

#### [Book Discussion: All the Leader You Can Be](#)

In this webcast, executive coach Suzanne Bates identifies 15 traits associated with strong executive presence to help viewers become all the leaders they can be.

### Councils

Big Data Working Group

Career Development Practitioner Council

Chief Human Resources Council

Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability Council

The Conference Board Diversity & Inclusion New Leaders Academy

Data & Analytics Working Group

Diversity & Inclusion Executives Council

Diversity & Inclusion Leadership Council

Diversity & Inclusion in Business Council

Executive Coaching Council

Global Business Women Leaders Council I

Global Business Women Leaders Council II  
Global Diversity & Inclusion Executives Council  
Global Human Resources Council  
Human Capital Analytics Council  
Human Capital Analytics Council II  
Leadership Council on Advancing Women  
Leadership Council on Advancing Women II  
Leadership Development Council  
Leadership, Talent & Learning Council  
Talent Management Executives Council  
Workforce Analytics Institute Council



## For more information

Marion Feigenbaum  
Senior Vice President,  
Member Engagement  
+1 212 339 0378  
marion.feigenbaum@conferenceboard.org

**THE CONFERENCE BOARD, INC.**  
[www.conferenceboard.org](http://www.conferenceboard.org)

**AMERICAS**  
+ 1 212 759 0900  
customer.service@conferenceboard.org

**ASIA**  
+ 65 6325 3121  
service.ap@conferenceboard.org

**EUROPE/AFRICA/MIDDLE EAST**  
+ 32 2 675 54 05  
brussels@conferenceboard.org

**THE COMMITTEE FOR  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
OF THE CONFERENCE BOARD**  
+ 1 202 469 7286  
www.ced.org

**THE DEMAND INSTITUTE  
A Division of THE CONFERENCE BOARD**  
+1 212 759 0900

**THE CONFERENCE BOARD OF CANADA**  
+ 1 613 526 3280  
www.conferenceboard.ca

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## Publications Team

Author Sheri Rothman  
Editor Sara Churchville  
Design Peter Drubin  
Production Rita Jones

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