

# WOMEN ON THE MOVE

## SHAPING LEADERS THROUGH OVERSEAS POSTINGS

By Katie Abouzahr, Leila Hoteit, Matt Krentz, and Claire Tracey

**I**N A GLOBAL ECONOMY, international experience is valuable for up-and-coming managers and executives who aim to gain critical leadership skills, develop social capital, and expand their knowledge of their company's operations and regional markets. Our research shows that women are eager to be part of this movement. Among the women we surveyed, 55% told us that they are willing to move abroad for a job assignment (including 44% of women in relationships and with children). Our research also shows that this percentage is not fixed: companies can take measures to increase it.

However, only a small subset of women currently get the opportunity to take international postings. According to our data, fewer than 30% of the women who were willing to move had actually done so, compared with nearly 40% of the men in similar situations. In other words, there's a gender gap that companies need to overcome. If companies continue to assign more men than women to international postings, they will unwittingly be putting their promising

female managers and executives at a disadvantage, decreasing the diversity of their future leadership teams.

The good news is that our research also points to specific ways to address the gender gap in mobility. By taking these steps, companies can give high-potential women a fair chance to take international opportunities and also to make travel more attractive to everyone. As a result, companies will be giving women the critical experience they need to grow, thus building more balanced leadership teams for the future.

### Five Priorities

There is a clear business case for gender diversity on leadership teams, and international postings can play a crucial role in achieving that. They give employees in all industries critical experience in dealing with the company's functions and operations in various locations. Employees return better equipped to assume new responsibilities, and, having broadened their professional networks and established

credibility among their colleagues and supervisors, they are stronger candidates for leadership positions. Quite simply, employees of a multinational company who spend their whole career in the company's home country have a harder time moving up.

Given that context, we analyzed data from BCG's Decoding Global Talent survey, seeking to define the differences between men and women in terms of international postings. (The survey, conducted in collaboration with The Network, included 203,756 respondents from 189 countries, across a range of demographic segments, industries, education levels, and work experiences. See *Decoding Global Talent: 200,000 Survey Responses on Global Mobility and Employment Preferences*, BCG report, October 2014.)

For CEOs, one highlight of that analysis is that a person's willingness to travel is not fixed. Companies can directly influence willingness by taking concerted actions in a handful of areas. The data points to five priorities.

**Focusing on Female Employees Early in Their Careers.** Our data shows that women

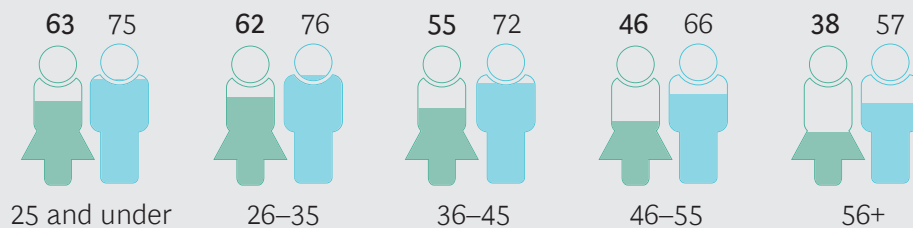
in their 20s—particularly single women without children—report the greatest willingness to travel, and that willingness drops as they get older, if they are part of a relationship, or if they have children. Responses from men show the same—but less intense—pattern. (See the exhibit.)

Accordingly, companies should aim mobility programs at women during their first few years in the organization. To manage such a significant investment, organizations could wait until they have identified a cohort of future leaders—either after the first promotion hurdle or through their talent management systems. At one global nonprofit, this approach had a dramatic effect in positioning high-potential women for steeper career trajectories. Enabling women to take international positions early in their careers may also bring about second-order benefits. For instance, a move early in the relationship of a working couple could help put the two careers on an equal footing.

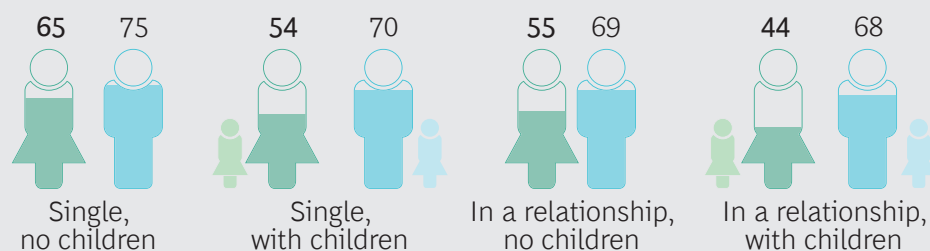
**Aiming to Reach as Many Women as Possible.** When seeking candidates for international job assignments, managers should demand lists that include balanced numbers of men and women. They should

### Women Show The Greatest Willingness to Move When They Are Young

WILLINGNESS TO MOVE ABROAD, BY AGE GROUP (%)



WILLINGNESS TO MOVE ABROAD, BY FAMILY STATUS (%)



Source: BCG analysis.

ensure that high-potential women are being offered international experience and that all applications are considered in a structured, merit-based way that minimizes inherent bias. In addition, companies should not simply assume that women who have declined such a position in the past would decline all similar offers. In particular, companies should not make assumptions about women's willingness to travel on the basis of their family situation. (As we noted above, 44% of women with families are interested in international positions.)

Moreover, companies should understand that international posts need not be one-time experiences. In fact, survey respondents who had worked abroad (16% of women and 26% of men) showed a much greater willingness to take an international position than those who had never gone abroad for a job—a difference of 30 percentage points for women across all age groups, compared with 21 percentage points for men. This suggests that experience abroad reduces the perceived mobility challenges for women more than it does for men, and it underscores the importance of allowing women to pursue these opportunities early in their careers.

Location is another important factor. Regardless of their age or stage of life, the men and women in our analysis expressed a preference for placement in either English-speaking or Western European countries. However, women who have worked internationally in the past are far more willing to consider any location, even late in their careers, including positions in some East and Southeast Asian countries.<sup>1</sup> To capitalize on this insight, companies could offer trial placements to these destinations in particular, which may help clear up any preconceptions and increase the potential pool of applicants—a critical opportunity given the importance of these areas for most multinationals.

**Offering Tailored Logistical Support.** All employees being transferred abroad need a designated, in-country sponsor who can answer their questions both before and after their arrival. Such sponsors should

advise employees on how to handle the challenges associated with accommodations, taxes, immigration law, insurance, and health care. Our research indicates that this form of logistical support is disproportionately important to women.

One unconventional approach could be to package positions abroad so that small groups of employees who are still in the early years of their careers can go on international postings together. The coworkers form a ready-made peer support network that may alleviate some of the concerns about international assignments, particularly to countries perceived as high-risk locations.

Companies can also consider offering short-term postings, such as a temporary transfer with the option to extend the assignment, along with some flexibility regarding the destination. Our research shows that women are more receptive to shorter assignments: the majority (63%) said that they prefer relocations of five years or less. (On average, men are more open to longer-term postings.)

As for the economically significant regions that our research shows to be less popular among women later in their careers, companies can consider providing higher levels of logistical support—including programs for children and partners. Companies should be prepared to accommodate employees who have children, helping them sort through education, health care, and childcare options in the destination country and, perhaps, reserving spots in top schools and nurseries, generating contracts with local childcare agencies, recommending local pediatricians, and even subsidizing certain costs.

Such assignments become even more attractive if the company offers all employees—both men and women—opportunities to choose from a selection of destinations so that their working partners will also have a range of employment options to consider. In addition, companies could offer the family subsidized accounting services to help them handle taxes and

could consider paying for headhunter services for partners.

**Developing a Compelling Communication Strategy.** The data shows that the job attributes women value are slightly different from those that men value. When they assess an international posting, young men and young women value the acquisition of work experience, better career opportunities, and the chance to live in a new culture. Men see somewhat greater value in the prospect of a higher salary, and women see somewhat greater value in the opportunity to learn a new language. (Among respondents aged 36 and above and those in relationships or with children, both women and men are far more focused on career improvement opportunities and less on learning a language or living in a foreign culture.) To capitalize on these findings, companies should describe new international opportunities in ways that highlight the attributes that both men and women value.

Companies should also provide detailed and specific information about each position, such as location and duration of the placement. The data shows that women are more interested than men in receiving this type of information before they give serious consideration to any opportunity. Companies could consider establishing early-return options for assignments, which may reduce some of the perceived risk for applicants.

As part of their communication strategy, companies can arrange open houses, town hall meetings, online discussion boards, and other forums through which employees considering assignment to a particular location can ask questions and meet employees who either live there or have spent time there in the past.

Active communication with HR, mentors, and previous participants can clarify the benefits of an international assignment—for example, the positive impact on a person’s career—as well as the possible downside of not taking an international job assignment. Organizations should issue

regular and transparent updates that describe in detail all international opportunities and their benefits. An intranet site or internal “mobility marketplace” can be good for such communications.

**Creating Other Opportunities for Women Who Can’t Relocate Abroad.** Finally, for high-potential women who cannot, for a particular reason, relocate abroad, companies should have other approaches that will help them broaden their experience. For example, these women could participate as members of an international team, collaborating remotely. Internal rotations would give them insight into how other functions and business units operate. Companies can also offer opportunities in other domestic locations. And they can give high-potential women temporary assignments in adjacent organizations, such as suppliers or clients.

## Closing the Leadership Gender Gap

Many companies struggle to close the gender gap in their leadership teams. Unless their female employees have the same development opportunities as their male employees—including the ability to build their expertise through international job assignments—companies will find it difficult to progress. By taking steps to make international posts more attractive to women, as well as to men, and tackling assumptions about which employees are eager to travel, companies can provide a wider range of experience, create more balanced leadership teams, and ultimately improve their performance.

### NOTE

1. When comparing international work locations, younger women ranked South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, China, and Indonesia higher than older women. This split was either not observed, or much less significant, among men of the same age groups.

## About the Authors

**Katie Abouzahr** is a principal in the London office of The Boston Consulting Group. A medical doctor focusing on health care topics, she is currently on temporary assignment to Philadelphia, where she works on the Women@BCG initiative. You may contact her by e-mail at [abouzahr.katie@bcg.com](mailto:abouzahr.katie@bcg.com).

**Leila Hoteit** is a partner and managing director in the firm's Dubai office. She specializes in human capital development. You may contact her by e-mail at [hoteit.leila@bcg.com](mailto:hoteit.leila@bcg.com).

**Matt Krentz** is a senior partner and managing director in BCG's Chicago office and the head of the global people team. He focuses on consumer and retail topics. You may contact him by e-mail at [krentz.matt@bcg.com](mailto:krentz.matt@bcg.com).

**Claire Tracey** is a partner and managing director in the firm's London office and focuses on marketing and customer centricity in financial services. She leads the Women@BCG initiative. You may contact her by e-mail at [tracey.claire@bcg.com](mailto:tracey.claire@bcg.com).

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