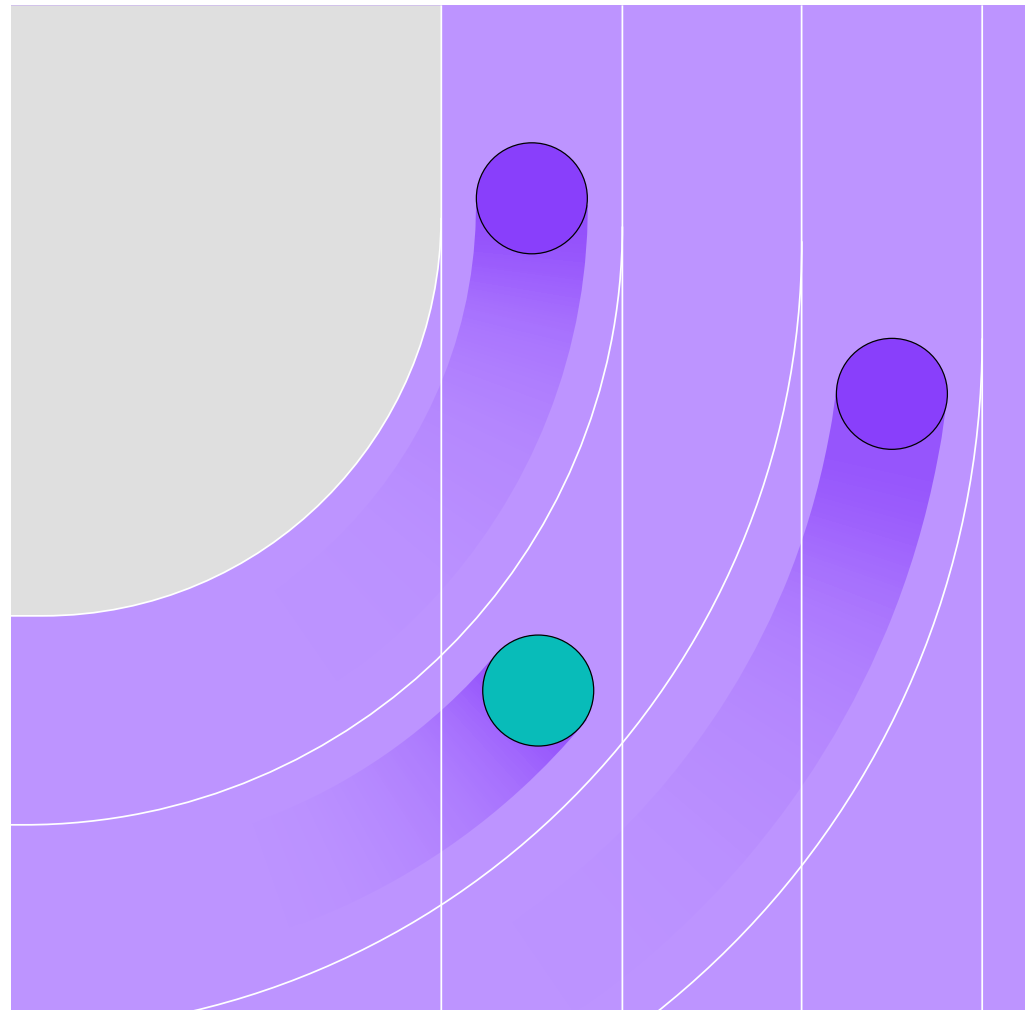


Forging the future of AI

Women can take the lead



Evolving AI, elevating women

When you think of the most famous women in business, a few magnates and moguls quickly come to mind. But when you compare any list of prominent businesswomen to a roster of their male peers, it's clear that something is askew. Up until recently, men named John outnumbered all women in the C-suite.¹

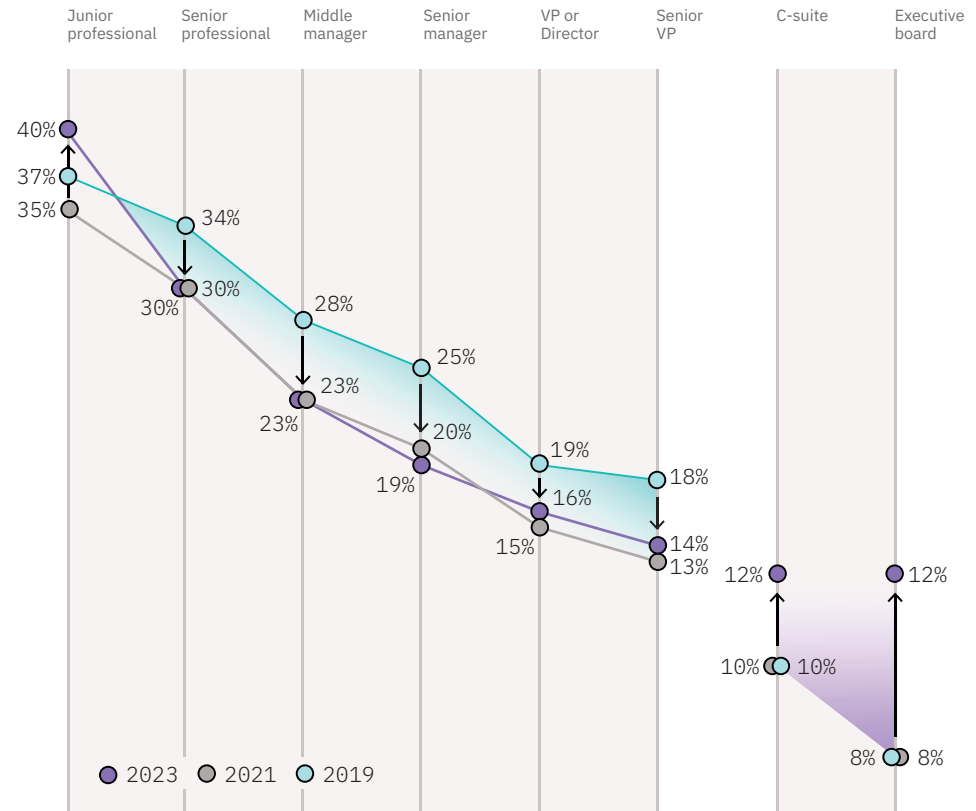
In fact, the 2023 IBM Institute for Business Value Women in Leadership study found that only 12% of C-suite and board-level positions are held by women. Perhaps even more disturbing, the pipeline of women leaders is shrinking. Only 14% of senior VP, 16% of VP or director, and 19% of senior manager positions are held by women—and these figures are lower than they were in 2019 (see Figure 1).²

This is bad for the future of gender equality—and bad for business. Organizations that formally prioritize moving women into leadership positions see higher revenue growth—19% higher. They also have more diversity in their workforce overall and report higher employee retention rates.³

FIGURE 1

A shrinking talent pool

More women are rising to the C-suite, but fewer are filling the leadership pipeline.



Why does the gender gap persist? This age-old question has gained a new sense of urgency in the era of generative AI. Our research indicates that many of the early use cases for this emerging technology are focused on functions that have historically been dominated by women, such as marketing and customer service.⁴ This means that, as generative AI disrupts workflows and demands organization-wide transformation, women have a once-in-a-career opportunity to gain equal footing.

By distinguishing themselves as change agents and embracing the skill sets that are quickly becoming essential, women can not only ascend to positions of power—but also help redefine the leadership roles of the future. On the flip side, if women don't leverage generative AI to gain a competitive edge today, there may be even fewer in the leadership pipeline tomorrow.

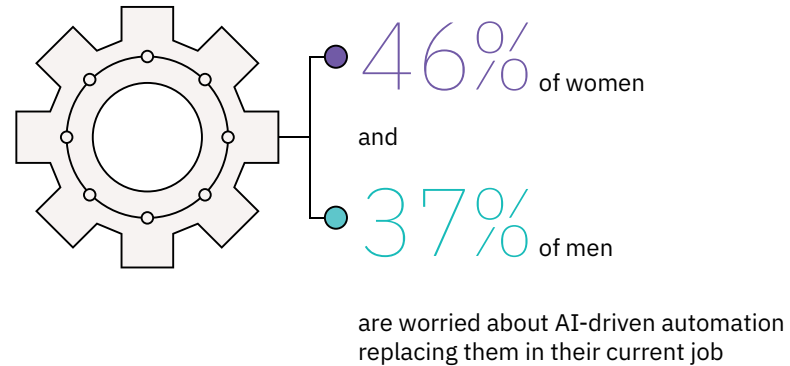
Which path are most women taking? To find out, we conducted a pulse survey of roughly 200 US-based C-suite officers, executives, and mid-level managers—an equal number of women and men—in late 2023. We asked how their company is adopting AI, how they're currently using it, and how they expect this shift to impact their productivity, job security, and career aspirations.

Our research reveals that almost half of the women we surveyed (46%) are worried that AI-driven automation will replace them in their current job—while only 37% of men say the same (see Figure 2). This disconnect is striking: Although women can be a driving force within the first business functions to adopt generative AI, they don't see this as an advantage. Many see generative AI as something that's happening TO them, not a tool that works FOR them.

FIGURE 2

Complement or competitor?

Women are more concerned about being replaced by AI than their male colleagues.



It's time to change the conversation. As this transformative technology takes hold, women have a chance to be trailblazers. They can wield generative AI responsibly, but forcefully—and make sure the organizations they work for take notice. By taking action today, women can combat gender inequity in the workplace, propel themselves into the leadership ranks, and pave the path for those climbing the ladder after them.

Perspective

Don't settle for less



Salima Lin

Vice President and Senior Partner
Strategy, Transformation,
and Thought Leadership
IBM

There aren't enough women in leadership roles today—but we've come a long way since the early days of my career. With fewer women role models back then, I often had to chart my own course.

If I could go back in time, I would encourage my younger self to be more self-assured, even in situations where I felt intimidated. Male mentors and sponsors were there to help, but only if I was willing to reach out and ask for assistance. Today, I don't always have to take the initiative. For instance, one of the most supportive male mentors I have now stepped forward on his own.

Still, as I mentor future women leaders, I encourage them to proactively ask for what they want—and be willing to look elsewhere if they don't get it. This requires confidence, as well as the conviction that you're bringing something valuable to the table. Yet, given how often women's ideas are dismissed, it's easy for imposter syndrome to creep in. For instance, when I was first asked to lead a business-wide transformation program, my first thought was, *Can I do it?*

I knew it would be an incredible boon to my career, but what if I failed? As I debated whether to take the role, I asked the mentor I mentioned above for advice. "Don't think like that," he told me. "Just think about what you need to be successful and ask for it." I took that advice to heart. I went back to the negotiating table with specific asks—requests that gave me the tools I needed to orchestrate big wins for the organization.

As generative AI shakes up the business landscape, many women are in a similar position. This transformative technology is fueling a productivity revolution in HR, marketing, and customer service—functions where women leaders have the home field advantage. This means women will determine how this technology is used. As women, we need to lean into our resilience and innate strength. It is on us to be bolder—to take full advantage of the opportunities in front of us.

If we ask for what we need—and have faith in what we can deliver—women can produce game-changing results for our organizations and our careers. If we fall or fail, we just need to get back up, keep pushing forward, and lift other women along the way.

Profile

Cultivate creative ingenuity



Joanne Wright

Senior Vice President
Transformation and Operations
IBM

Transformation takes a clear vision—and the determination to keep pushing forward when challenges arise. Rather than fear of the unknown, innovators are motivated by uncertainty and excited by the possibility of creating something entirely new, she says. “When you bring like-minded, passionate people together, they all flourish. They thrive because they see themselves in each other.”

Wright says that innovative spirit is essential for organizations to realize the full potential of generative AI. As this opportunity unfolds, she says women are in a prime position to influence how organizations adopt generative AI—and define more effective ways of working.

“This is almost like a blank sheet of paper. The world doesn’t know how we’re going to capitalize on it yet,” she says. “If women can lean in by showcasing their innovation and strategic thinking capabilities, they can really take a leadership role.”

Imagination and ingenuity will serve women well as they envision the path forward, Wright says. For example, finding new ways to tap digital assistants—from responding to emails to prioritizing tasks—can help them deliver more value across the board. “We can continue to elevate what AI can do for our clients and our partners. We can completely reimagine the way companies run,” Wright says.

“It just takes distilling all the data to discover what exactly you need to do to be more productive.”

Wright sees it as her role to help other women as they grapple with this task. Just as her coaches and role models helped her gain a seat at the table, she aims to open the door for the next generation of women leaders. “I always go with the mantle of, be the difference that you want to see,” she says. “From that point of view, I’m trying to ignite an innovative curiosity within every single one of my leaders, new hires, and interns. Embracing generative AI can be a game-changer for them today—and for the future.”

Profile

Embrace healthy competition



Paola M. Doebel

SVP and Managing Director
North America
Ensono

Paola Doebel has an athlete’s mindset. In business, that translates to a willingness to compete and embrace failure as part of growth. Whether they’re part of a team trying to win clients, or an individual working for a promotion or trying to improve their performance, women have to think like a competitor, she says. “If you’re never afraid to compete and you think failure is part of the process to improve, you don’t really worry about who’s in the room with you—or what they look like.”

Doebel says it’s fear of failure that often holds women back, acknowledging that women are generally held to a higher standard of performance than their male peers. However, if women see failure as an inevitable part of finding success, rather than the end result, it can open up new avenues for growth. As an athlete, you know that “the first time you try to do something, such as executing a new skill, you’re almost

guaranteed to fail,” she says. “If you already know mistakes will happen, you’re not focused on them. All you’re thinking about is making progress and finding the optimal way to do it excellently.”

Embracing the spirit of healthy competition can help women level the playing field in the generative AI era, as the opportunity is spread across technology and business disciplines. However, there is uncertainty and ambiguity. “Uncertainty creates opportunity, ambiguity creates opportunity,” Doebel says. “Right now, that opportunity is fairly equally distributed—but the failure rate on first attempts is going to be high. So, the fear factor could be limiting if you’re risk averse. That mindset disproportionately impacts women.”

Doebel is taking her own advice. As the leader of a sales organization, she’s experimenting with several different generative AI uses to

help her team reach new heights. For example, the team recently trained an AI assistant to spar with salespeople on a key talking point issue, with the goal of developing their client-facing skills and confidence. “It looks and sounds like a client,” she says, “and we can train it to replicate many different scenarios.”

If women find themselves struggling to see the opportunities in front of them, Doebel suggests working with mentors or sponsors who can help them cut through the chaos—and potentially share in the risk of experimentation. But whatever path they take, the key is to start small and gain some quick wins to build on, she says.

“Embrace the process. Then, once you succeed, keep the momentum going. Understand that failure isn’t the end. Failure’s just a pothole in the road—and you can keep moving down the road despite the potholes. A lot can change if you adopt that mentality.”

Profile

Attitude is everything



Juhi McClelland

Managing Partner
APAC
IBM

Success takes tenacity—and a winner’s mindset, says Juhi McClelland. Women must refuse to settle for a support role. If they aspire to step into a leadership role, they must take a seat at the table. The best way for women to reach their goals is by going after assignments that deliver strategic value, McClelland says. “Don’t just work in a support function. Run a P&L. Manage a client relationship. Lead development. Do something mission critical for the company. Take charge.”

The generative AI moment gives women the perfect chance to capitalize on the next big wave as it emerges. But to ride the wave, women must proactively prepare for the crest that’s coming. “It’s going to happen to you,” McClelland says. “Either you’ll let it happen to you or you’ll take charge. So, what does ‘take charge’ mean for you?”

She elaborates, “Generative AI is fast becoming inextricably woven into the fabric of daily life—I even use it to create artwork in my home. And at work, we are using generative AI assistants to help with repeatable tasks. Every CEO is interested in generative AI. So the question isn’t ‘how’ but ‘how quickly’ AI will manifest in our business, social, and personal worlds. Use it, don’t be intimidated by it. Stay abreast of new AI applications,” McClelland says. “If you don’t adopt generative AI now, it will make you irrelevant.”

While AI is the “software” of innovation, transformation, and progress, continued success will also need to be anchored in what Juhi calls the “heartware”—the tenacity, ambition, and courage to go after what you want.

McClelland also says it’s the personal relationships she’s built over the years that have helped her overcome the biggest career obstacles she’s faced. These relationships span multiple IBM divisions, clients, partners, and friends across the globe.

“There were times when I felt like I had hit rock bottom,” she says. “I always think, ‘How did I succeed during that adversity?’ It’s really just having very strong mentors and sponsors and never losing touch with them.”

In addition, Juhi challenges women to have a sense of urgency. “Take calculated risks, help others advance with you, respect your peers, and have a global perspective. Be patient enough to listen to all points of view—but feel the urgency to decide and act.”

Steer the ship with confidence

Generative AI is a shiny new tool in a professional's toolbox. But it doesn't come with a clear instruction manual. This gives early adopters a chance to shine, as employees who use generative AI to create business value could open the door to lucrative new career paths.

Men see this potential and are jumping at the opportunity, but women are lagging behind. In fact, 71% of all respondents say men are adopting generative AI faster than women—and 68% say men are seeing greater benefits (see Figure 3). Men are also more likely than women to say generative AI will improve their productivity at work.

Yet, generative AI could give women the opportunity to elevate their own careers while also busting gender myths and reducing systemic bias.

Here's how: Generative AI can only learn from the data it's trained on—and data tends to reflect existing inequalities. By interacting with AI early on, women can flag problematic and biased outputs and begin to shrink the gender divide. It's a domino effect.

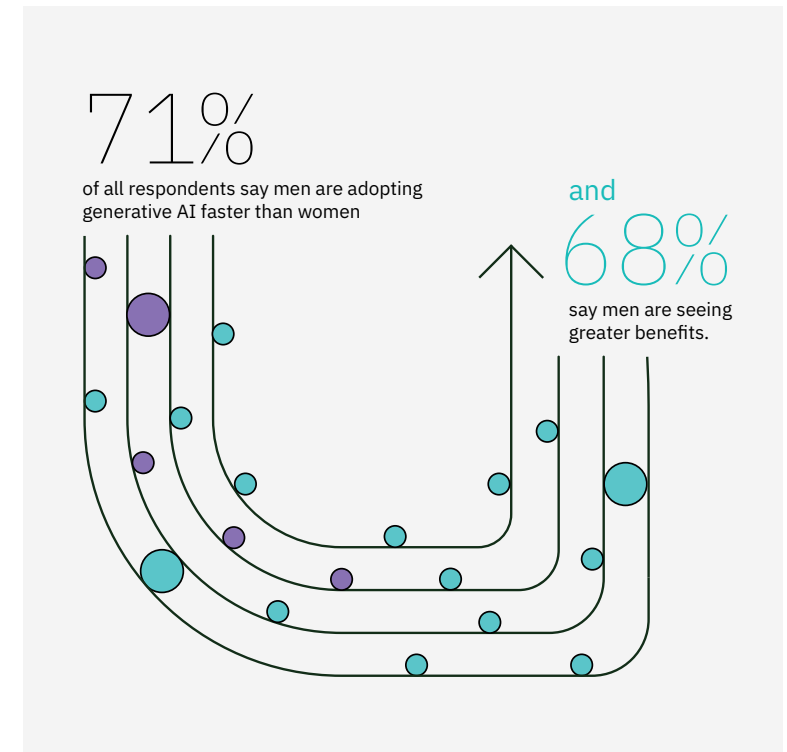
But it's not happening yet: 56% of all respondents—and 67% of women—say there aren't enough women leading the conversation about generative AI. In Europe, related IBM research found that 73% of business leaders believe that having more women leaders in their sector is important for mitigating gender bias in AI—but only 33% currently have a woman in charge of making decisions on AI strategy.⁵

This is the time for women to take charge and be the change agents their organizations desperately need. Those who use this moment with AI to take a leadership position today will be well positioned to continue advancing toward the C-suite tomorrow.

FIGURE 3

Widening the gap

Men are outpacing women in generative AI adoption.



Perspective

You don't have to be an IT expert to lead on AI



Debra D'Agostino

Managing Director of Thought Leadership
Oxford Economics

The adoption curve for AI will vary across companies but, according to our data, it's probably already in use in customer service and marketing—areas where women are more likely to hold leadership roles.

Women aren't idling when it comes to piloting AI tools. They are more likely than men to have used AI to generate, edit, and summarize content, and nearly 40% have used it for graphic design, and image and video generation. What's more, 40% of women say using generative AI has resulted in a greater than 10% increase in productivity.

Are any of these women IT experts? Maybe—but they don't need to be. Understanding and anticipating how AI can best augment the unique needs and capabilities of your team is more important; then you can work with the right people in IT to make it happen. In fact, all of our research to date shows that the most important quality that leads to AI success is one that's uniquely human—creativity.

For example, at Oxford Economics I am part of a global working group to help our economists, analysts, and researchers identify specific generative AI tools to amp up their productivity—from automating literature reviews and desk research to quickly querying large data sets and identifying trends drawn from qualitative insights. We are also testing ways generative AI can help our clients get deeper insight from our economic briefings and forecasts.

Profile

Leveling the playing field



Kitty Chaney Reed

Chief Leadership, Culture,
and Inclusion Officer
IBM

Kitty Chaney Reed didn't start her career in technology. In the early 1990s, she worked in retail operations—but she was always on the lookout for her next big leap. So, when an opportunity to join a promising tech start-up appeared, she decided to test her skills in a new sector. “Technology was an accelerator for my personal career path,” she says. “It opened up career opportunities that I hadn't previously considered.”

Since then, Chaney Reed has held several senior leadership roles, eventually earning a C-suite position at IBM. Today, technology promises to transform her career once again. This time, it's not about changing what she does, but rather how she does it.

“Generative AI will be a game-changer for everyone,” she says. “It presents an opportunity for all of us of to rethink how we get work done and be more creative.”

Chaney Reed also believes that generative AI could help level the playing field for women and people of color. By eliminating bias in recruiting and promoting it can create more opportunities for groups that have historically been overlooked. But to deliver on this promise, teams developing AI must be as diverse as the workforce itself.

“Across the entire product lifecycle, we need teams that are diverse from both a cultural perspective and a gender perspective,” Chaney Reed says. “We also need the right people involved in AI ethics. We need representation as teams evaluate the impact of using AI tools.”

When women have the authority to press pause on AI projects that create adverse impacts, they can stop existing gender bias from influencing the systems of the future. However, women must also influence how AI tools are used, including where tech can make decisions and where humans must keep the reins. “All of the people don't have to agree,” she says. “What really encourages me is that we're asking the right questions and requiring transparency in the process.”

Profile

Setting the curve



Monique Cormier

General Counsel
GSMA

Monique Cormier is used to being the only woman in the room. As an accomplished lawyer with decades of experience in the tech sector, she's accustomed to the challenges that come with working in a male-dominated field. "Gender bias manifested in what deals you were put on," Cormier says. "The big IPOs would go to the big shot guys and the C and D funding rounds might go to the women. There were very visible mommy tracks in the law firms where I worked."

Today, Cormier is no longer the only woman in the room. She's part of a team of women leaders at GSMA, a non-profit trade association for the mobile telecom sector. But that doesn't mean gender inequality is a thing of the past. In the generative AI era, Cormier is concerned that technology could further entrench existing bias.

"I worry that it's being stuffed full of datasets where women are under-represented," she says. "All of the biases that are in our heads are going to be in these systems, unless we find a way to root them out in a way that we haven't been able to do in real life."

Still, she sees generative AI's potential to give women a leg up, especially in environments where they get handed all the mundane tasks on top of their regular work. For example, her organization is looking for ways to leverage this technology in contract management. A tool that can accurately surface relevant legal clauses and precedent could give hours back to the people who use it each day.

As more companies expect employees to tap generative AI to deliver better results faster, women will need to stay on top of this technology to avoid falling behind, Cormier says. On the flip side, harnessing it early could give women the nitro boost they need to get ahead.

"People get very concerned about the way we've always done things," she says. "But we have to turn the discussion away from 'AI is going to kill our jobs' to focus on the opportunity it creates to do more of the really interesting work. It really could change everything."

Take risks to gain an edge

“Women don’t like to take risks” is one of the oldest gender stereotypes in the books. Women tend to be more careful, more responsible, and even more virtuous—or so the story goes.

However, a recent study published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* contradicts this narrative. It found that men and women are equally likely to take risks—and equally likely to avoid similar risks in the future when a bet doesn’t pay off.⁶

The difference is in the outcomes. When professionals described their work experiences to researchers, women were more likely to say they experienced negative consequences due to taking risks. Men reported more positive outcomes.⁷



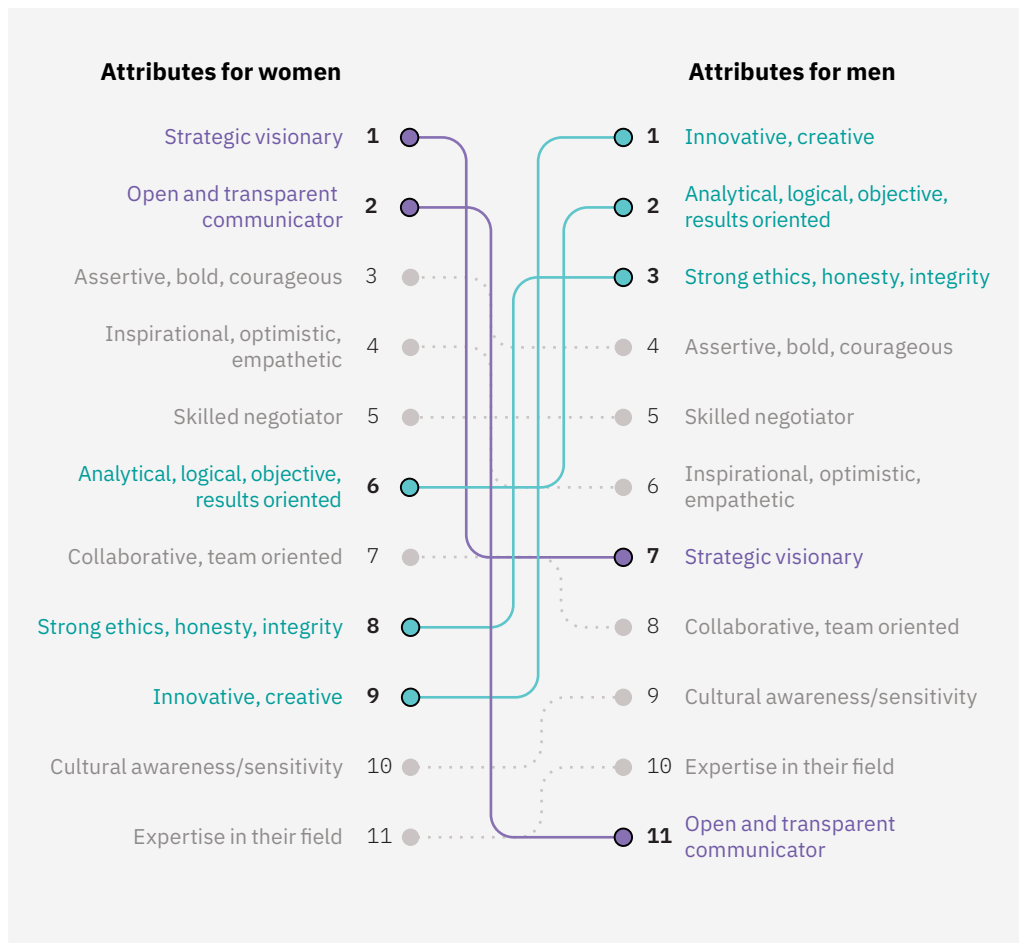


FIGURE 4

Bias in action

Men and women are judged differently when being considered for leadership roles.

Why might this be the case? Our 2023 Women in Leadership study offers a clue. When we asked business leaders to pick the most important skills for leadership candidates, they had different priorities for women and men. They said men need to be innovative, creative, analytical, and results oriented. Women, on the other hand, need to be strategic, visionary, and good communicators (see Figure 4).⁸

It’s unsurprising then, that men are more eager to innovate, while women tread more carefully. Our survey found that more men than women see generative AI as a way to gain a competitive advantage in the job market (47% versus 40%) and increase their pay (38% versus 28%). Most women (56%) are focused on using generative AI to shore up job security. And when we asked women what would encourage them to use generative AI, company policies (59%) topped the list, followed by greater ease of use (58%) and increased confidence in security (51%).

Playing aggressive defense is essential in the evolving AI landscape, but women must be ready to play offense, as well. Looking to the future, 77% of entry-level workers will see their job roles shift by 2025, as will one in four senior executives.⁹ In this environment, the women who have a vision for AI, understand how it aligns with strategic goals, and communicate how it should be used to deliver meaningful results will gain an unbeatable edge.

Perspective

The best defense is a good offense



Yvonne Li

Vice President of Enterprise Artificial Intelligence, Data, and Decision Science
Advance Auto Parts

There are two sides of the AI equation: offensive plays that drive business performance and defensive plays that reduce risk. And as generative AI takes hold, a gender divide is appearing on the playing field. Men are more attracted to the offensive plays—finding ways to drive growth and efficiencies—while women focus on defense, filling governance and legal roles.

Why is this the case? Partly because women, by nature, care about the wellness of society and want to make sure technology doesn't cause harm. That's why women are well-positioned to contribute to the development of responsible AI. We should take the initiative to practice proactive defense and create the governance guardrails needed to make sure the practice is ethical and free of bias.

With the right guidelines in place, women can feel more comfortable going on the offensive—something I do in my role every day. I build solutions that have a positive, measurable impact on business performance, and I love what I do. But getting there requires disrupting the way work is done, something people may or may not embrace with open arms. Therefore, much of the real work happens after an AI solution is in production.

AI leaders are change agents. The solutions and practices you bring to the table will inevitably change people's lives and jobs. Many will perceive you as a threat, as someone looking for ways to eliminate their role. Navigating this requires strong leadership, thoughtful transformation, change management, relationship building, and constant dialogue. The proactive defense you put in place up front will come in handy here—and pave the way for the last mile impact.

To break the ice in these scenarios, I set clear expectations and provide transparency about what I'm trying to do—leverage AI to help elevate their experience so they can do more with the bandwidth they currently have. I put myself in their shoes to understand their routine and pain points to build something that will resonate and have a positive impact on their daily work.

But I also accept that winning people over and spurring AI adoption takes time. If it's your job to drive transformation, you have to earn people's trust and push them to evolve at a pace they can handle. If you do things right, they'll eventually warm up to what you're trying to do. And when they look back at the process five years from now, they'll probably even thank you for it.

Profile

Calculating risk and reward



Karen Medhat

IBM Customer Success Manager
and Chairperson of the
IBM UK Technical Consultancy Group

The field of engineering is often perceived as a boy's club. Brilliant women have always found their way in—but they must clear a much higher bar to be admitted, says Karen Medhat. “Women constantly feel the need to prove themselves,” she says. “In contrast, when you're a man, there's a sense of being inherently good enough. Regardless of skill level, men often feel assured in their abilities.”

Many women internalize this bias, frequently doubting whether they have what it takes to apply for a job, present at a conference, or request a promotion, Medhat says. She empathizes, having experienced this feeling herself in the past. “I used to worry about others' opinions and how to assert myself when faced with situations I disagreed with,” she says. “As a result, I often found myself in unfair circumstances because I didn't speak up. I wasn't aware of the importance of doing so—or even sure if I should speak up.”

As she's grown in her career and earned more credentials, Medhat has helped other women build confidence in their abilities. This self-assurance will be essential as generative AI begins to reshape job roles across sectors, starting in functions that have historically been staffed by women.

“It might open new doors for women so that they aren't stuck in the routine jobs that can be done by AI,” she says. “But it depends. If AI replaces women and men take the leadership roles it will just worsen the situation for women.”

That's why women need to weigh the risk of inaction against the risk of making mistakes, Medhat says. Rather than waiting for clear direction from above—which may not come in a timely manner—they should embrace opportunities to try something new with AI and build their skills in this

space. “We definitely need organizational policies that outline how to use technology, but I believe it also requires common sense, which is equally important,” she says. “If you feel that a specific use of AI could lead to a breach of security or might misuse information, just don't do it. But if it is a new opportunity where you can add value, go for it.”

By embracing the principles of responsible AI and harnessing the spirit of innovation, women can focus on the high-value work that will help elevate their careers, Medhat says. “Generative AI has grown exponentially recently, so it will definitely help me be more creative at work,” she says. “If you have an AI assistant that will do some of the boring stuff for you, you can focus on the work that takes more brainpower. It can help you come up with new ideas and make decisions in a better way.”

Profile

Make AI personal



Maryam Ashoori

Director of Product Management

watsonx

IBM

As a person who develops generative AI for a living, Maryam Ashoori knows its limitations better than most. While its promise is very real, so are the risks associated with it, she says. “It’s important to understand the risks associated with generative AI along with its benefits to productivity. Examples are unexplainable output, unreliable attribution of sources, and misleading or biased results. If the risks associated with generative AI are not mitigated carefully, they can potentially result in reputational harm, disruption to operations, and other legal consequences.”

Women know this intuitively. They see the risks and limited regulation around generative AI as a red flag for adoption, Ashoori says. “Women want to see how the benefits of generative AI align to their values and can outweigh its risks when carefully mitigated with proper guardrails,” she says. This starts by shifting the focus to show how generative AI can help people, not just the bottom line.”

For instance, Ashoori recently had to fly to France for a medical emergency to help care for a family member undergoing multiple surgeries. The doctors gave her complex medical information in French—a language she doesn’t speak—in a high-pressure, time-sensitive situation. Using a large language model, she was able to quickly investigate the medical condition the doctors were describing in French, as well as what needed to happen next.

“This experience had a profound impact on my view of generative AI and how it can make a difference in people’s lives,” she says. “Generative AI can help families and change society. That’s what women care about. They need to hear these stories to build their confidence around AI adoption.”

Allyship is the accelerant

Male allies must play a major role in addressing the gender imbalance—both within and outside the workplace.

By acknowledging that women often do more than their share, and finding ways to balance the load, men at work and at home can help women invest in themselves. It's time to bring allyship to the forefront. It may seem counterintuitive—and even a bit wrong—to rely on men to elevate the role of women, but the fact remains: Their support is critical.

*How can women solve the problem alone when more than 80% of the people in leadership roles today are men?*¹⁰ It can't be done. To address this inequity at its core, women and men must *work together* to balance the scales. This isn't just the right thing to do. With a nearly 20% revenue bump on the table for organizations that treat gender equity like any other business priority, it also makes good business sense.

To achieve more equal representation at all levels, more men in leadership roles need to serve as mentors and sponsors, advocating for the advancement of women into leadership positions. When it comes to increasing women's involvement in AI specifically, mentoring programs are the most popular solution.¹¹

Good male allies can also champion women who are experimenting at work and taking risks in this critical generative AI moment. At work, they can proactively volunteer to take on more of the administrative tasks that are often delegated to women, such as taking notes, scheduling meetings, and ordering meals or supplies. Or they can advocate for AI to handle those tasks. At home, they can help reduce the burden by assessing how time and tasks are allocated—and taking on more of the domestic load, whatever that might look like. With the right support from male allies at home and at the office, women can use “found time” to take steps that might not have seemed possible before.

Conclusion

It's time for tenacity

Opportunities to boost productivity and transform industries with generative AI are growing exponentially. Women are in a prime position to define new use cases.

Pairing sharp analysis with excellent communication can give women superpowers in the age of generative AI. By owning the evolving AI landscape, they can create new ways to deliver business value and advance their careers. And as more women rise to the challenge, their efforts can increase gender equity, close gaps in the leadership pipeline, and reduce systemic bias. With so much to gain, it's time for women to take charge of the conversation, innovate responsibly, and redefine the leadership roles of the future.



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