



Women in the Workplace: How We Can ElevateHER

By Jamie Claire Kiser

Make no mistake about it: The A/E/C industries are at an HR crossroads, and the decisions firms make today will determine the talent available for the next professional generation.

The lessons learned from previous crises tell us diversity and inclusion programs are at risk of receding from the forefront as a strategic priority, as companies focus on basic needs to transition to the new normal. This could cripple organizations and, indeed, the entire A/E/C community, in the future as companies seek to stabilize, flourish, and grow.

Before COVID-19, the A/E/C industries were in a precarious position related to diversity—and especially women—in the workplace. The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards' (NCARB) 2019 survey of the profession, conducted in partnership with National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), found that women are twice as likely to stop pursuing a licensure after taking one of the six divisions of the Architect Registration Examination® (ARE®).

Zweig Group studies similarly reflect a downward trend of those who self-identify as female from entry into the A/E/C workforce through licensure, with representation dropping from 36% for ages 18 to 25, down to 29% by ages 44 to 55. According to Zweig Group's *2020 Principals, Partners, and Owners Report of AEC Firms*, 94% of firm principals are white; 84% are male; 82% are 50 or older; and only 2% are under age 40. The same NCARB and NOMA study found that 66% of African Americans don't see themselves reflected in firm leadership.

Bridging the Gaps

The representation gap is significant, but taking action requires support from the very top of the organizational chart. It also takes thought leadership from the C-suite across the entire A/E/C industries.

Despite the gap in retention and leadership attainment of women within A/E/C, the No. 1 challenge identified by the award-winning firms within our *Hot Firm and Best Firm to Work For* awards is recruitment and retention.

Marrying the needs identified by C-suite leaders of fast-growing and culture-conscious A/E/C firms with the gaps found in the demographic data was a perfect launching point for our ElevateHer™ movement to bring senior executives to the table to commit to working together to find solutions. To us, the opportunity was clear: We cannot begin to fight the talent war without reckoning with the reality that we haven't done all we can to recruit, retain, inspire, and develop every bright mind with an interest in STEM.

ElevateHer started in 2018 as an open letter about my personal experience serving the A/E/C industries as a consultant that turned into a Facebook community. As the community grew, the virtual network spurred in-person conversations at conferences and industry panels. Just over a year ago,

in September 2019 at Zweig Group's ElevateAEC Conference, we announced the formation of the ElevateHer cohort, calling for those interested in joining us to form a think tank to identify a topic and develop implementation-ready plans. These would be available to anyone free of charge and centered on tackling recruiting and retention challenges that threaten the long-term vibrancy of the A/E/C industries. They would focus on working together to better address where we're falling short for an entire gender.

We see this initiative as a way to bring people together across disciplines, ages, positions, tenure, and professional backgrounds to find solutions, not to polarize or factionalize. We also involved the C-suite directly, encouraging a visible, cross-disciplinary commitment instead of delegating a proxy to sign up for a networking group. We knew we had to get leader participation to encourage the next generation to choose civil engineering, for example, over a career in medicine or technology. Their involvement also provided representation to build networks that retain and support the careers of talented staff who share backgrounds with the communities and clients we serve.

Recruiting and Retention Realities

Just a couple of weeks after our inaugural ElevateHer cohort met in person in early 2020 to begin our work on thesis topics, the pandemic changed the narrative entirely. COVID-19 brought to the surface two unspoken realities that are deeply tied



Public Will Building, Portland, OR. Scott | Edwards Architecture, Todd Hess Building Company, and Metropolitan Group. @cherylmcintoshphotography | greatthingsaredone.com.

to recruiting and retention. When it comes down to it, women are the first to exit the workforce, based on family conversations about whose career takes priority. Several female members of the cohort were directly impacted—some lost their positions or had hours reduced, while others chose to leave the workforce voluntarily to focus on their families, which is consistent with national labor statistics.

An industry-agnostic study by FlexJobs of over 2,500 working parents with children under the age of 18 living at home found that 17% of working mothers quit their jobs during the pandemic, and 38% of those who left don't plan to return to the workforce. We can't un-ring this bell. The context may have been the pandemic, but I believe we will see the outcomes of these decisions for years to come. For example, after the pandemic, will a firm have to work harder to convince a woman to move across the country to take a new role if, in the back of her mind, she's reflecting on her initial conversation with her family about who would give their job up first if needed?

The second unspoken reality is that many female employees weren't all that happy to begin with. According to Zweig Group's latest *Principals, Partners, and Owners Survey of AEC Firms*, there's a gender split in response to the question "Would you recommend your career track to family and friends?" Only 69% of female principals said they would, compared to 88% of male principals.

Will the burnout many feel today translate to less aspiration to scale the ladder and make it to the C-suite after experiencing a year at home and realizing the magnitude of the pre-pandemic sacrifices many made in pursuit of the next promotion?

This is a likely scenario, according to the 2020 *Women in the Workplace* report, the largest study of women in corporate America, published by McKinsey & Company in coordination with LeanIn.Org.

The study found that after six years of slow progress in the representation of women in corporate America, one in four women are now considering leaving the workforce or downshifting careers due to COVID-19. Senior-level women juggling professional and personal demands cited burnout as the primary reason in almost three out of four responses. This is especially troubling as senior-level women make meaningful impacts on company culture, serving as mentors, allies, and sponsors to women and, importantly, women of color, at a higher participation rate than senior-level men, according to the study.

Building a Better Workforce

The pandemic has provided a reimaging of everything about the workplace. If this sounds overwhelming, it is. But this is an opportunity to review all of the rules that governed career engagement and to be deliberate and thoughtful in applying the lessons learned to rebuilding a better, more sustainable workforce.

Groups like ElevateHer have spent time developing resources to make this attainable. The *Women in the Workplace* study found that fewer than one in three Black women report their manager has checked in on them in light of recent racial violence. And only a similar percentage say their manager has fostered an inclusive culture on their team, meaning the majority feel managers haven't fostered such an environment.

One of the ElevateHer cohort teams created a deck of cards that can be downloaded for free, with discussion opportunities designed to engage with underrepresented demographics and reassess, evaluate, and improve workplace culture. These cards can help jump-start conversations, making it easier for a committed leader uncertain of where to begin to connect with their team. Card topics reflect those cited in the study that have further isolated staff during such an overwhelmingly isolated year.

The path to building companies that better reflect the clients and communities we serve is an effort that Zweig Group has invested energy and resources to address. We launched ElevateHer as a way to combat the A/E/C industries' recruiting and retention challenges. The additional challenges of 2020 truly have the potential to set this important work back by an entire professional generation if we don't take seriously the genuine fissures in our workforce and workplace practices.

The firms that can find opportunity in the circumstance, though, will be remembered for how they responded as entrepreneurs, leaders, and humans for years to come. ■



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