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Revisiting the Glass Ceiling: Career Progression for Women in the Hotel Industry

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The hospitality industry has no shortage of women entering the business, but senior management positions seem to be dominated by men, especially general managers at major hotel properties. Although the proportions have probably improved over time, two academic studies by Robert Woods and his colleagues a decade ago indicated that fewer than ten percent of hotel general managers were women. Such disparity is apparent in many hospitality classrooms today, where most of the students are female, but most of the senior industry executives who serve as guest speakers are male.

The next generation of female managers may have a very different experience, but if the current conditions remain unchanged, then we should expect similar results. This suggests a need to examine

more deeply the underlying dynamics of career progression for female hotel managers, and to explore the reasons for the continued imbalance. If so many women enter the industry, then where along the way do they disappear, and why do they decide to leave the industry?

To offer some insight on this topic, a project has been launched to conduct extended interviews of numerous female hotel executives. The purpose is to discover how successful women achieve their senior-level positions, how they balance their work and family life, and what career advice they can offer to future hospitality leaders. The results may help students learn from successful female hoteliers and perhaps increase their commitment to longevity in hotel careers. The following are representative ex-

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This paper reports the preliminary results of an ongoing research project about the attitudes of female hotel managers toward their career progression. The qualitative methodology involves extended interviews of female hotel executives conducted in person by the author, using five identical semi-structured questions. The first set of interview subjects included female hotel managers in senior management positions from different hotel companies and different departments in the Boston area. Subsequent analysis included grounded theory, content analysis, and interpretation to identify commonalities and underlying themes. The specific quotes in this paper were selected based partly on the willingness of the interview subjects to be identified and profiled publicly.

cerpts from a few of the early interviews of executives in Boston, related in their own words, which provide some understanding about the attitudes of such women toward their professional environment.

A Demanding Industry

Hotels never close. This aspect of the industry creates difficulties that managers in many other fields do not face. Cate Farmer, the General Manager of the Ames Hotel in Boston, observed that “the industry is outside the norm of nine-to-five jobs. When I get up in the middle of the night to go into the hotel, it’s not unusual.”

Stephanie Cahill, the Director of Security for the Four Seasons Hotel in Boston, had similar reactions. She remarked: “I have a Blackberry with me 24 hours a day. When I go on vacation, it’s on me. If there’s an emergency, if there’s an email, I’m checking it.”

This becomes even more complicated for anyone with children. Silvia O’Connell, the Director of Revenue for the Colonnade Hotel in Boston, reflected on this. She observed: “There are other positions in any hotel where, at my management level, you still have to work nights and weekends. Colleagues who have children must coordinate and plan their days in much more detail, to be able to keep their jobs and spend enough time with their families. I think once you have children, it’s much harder to do.”

Another executive who was interviewed, but preferred to remain anonymous for this article, is a department head for a Boston hotel. She suggested that “the majority of the people, more than half of hotel staff members, are single and younger. Once you start having children, you don’t want to work 12 hours a day, but in this industry you are required to.” She argued there is a direct relationship between the

demanding nature of hotel work and the departure of people from the industry.

Personal Choices

Hospitality graduates entering the industry are typically young, single, flexible about scheduling, and easy to relocate. As they grow older, they tend to become more settled in their lifestyles, career paths, and geographic preferences. They also often get married and have children.

Balancing work and family becomes a major challenge for women in particular, because of the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. Women still often serve as the primary caregivers for families, despite their expanded activities outside the home. Many of those interviewed indicated that their careers reached a point where they were forced to decide between a family and career advancement. Farmer, who is also a wife and mother, tended to agree with this assessment. She suggested: “I think as women struggle to make decisions, they feel they must make a choice between having a family and having a career.”

Amy Finsilver, the General Manager of the XV Beacon Hotel in Boston, observed that “women do have families, and it’s hard to manage children while you’re having a full-time career.” She has noticed that some female friends in high-level positions have chosen to work part-time or decided to stay home entirely after having children.

Even though participants in the study found themselves struggling to balance work and family, they were still enthusiastic about the hotel industry. Finsilver shared that she is “constantly thinking of the hotel and constantly with the operation. I’ve had relationships sacrificed because of it. That’s my choice and this is where I’m happiest.”

Along the same lines, Farmer observed: “For me, I love what I do and I’m passionate about it. Generally speaking, it’s not difficult to get into the business. And how the business continues to enhance and develop talent is the same regardless of your gender. But life choices play into the reasons that women don’t continue, and it isn’t necessarily the decision of a company or the business, but rather the personal decisions of the individual.”

Michelle Dion, the Director of Housekeeping at the Sheraton Boston, the largest hotel in New England, suggested that not every female hotel manager aspires to lead an organization. She observed that “some are happy where they’re at, because they feel they have more flexibility to balance their lives, to not have to be at work 24 hours a day.”

Support Systems

Every participant in the study has been in the hotel industry for more than ten years. They have become accomplished in senior management roles, and yet still struggle occasionally to balance their work and personal lives. Often this requires developing creative solutions and coping strategies for managing their dual status, including relying on subordinates and family members.

The executive who preferred to remain anonymous is a single mother. She did not take her daughter to any activities after school because of her extended working hours, and instead relied on her own parents to do this as grandparents. She lamented: “In American culture, the mother is the one who’s picking the kids up after school, taking them to soccer, all of those things that you do after school. So the work-family balance is a huge struggle. For single moms, it’s different, there are more challenges. If I didn’t have my parents, I wouldn’t have this job.”

Farmer has a family that understands the industry and supports her. She suggested that “you juggle the priorities in your life and you have to build a really strong system of support around you.”

Cahill, who is married with two children, also stressed the importance of family support, including a helpful spouse. She remarked: “He is always there to pick up some of the pieces and some of the slack that I’m not able to. I don’t think I’d be able to do it on my own. I don’t think I would do it very successfully.”

Due to the extended hours in the industry, regular daycare is often not available for hotel employees. Cahill and her husband opted to have a nanny at home to care for their children. She observed: “I am at work pretty early, by 7:15 a.m., and a lot of day care facilities aren’t open at that hour. So having a nanny come to our house and stay with our kids, and having the flexibility of calling and saying ‘I’m not going to be out of work on time today’ is really helpful.”

Cahill has also built a well-trained management group, upon which she depends. She remarked: “I have an amazing team that can pretty much run the show if I’m not here, but it took a while to get to this point.”

After her promotion to a department head position about two years ago, Dion received more calls from work when she was at home. Her solution was to train her team to know what she expected if problems arose. She stated: “I make sure that all the folks who work for me, or with me, are aware of what I

would do. I think if you build your team around you, and they know what your expectations are, it helps. They are a very important part of helping me balance my work and life.”

Capabilities of Women and Men

All participants in the study believed that their own hotels promote managers based on objective qualifications, rather than factors such as gender. Finsilver remarked: “I don’t discriminate whether you’re male or female. I find that whoever works the hardest, or is the most creative or the most diligent, those are the people that I will look to promote.”

Cahill also shared a similar viewpoint. She argued: “Positions are given based upon quality of work, based upon accreditations, things of that nature. I think personally it doesn’t matter if you’re a female or you’re a male. I think as long as you give it your all, and you strive to be the best in whatever you do, then you will succeed.”

Dion emphasized that there is no difference in the capabilities of men and women. She shared: “It’s all who the individual is. There are some amazing female managers, there are some amazing male managers. I don’t think it’s gender. I really think it’s individualized and based on what you put into it.”

O’Connell echoed these comments. She remarked: “I don’t think the possibilities to advance have anything to do with male-female intelligence, or gender in general. It is the same for everybody. Everybody has to work hard. I think what it boils down to eventually is, are you willing and able to relocate, and to work the hours that are required in the job.”

The Future

Based on the preliminary findings in this study, women seem to have no problem entering the industry at the beginning of a career. However, they may be more likely than men to leave the industry as they age, especially if they have families. The reasons for this may not relate to the classic ‘glass ceiling’ effect attributable to gender discrimination. Some of the executives observed that colleagues have chosen not to advance, so they can have more flexibility in balancing the professional and personal aspects of their lives. The result of such choices across a wide number of managers would be a smaller pool of female candidates seeking promotion, and in turn fewer women in senior management positions, even though opportunities have become more equalized.

Nonetheless, it does raise the question of wheth-

er such preference is merely an accommodation to the realities of lingering gender roles within the family unit. For those female hotel managers who do choose to pursue both professional and maternal roles, it is important for family members to understand the unrelenting nature of the hotel industry and for hotel management teams to be supportive.

Finsilver concluded her interview on an opti-

mistic note, indicating that she expects to see more female managers reaching top positions in the future. Farmer echoed this: “I think women are different generationally. There will be more women general managers in the next decade. There are more today than there were fifteen years ago. Every decade changes the way women look at their careers and the notion of balance around family.” ■



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