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## Flexible work is everywhere – except where future leaders need it most

### Key findings:

- Women are leaving management roles at disproportionate rates --
- Employers with gender-balanced leadership teams show stronger performance --
- Flexible workplace policies for men and women are key to retaining talent --
- New research identifies 12 opportunities to drive positive change --

Employers could unlock a lucrative stream of talent by focusing their attention on ‘good flexibility’, according to a new report released today.

Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre’s ([BCEC](#)) analysis of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency’s ([WGEA](#)) extensive employer dataset shows progress on gender equality has been made in the past decade, but workforce potential and opportunities to improve business performance remain untapped.

*Gender Equity Insights 2026: Unlocking Australia’s Workforce Potential* found women’s workforce participation is increasing and women are progressing into management.

But the experience across industries is uneven and women were more likely to resign from leadership positions than men. This ‘missing middle’ reflects a persistent leak in the talent pipeline. For many employers it has been a difficult issue to solve.

BCEC’s analysis shows the key factors associated with women leaving management roles include uneven distribution of caring responsibilities and a lack for flexible work offerings for both women and men at key moments in their careers. Employers with women CEOs and Key Management Personnel are more likely to have flexible workplace strategies and that is giving them a competitive advantage.

A comparison of ASX employers who report to WGEA found those with more women in leadership consistently outperformed their peers in areas such as market value and investor returns.

Report co-author and [BCEC Director Professor Alan Duncan](#) said the findings called for a closer look at the whole career pathway.

“Women are being promoted at higher rates than men at several points in the pipeline, yet that advantage disappears by the time we reach the most senior positions,” Professor Duncan said.

“Men remain overrepresented in the highest leadership roles, and this is particularly striking in industries where women make up the majority of the workforce.

“Promotion rates tell us who is taking the next step. We also need to understand who keeps progressing through successive leadership tiers – and who stays.”

[WGEA CEO Christine Castley OAM](#) said analysis shows employers where they can make better use of the talent already available to them.

“We know that employers want to attract good people, keep them and see them succeed. This research shows why it is worth looking at the whole talent pipeline: who comes in, who progresses, who stays and who leaves,” Ms Castley said.

“Women are entering workplaces and progressing into management, but that progress is not necessarily carrying through to the most senior levels. The interesting question is what the data tells us about where that pattern changes along the way, why, and what employers can learn from it.

“This is where the opportunity lies. Good workforce data can show employers where talent is progressing, where it is being lost and where they may be overlooking capability they already have.

“Recruitment is part of the picture, but so too are retention, career pathways, job design and working arrangements that enable people to stay and progress. Making better use of the talent already available to us is good for workplace gender equality, good workforce strategy and good business.”

The report also points to a ‘male pedestal’ effect, where men represent a larger share of senior roles compared to their share of that sector’s workforce.

In some women-dominated industries, like Health Care and Social Assistance, men make up just 22.2 per cent of workers but hold around half of CEO and Head-of-Business positions – more than twice their share of the workforce.

“The pedestal effect asks employers to compare who leads a sector with who works in it,” Professor Duncan said.

“Women can dominate an industry numerically and still be significantly underrepresented at the top.”

Combining the WGEA dataset with analysis of household-level data has unlocked deeper insights into the impact of parenting on career progressions. This new report makes recommendations on the role employers can play through better job design.

Women’s employment following the birth of their first child varies considerably according to the industry they worked in beforehand. Women also report more unpaid work than their partners, even when both are working full-time.

Report co-author and [BCEC Senior Research Fellow, Dr Silvia Salazar](#), said sharing care is also part of the workplace story, with only 11 per cent of organisations having a target to increase men’s use of parental leave.

“Employers cannot determine how care is divided at home, but they can help make sure that becoming a parent does not mean stepping off the path to career progression,” Dr Salazar said.

More than 90 per cent of organisations offered flexible start and finish times in 2024-25 and 86 per cent offered part-time work, but only 13.2 per cent designed management roles for part-time work.

“Offering part-time work is very different from designing senior jobs that can actually be done part-time,” Dr Salazar said.

“If flexibility disappears as people move up the organisation, employers risk narrowing their leadership pipeline just as experienced workers are ready to progress.

“The goal should be to make flexibility part of a career pathway, rather than something that comes at the expense of career progression.”

The full report is [available on WGEA’s website](#).

## Key actions for employers

- **track what matters and hold leaders accountable:** measure recruitment, promotion, pay and retention outcomes by gender, identify where women are falling out of the pipeline, and report progress to boards.
- **close pay gaps with action, not analysis alone:** audit total remuneration, including bonuses and incentives, set targets to address identified gaps, and monitor results over time.

- **create clear pathways to leadership:** remove barriers to advancement, broaden access to senior operational roles, and ensure succession plans actively develop women for leadership positions.
- **make flexibility work for careers, not against them:** design management roles that can be performed flexibly, support employees through key career transitions, and ensure flexible work does not limit promotion or pay progression.
- **support shared caring responsibilities:** encourage men to take parental leave, strengthen return-to-work pathways, and address childcare and caring barriers that limit workforce participation and career advancement.

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