

Women Hospitality Managers: Perceptions of Gender-Related Career Challenges

by
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In spite of increases in the number of women who are both academically prepared and interested in pursuing hospitality management careers, women appear to be leaving the industry at a much higher rate than their male counterparts. Although women are better represented in lower and middle management than ever before, there has been no corresponding increase in the number of women in top level management positions. The author explores women managers' perceptions of the career-related challenges they confront in hospitality environments and suggests that inadequate access to informal information networks, lack of women mentors, and the impact of unique job characteristics are their most significant concerns.

Women are entering the hospitality industry at an increasing rate. Not only do women account for approximately two thirds of the more than eight million people in the hospitality workforce,¹ but at least half of those graduating from many hospitality management programs around the country are now women.² Over one third of hospitality management positions are filled by women and, in the years ahead, women will account for an increasingly larger percentage of the labor force generally.³

Although the number of women who are both academically prepared and interested in hospitality management has increased significantly over the past decade, women continue to encounter gender-related obstacles to their career development. Across the country, women are leaving the industry at a much higher rate than their male counterparts.⁴ In addition, although women are better represented in management than ever before, there has been no corresponding increase in the number of women in top level management positions.⁵ Recent reports, in fact, place the number of women presidents and CEOs at less than 5 percent.⁶

Research has documented a variety of issues associated with women in the workforce,⁷ including such challenges as the glass

ceiling,⁸ old boy networks,⁹ and sexual harassment.¹⁰ Other concerns such as quality of life issues,¹¹ equity in pay and promotions, and professional credibility¹² have also been explored. Although numerous studies have focused on each of these topics, few efforts have been made to provide a comprehensive view of workplace challenges from the women's perspective. Fewer still have focused exclusively on women in hospitality management. Although it is known that a variety of factors influence gender dynamics at work, there is less certainty of the perceived impact these factors have on women in hospitality environments. As Gregg and Johnson note, "Women and men with similar educational backgrounds and producing similar products do have different work-related experiences."¹³ It would seem useful to identify, from the perspective of women hospitality managers, the factors that influence their workplace gender-related experiences and the extent to which they perceive these factors as obstacles to their career growth.

In an industry faced with "rampant turnover, high labor costs, and a diminishing supply of workers,"¹⁴ the more educators and practitioners can learn about the challenges women perceive in the workplace, the better able they will be to create environments that encourage, recognize, and reward women's contributions.

This study explores the perceptions of women in hospitality management with regard to a number of career-related variables. Both quantitative and qualitative information was gathered regarding women managers' workplace experiences in an effort to identify their perceptions of specific professional challenges. Demographic information was gathered, and women managers were asked about the extent to which various factors were perceived as obstacles to their career advancement. Their preferences with regard to supervising and being supervised by males and females and their general job satisfaction were also addressed.

Body of Literature Is Expansive

There is now an extensive body of literature on women in management,¹⁵ and a growing number of studies that have examined the specific challenges of women hospitality managers.¹⁶ Since some of these challenges are thought to arise from the unique characteristics of the hospitality environment, an overview of findings related to hospitality organizations is helpful.

The work environment itself influences behavior and, in the case of hospitality environments, may heighten gender-related concerns. Employees work in close proximity to one another. The duties of hospitality employees often take them into settings traditionally associated with social-sexual behavior: bedrooms, bars, and lounges. Hospitality employees are often hired, in part, because of out-going personalities and physical attractiveness. Uniforms may further accentuate gender differences. Gutek, Cohen, and Konrad¹⁷ have proposed the notion of "sexualized" work environments, those in which there is a great deal of physical contact that may promote sexual

overtures and harassing behavior. Clearly, the hospitality workplace may be one of the most sexualized environments in which employees interact. Several researchers,¹⁸ in fact, suggest that sexual harassment in the hospitality industry may exist at twice the rate it does in other organizations.

In addition to accentuating gender differences, it has also been suggested that work in hospitality organizations—particularly during the first few years—is also likely to create conflicts for women between family and career. Shifts are long and irregular, often including evening or night hours. Work groups are likely to form social networks as well, with members spending time together after work hours. It is likely that women who have husbands and families will confront quality of life issues as they make decisions regarding how much time and emotional labor to invest in their jobs.¹⁹ Those who choose to monitor their time at work may find that not only are they perceived as less career-minded, but they also miss out on opportunities to make significant personal contacts and gather important career-relevant information.

A well-documented challenge faced by women in hospitality management is the old-boy network.²⁰ Networking is often defined as the process of using personal contacts for career-relevant information, advice, and moral support as individuals pursue their careers.²¹ Men have traditionally used informal networks to help move ahead professionally. This is particularly true in hospitality organizations, where career paths are largely unstructured and career advancement depends heavily upon upper management support.²² Since networking is often a by-product of membership in clubs, civic organizations, or athletic events, women reaching middle management positions have often found such professional contacts unavailable to them.²³ Although women have made significant gains in middle management positions, promotion to upper levels may well be blocked in part because women are not connected to important information sources. For whatever reason, the glass ceiling has been the subject of numerous recent studies.²⁴

Due to poor representation at the top, there is also a lack of role models and mentors for women in lower and middle management.²⁵ Although women have the option of turning to men for such support, “subtle social and sexual pressures can make women feel uncomfortable in these relationships.”²⁶ Lack of support and the absence of role models also cause some women to become less optimistic about their professional future²⁷ and turn to alternative career options. Other well-researched factors affecting women’s career development include discrimination with regard to pay and promotions,²⁸ issues of professional credibility,²⁹ and recognition and rewards.³⁰

In light of previous research, it would seem useful to hear women manager’s voices and explore their perceptions regarding the extent to which these and other workplace variables pose challenges to their career development in the hospitality industry.

Study Explores Advancement, Management

In this study, 287 women hospitality managers were surveyed to determine the following: the degree to which they perceived each of 11 factors as a barrier to their personal career advancement; their perceptions of gender as a variable with regard to supervisory relationships; and their perceptions and personal experiences with regard to three open-ended questions on the subject of women in management. Demographic variables were also requested.

The study began with an exhaustive literature review to determine recurring themes in the study of women's career-related concerns. Three focus groups consisting of from five to eight women hospitality managers were then conducted. The purpose of such exploratory research was to determine the extent to which women experienced gender-related obstacles to their career progress and to identify the types of challenges they perceived. Two all-male focus groups were also conducted to ensure that no potentially significant items were omitted.

Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of whether or not women confronted gender-related challenges in the hospitality industry and, if so, what specific obstacles women faced in their organizations. Demographic information was also collected. All focus groups were audiotaped, and a content analysis of the transcribed tapes provided direction for the development of the survey instrument. Three coders had an inter-rater agreement of 98 percent on the content items identified.

The results of the focus groups were compared to those career challenges identified in the literature on women in management appearing between 1980 and 1992. Issues that emerged in at least three of the six focus group discussions as well as in the literature review were compiled, providing a total of 15 items; 11 of these items appeared in the content analysis of all six focus groups. Since the remaining four were judged to be based on experiences that were less generalizable, a decision was made by the researcher to use the 11 items in the initial survey.

A three-part questionnaire was then developed. The first section requested basic demographic information and respondent preferences regarding the supervisor/employee relationship. The second examined perceived obstacles to career development. Respondents were asked to use six-point Likert scales in rating the degree to which each of 11 items was perceived as a barrier to their personal career development. Means and standard deviations were derived for each variable, as well as frequencies and percentages. Pearson correlations were run for each demographic variable and each perceived barrier to career development.

The final section posed three open-ended questions pertaining to issues of gender in the workplace. Responses to these questions were compiled and a content analysis was conducted by three trained raters to determine recurring themes in the text of the women's

responses. The questionnaire was piloted on a group of 10 women, and on-site interviews were then held with eight participants to discuss their responses and to make sure the instrument was clear and comprehensive.

All 389 women alumni of Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration between 1965 and 1990 who were listed as having a job title indicating that they were a middle manager, director, or supervisor were mailed questionnaires. Only those working in hotels, clubs, and restaurants were included. Initially, 247 responded; a second survey elicited 40 more for a total of 287 or 81 percent.

Although this non-probability sampling method has inherent limitations, the common academic background of the participants was not judged to be a significant factor in determining the nature of their responses and was therefore not considered to have a significant effect on research results. The strong alumni affiliation, however, may have contributed to a relatively high response rate. In addition, demographic information was used to determine whether factors such as age, size of property, years in the industry, and other variables were correlated with participant's job-related experiences.

Respondents were a generally young group; almost 80 percent were under 35 years old. Approximately 50 percent of these were between 26 and 35, and just over 28 percent were under 25 years. Almost 70 percent of the women were single. Approximately 22 percent were married, and just over 8 percent were divorced or separated; of those, fewer than 10 percent had children. While almost 40 percent of the respondents had been working in the industry fewer than five years, just over 15 percent had been working 15 years or more.

Respondents were also asked to indicate their past experiences both with male and with female supervisors and gender preferences with regard to supervisory relationships. Ninety-six percent of the respondents had had a male supervisor, and more than two thirds (77.2 percent) had been supervised at one point in their careers by another woman.

The strength of preference for male and female supervisors was indicated on seven-point Likert scales. Almost 25 percent of the women indicated some preference for male supervision, while only 6 percent preferred women supervisors. While only 3 percent of the participant group preferred not to work for a man, 27 percent preferred not to work for a woman.

When asked about gender preferences when they were in the supervisory role, the women were less discriminating. Approximately 90 percent indicated that they had no gender preference, while very small percentages indicated moderate preference for supervising other women (7 percent) and for supervising men (4 percent).

Finally, respondents were asked whether they believed the men and women they supervised had any difficulties due to their gender, and if, as a woman, they were as effective as a man in their supervisory role. In response, the vast majority of the respondents (87 percent)

indicated that they had no gender-related concerns with regard to their employees' perceptions of them as a woman supervisor. An equally high number of respondents (96 percent) believed that they were as effective as men in their supervisory roles.

Barriers to Career Development Are Varied

Respondents were asked to rate, on six-point Likert scales, the degree to which they perceived each of 11 factors as an obstacle to their personal career development. A rating of "1" indicated no obstacle, while a rating of "6" indicated that the respondent felt a particular item posed a very significant obstacle to her career development. Focus was placed on the personal experiences of respondents, not on the extent to which they felt the items were problematic to women in the industry generally.

The old boy network (mean of 4.89) and the lack of women mentors (mean of 4.62) appeared at the top of women's concerns. Well over half the women rated the old boy network and the lack of women mentors as a 5 or 6, believing these to be very significant factors. Lack of women role models was also perceived to be a major barrier to career development; 42 percent of the respondents perceived it as a somewhat significant, significant, or very significant barrier, resulting in a mean of 3.49.

While much attention has been given to the job characteristics of hospitality employees, participants were not in agreement regarding the impact of this dimension on their careers. While close to 25 percent gave job characteristics low ratings on the Likert scale, just slightly more respondents rated it 5 or 6. This polarization resulted in a mean close to the middle of the scale (3.51), although still high in the rankings of work-related challenges. These job characteristics may also increase the potential for family/work conflict, which was another of the variables studied. The mean for domestic and work conflicts was 3.05; recalling that only a third of the respondents are married, the mean for this item seems particularly interesting.

By comparison, several topics that have received a good deal of recent attention were perceived as much less of a problem. Sexual harassment, for instance, was perceived as a major obstacle by just 8.8 percent of the women surveyed; in fact, over 70 percent of the group indicated that sexual harassment was almost no concern.

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that lack of equity in training was almost no concern. Similarly, few women felt that lack of job knowledge was a barrier to career development (mean of 1.43); in fact, none rated this potential barrier over a 3. Women perceived much more discrepancy with regard to pay and promotions; both of these barriers to career advancement received relatively high ratings (means of 2.98 and 2.89, respectively), with lack of equity in pay the more significant of the two concerns.

The final question in this section of the survey pertained to participant's overall job satisfaction. In response to a general question,

“How would you rate your overall job satisfaction?,” 76 percent indicated they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs; 24 percent expressed some degree of dissatisfaction, and, of those, 9 percent were very dissatisfied.

Pearson correlations were run for all perceived obstacles and all demographic variables. The only strong correlation ($>.5$) pertained to marital status and responses to the balance of family and worklife as a factor in career development. The correlation of these two variables was .825. None of the other demographic variables had strong correlations with any of the perceived barriers to career advancement.

Old Boy Networks Are Barrier

Eighty two percent of the women responded to an open-ended question about gener-related obstacles on the job. Three raters sorted the data and achieved a 96 percent rater agreement on 18 categories. Five appeared to be particularly significant and recurring. As might be expected, comments were generally consistent with the Likert ratings in the earlier section of the questionnaire pertaining to perceptions of career-related obstacles.

Old boy networks and limited access to informal information were the most frequently-cited barriers to career development in part two of the questionnaire, and were mentioned most frequently here as well (46 percent). A typical comment was, “Information in the informal network is never passed on to woman, as women are not included in the casual activities which promote information-sharing.”

Another frequently-mentioned barrier (34 percent) pertained to the balance of work and personal life. Although not all women saw this as a major factor affecting their own career development, over one third saw this as a personal and professional conflict for industry women generally. As one respondent wrote, “The real issue is sacrifice. Sacrifice is required if you want to stay in the profession—sacrifice of everything non-work related.”

Although issues pertaining to support systems—lack of mentors, role models, and women’s networks—were raised, a number of women (13 percent) also addressed problems created by less collaborative relationships among industry women. Several respondents noted that it was other women, not men, who made it difficult for them to advance. They did not believe women were helping women and, in fact, pointed out instances of jealousy and competition.

Sexual harassment was mentioned by 8 percent of respondents. Most addressed the importance of anticipating harassing behavior and learning to handle inevitable gender-related comments in the workplace—both from colleagues and customers. Several related comments highlighted the fact that “pretty women” seemed to succeed far more quickly than others who they judged were performing their job as well or better.

A final recurring theme was the fact that women felt they had to work much harder than their male counterparts. Typical responses included: "You have to work much harder than men for equal promotions and recognition." "You must have all the facts, and have them right. You must be much more prepared than a man has to be."

Gender Advice Varies

Eighty-two percent of respondents provided more than one piece of advice to a woman manager just entering the hospitality workforce; 15 discrete categories emerged from the data. Four of these appeared frequently: deemphasize gender, network with both men and women, have realistic expectations, and be ready to work harder than your male counterparts. Inter-rater agreement was 95 percent when sorting these items.

First, women need to deemphasize their gender as a variable (mentioned by 73 percent of respondents) when it comes to performance concerns. The most successful women, they believed, focused on their accomplishments and did not introduce gender as a workplace issue. Successful women were described as confident and expected equal treatment. Advice included the following: "Speak softly but carry a big stick." "The last thing you want to do as a woman is to enter the workforce with a chip on your shoulder or expect special treatment." "Don't be defensive because you're a woman, and don't be overly aggressive."

Yet, several women acknowledged that using a "feminine style" or "flirting" with male colleagues and supervisors had been effective in gaining recognition or in winning their point. Others (15 women) reported instances where their female colleagues "capitalized on their gender to get a man's attention." It appears that women are in agreement that gender should not be used as an excuse in performance-related issues, but a vocal minority acknowledged that taking advantage of gender in other circumstances had been beneficial.

With regard to communication between the sexes, the women advised new managers to network with both women and men. In fact, a surprisingly large percentage of women (22 percent) noted that it was often the men, both colleagues and senior level managers, who had been the most helpful in their career development. A number of women noted personal experiences where female colleagues or supervisors had been unwilling or unable to lend support. They did not believe that women were necessarily helping other women and, in fact, 28 women pointed out instances of direct conflict, including jealousy, flirtatious behavior, and competitiveness.

More than 77 percent of the respondents advised those just entering the workforce to prepare themselves for the "realities of the industry." "Be realistic. Know what is expected and be ready to deliver," was the pervasive theme. Important facts women practitioners believed new managers should know pertained to low salaries (18 percent), the need for travel and relocation (8 percent), and organizational politics (6 percent).

Women Must Serve as Mentors

A surprisingly strong preference was shown by women for male supervision. Although women believe that they personally are as effective as a man in the supervisory role, almost 30 percent would themselves prefer to be supervised by a man. This finding is troublesome, especially when viewed in combination with other responses that indicate women's relationships with other women may not be as supportive as previously assumed. Women's preferences are much weaker when it comes to the gender of their subordinates. While a few women had a preference for one gender over the other, the majority indicated that they felt equally comfortable supervising either sex.

Recent work on women's support groups and networking suggests that women's career development can be facilitated through the help of other women. Clearly, women appear sensitive to the lack of mentors and role models in the industry. Since career paths are often unstructured, mentoring (by either gender) is particularly important for career development. It is therefore significant that a relatively high percentage of the women surveyed were unconvinced that women were supporting other women on the job. They noted jealousy, increased competitiveness, and a general lack of trust among women employees.

These concerns reflect issues raised in a body of literature on the "queen bee" theory,³¹ which suggests that women's behavior in mixed-gender environments may be characterized by strategies that do not promote the professional development of other women in the organization. Issues related to mentors and role models clearly deserve attention as researchers attempt to clarify the professional relationships women establish during their careers and how these relationships facilitate, or hinder, their advancement and professional growth. The apparent contradiction between women as ideal role models and mentors, and women as competitors, calls for additional research on women's relationships and support systems in the hospitality workplace.

Another organizational dimension in the hospitality industry is the informal networks, which are not only active, but are perceived as extremely important to women managers. Judging both from their ratings of the old boy network as the most significant barrier to women in the industry, and from their explanatory comments, these networks are perceived as an obstacle in women's efforts to gain access to career-relevant information and to establish the credibility and interpersonal relationships that they believe affect both job performance and, ultimately, personal satisfaction. Additional research on informal information networks, particularly patterns associated with sharing career-relevant information, would be helpful to women who recognize that they are missing important organizational knowledge but are less certain about how to establish essential connections.

Conflict between work and family was seen as moderately problematic by the total respondent group, with a strong correlation between marital status and ratings on this particular barrier. It seems safe to conclude that the women who did not rate family versus work life balance as a major concern for them may not have had regular or significant family commitments. Many women raised this issue in open-ended questions which addressed general work life concerns. In addition, this study sampled women who are currently working in the industry. Those women who have made family life a high priority may have chosen not to enter, or not to stay, in hospitality management. In any event, quality of life issues cannot be ignored. As educators better prepare women for the realities of the workplace, practitioners might rethink the reasonable accommodations that could be made for those whose family responsibilities must also be met. Regardless, factors unique to the hospitality workplace appear to create a special hardship for women, particularly those with family responsibilities.

Sexual Harassment Is Not a Problem

Sexual harassment was not perceived as a major obstacle to the career advancement of the sample of women in this study. Although responses to the issue of harassment may at first appear to contradict previous research, there are explanations for these findings. For one, the question in this study asked respondents the extent to which they perceived harassment to be an obstacle to their own career development, not whether (or to what extent) they had experienced harassing behavior on the job. Minor, even frequent, harassment may affect such variables as job satisfaction, but may not be perceived as posing a significant threat to career development. Responses to open-ended questions revealed that these women recognized harassment as a workplace challenge, but their advice was to anticipate and "learn to handle" harassing behavior. This sample of women, too, has chosen to stay in the industry and may have developed strategies to deal with harassing behavior.

Women surveyed perceived lack of equity in pay and promotions and feel uncomfortable and concerned about these equity issues, although they clearly are not at the top of the list of factors viewed as obstacles to career development. Neither lack of training nor job knowledge were perceived as important factors to women's career growth. Most (89 percent) of the women believed that job knowledge was not an issue; 82 percent gave lack of training a rating of 1 on a 6-point scale. Women clearly felt prepared for their management positions, and focused on other factors in the work environment as more significant concerns.

It appears that women moving into the hospitality industry perceive a variety of career challenges; clearly there is both opportunity and need for much additional research. It would seem, too, to be the obligation of today's educators and industry representatives not only to help this growing labor market chart the best course, but also to equip them to sail undaunted through still turbulent waters. Suggestions posed by women out in the field must be heard; graduates need accurate and complete information regarding workplace realities so that they can adequately prepare for the challenges they will inevitably confront.

Although there are problems yet to be resolved, there is much optimism as well. Women who feel the strength of a solid academic preparation and the excitement of a vibrant and growing industry appear ready to tackle and master industry challenges. The 1990s may well see more gains for women in management than any other period so that, as the industry moves toward the year 2000, it will also be moving toward a more equitable, collaborative, and tolerant workplace.

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