Give and you shall receive: Organizational strategies for advancing women's careers

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore what organizations can do to facilitate the retention and advancement of women professionals into top leadership positions. A social exchange framework is applied to examine ways organizations can signal support for and investment in the careers of women professionals, and ultimately the long-term work relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper employed a qualitative methodology; specifically, semi-structured interviews with 20 women executives, in primarily the US hospitality industry, were conducted. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed.

Findings – Organizations are likely to strengthen the retention of their female professionals if they signal support through purposeful, long-term career development that provides a sightline to the top, and ultimately creates more female role models in senior-level positions. Organizations can also signal support through offering autonomy over how work is completed, and designing infrastructures of support to sustain professionals during mid-career stages. Findings are used to present a work-exchange model of career development.

Research limitations/implications – This research is an exploratory study that is limited in its scope and generalizability.
Practical implications – The proposed work-exchange model can be used to comprehensively structures initiatives that would signal organizational support to – and long-term investment in – female professionals and enable them to develop their career paths within their organizations.

Originality/value – Through offering a work-exchange model of career development, this paper identifies components of organizational support from a careers perspective, and highlights the factors that could potentially contribute to long-term growth and retention of women professionals.

Keywords: Career development, Perceived organizational support, Women professionals
“There has to be a commitment—a really deep commitment—on the part of the most senior people in the organization to give more than lip service to the idea that the human resource is the most precious thing. Everybody says it, everybody’s mission statement is very clear about using words that capture that idea. So what do you have in place that allows that to really happen?” Senior Vice President Interviewee (married, age 60s, no children).

INTRODUCTION

The most crucial form of capital is an organization’s human talent; developing, keeping, and drawing upon this knowledge base is key to the vitality and longevity of any company (Aryee et al., in press). Research points to the benefits of investing in the knowledge-based equity of the firm, or human capital, particularly in organizations where the experience or expertise offered for sale is often delivered through or shaped by its professionals (Walsh, Canina and Enz, 2008). With a growing labor shortage and aging workforce, organizations run the risk of disadvantage if they underestimate the criticality of identifying and grooming their most promising talent for future leadership roles (Burke and Vinnicombe, 2005).

Yet, research shows that when it comes to developing, retaining, and advancing female talent, organizations often fall short. While women comprise over half of the students in many university degree programs, and occupy more than half of professional entry-level positions, their representation dwindles to around 15% at the executive level (Catalyst, 2014). These statistics are the result of a combination of some women plateauing in middle management, and other women leaving their employers to either pursue more supportive and attractive career opportunities, including entrepreneurial endeavors, and/or to more effectively meet family responsibilities (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Litzky and Greenhaus, 2007).
So too, representation of women at the board of directors’ level is sparse, with women comprising 17% of director positions within the Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2014) and 11% across a much larger sample of global companies (GMI Ratings, 2013). While there has been some increase in board representation, largely as the result of substantial pressure from numerous advocacy groups, as well as the threat and/or implementation of legislation mandating quotas for female board representation in certain countries, the progress remains modest. Not surprisingly, the countries with the highest level of female board representation are those with legal requirements such as Norway, Sweden, and Finland, at 36.1%, 27.0%, and 26.8%, respectively. In North America and Asia, where efforts to increase female board representation have been voluntary and/or driven by investor pressure, the absolute level of representation is substantially lower, and increases have been very slow (GMI Ratings, 2013).

In this paper, we explore the issue of what organizations can do to develop the careers of and retain their female professional talent. Applying a social exchange framework, specifically the notion of perceived organizational support, we examine how organizations can use job features important to the careers of women professionals to signal long-term investments in the work relationship. Through a sample of successful female professionals currently working in executive-level positions (in primarily the U.S.), either in corporations, or as former corporate executives and current entrepreneurs, we investigate the organizational initiatives that either were central to these women’s career development and retention, or lacking, thus leading to their exit. Based upon the key themes that emerged from our qualitative approach, we propose a work-exchange model of professional career development. Our goal is to uncover ways organizations can facilitate the contribution and long-term career progression of half its professional workforce.
Overall, this paper makes three key contributions to the careers literature. First, we identify the job features salient for professional women, as they ebb and flow through their careers, and face different challenges along the way. Next, through linking these job features in a holistic manner, we identify career-oriented signals of perceived organizational support. Finally, we propose a model that reframes the employment relationship from a short-term, transactionally-based lens to a long-term, relationally-based one. In other words, as part of the employment relationship, we identify the job features that would promote return investments by women and potentially increase their contribution, strengthen their work attitudes and lengthen their organizational tenure. Simply put, we identity job features that would enable professional women to build their careers in-house.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The reasons female professionals opt out of their organizations are complex and numerous, but they frequently include the inability to overcome significant structural and cultural barriers to the C-suite (Buse, Bilimoria and Perelli, 2013; Smith, Caputi and Crittenden, 2012). One of the most difficult barriers arises from organizational systems and norms that were adopted during a time when the sole male-breadwinner model was common, and when women were not well represented in the workforce (O’Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008). Since these structures were created largely by and for men, what is considered ‘normal’ at work tends to privilege traits, behaviors and work practices that are socially and culturally ascribed to men, and that benefit individuals whose primary (or only) focus is their career (Ely and Meyerson, 2000).

As a result of these work structures and practices, women are often subject to unconscious and unintentional stereotypes, commonly termed ‘second generation’ bias (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2013; Oakley, 2007). These stereotypes include assumptions that women are
less competent than men, and as a result, women are often subject to higher standards when being evaluated, and attributions that their performance is due to factors other than their abilities (Carli and Eagly, 1999; Heilman, 2001). This bias is complicated by the fact that women must navigate the ‘double bind’, in which they are simultaneously expected to be communal (to be seen as appropriately female) and agentic (to be seen as competent) (Carli and Eagly, 2001). Because women must shift between communal and agentic behaviors to satisfy both roles, they are vulnerable to targets of prejudice, and are often perceived as either incompetent leaders or offensive women (Carli and Eagly, 2001). The compound effect of all these barriers is that women face slower upward mobility and earn lower wages than their male counterparts; they are also overrepresented in positions lacking authority or autonomy (Fleming, 2015).

For women with families, the challenges enumerated above are heightened. Organizational practices requiring irregular or excess work hours, as is increasingly common in professional organizations, disproportionately disadvantage women, who are simultaneously subjected to cultural and societal expectations to be primary caregivers. As one study showed, due to these very real time conflicts, overworking mothers in male-dominated occupations are more likely to opt out of the workforce than non-mothers or men (Cha, 2013). These issues are particularly salient in service sectors such as the hospitality industry (from which our sample is drawn), because the nature of the work often requires that individuals be available on site and in person during nighttime and early morning hours. Constraints such as these have led to women managers in hospitality earning 79.4% of their male counterparts (Fleming, 2015).

Beyond practical constraints, women with families are also subject to specific stereotypes about their commitment and competence. Experimental research has shown that mothers are assumed to be less competent than non-mothers, and a survey study of potential future employers
demonstrated that mothers were less likely to be called back for interviews than non-mothers (Cuddy and Fiske, 2004; Correll and Bernard, 2007). In both studies, fathers were not similarly disadvantaged, and in some instances, were advantaged by their status as parents.

Response by Women Professionals

Given these challenges, which become especially salient for women in mid-career, a time when work demands and family responsibilities are most in conflict (Anderson, Vinnecombe and Singh, 2010; Metz, 2005; Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007), it is not surprising that while both men and women do permanently opt out or even take career breaks, women do so at a higher rate. One study found that as many as 37% of high-level women executives had taken a break during their careers (versus 24% of men). This number increased to 43% for mothers, but did not change for fathers. Further, when asked about their reasons for their career break, 44% of women identified caring for children or parents as significant factors, while only 12% of men did so (Hewlett and Luce, 2005).

While some women opt to leave the workforce entirely, other women respond to the disconnect between the career needs of female professionals and the traditional paths many companies favor, by seeking alternative ways to build meaningful careers, often outside of major corporations or their chosen industry (Cabrera, 2009; Grady and McCarthy, 2008). In one study, as many as two-thirds of highly qualified women rejected corporate jobs for entrepreneurial endeavors, defined as business start-ups (Lewis et al., 2015). Indeed, research has shown work/family conflict to be one of the key factors encouraging women to become entrepreneurs (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Mattis, 2004), and in fact, women entrepreneurs report that they experience less of this conflict than women working in salaried positions (Thebaud, 2015).
Benefits of Retaining Women Professionals

If women do remain with their organizations and eventually move into senior leadership roles, their organizations benefit in important ways. High costs associated with executive turnover aside (Messersmith et al., 2014), the presence of female senior leaders positively influences the attractiveness of their institutions for more junior women; this results in a larger proportion of women, and thus professional talent, at lower levels (Hirsh, 2009). Because female leaders signal possibilities for advancement within their organizations, younger professionals are more likely to emulate these executives and want to follow similar paths. Further, greater representation of women in executive-level positions has been associated with greater numbers of customers, and higher sales revenue, relative profits and stock performance (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger and Meaney, 2008; Dezso and Ross, 2012). These findings suggest that organizations could gain advantage from advancing more women into senior-level positions. To do so, organizations need to keep these professionals from exiting and instead, help them to develop and sustain meaningful, life-long careers.

While organizations are increasingly focused on gender diversity as a business priority (Barsh and Yee, 2011), advancing women effectively requires fundamental structural changes that are often difficult for organizations to design and implement (O’Neil et al., 2008); as noted, organizations have experienced only limited success in these initiatives. The question then, is - beyond human-resource initiatives aimed at supporting work-family integration - how can organizations signal long-term commitment to and support of women professionals in ways that promote their career growth and retention? Holistically, what would the set of related organizational initiatives look like?

To frame these questions, we apply a social exchange framework. This type of framework is based on the premise that organizations can signal commitment to and support of employees through creating socially-based work exchanges that contribute to a long-term employment relationship (Blau, 1964; Hom et al., 2009; Weng et al., 2010). These exchanges are based on the concept that when the organization makes continuous investments in its professionals, professionals develop a reciprocal sense of obligation and trust (Hu, Tetrick and Shore, 2010). This sense of trust, which becomes embedded in the exchange, implies that the work relationship is ongoing, and that one party’s investment in the relationship will be reciprocated by the other (Shore et al., 2006; Song, Tsui and Law, 2009). Over time, as organizations invest more into the work relationship, employees are more likely to feel a sense of perceived organizational support (POS), or organizational-care about their well-being, and they are more likely to reciprocate in ways that benefit their organizations, such as with increased loyalty and commitment (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Perceived organizational support for career development has been shown to increase employees’ career satisfaction (Barnett and Bradley, 2006); they are also less likely to quit (Baran, Shanock and Miller, 2012). Indeed, POS has been shown to impact the turnover intentions of female professionals (Jawahar and Hemmasi, 2006).

Working in organizations that adopt a long-term, relationally-based perspective matters for professionals. Indeed, one study showed that professionals were committed to their organizations, despite managing their own careers (Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009). Yet, from a careers point-of-view, we still do not know what organizational support holistically looks like, or
more specifically, the combination of factors that can signal an organization’s long-term investment in its female professionals. Applying a social exchange framework, we consider the initiatives that would demonstrate an organization’s commitment to the career growth and development of its female employees – and to maintaining the work relationship for the long-term. We note that current organizational efforts to retain female professionals are only incrementally increasing the number of women who do ascend to top leadership roles (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2015). However, through considering relevant signals of organizational support, we may be able to identify a holistic framework that would encourage women professionals to develop their careers within their organizations, and ascend into significant leadership roles.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Sample**

To identify the components of this framework, we used an exploratory, qualitative methodology, and conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty female executives in the hospitality industry; twelve respondents were high ranking executives in their organizations, while the remaining eight were entrepreneurs who had previously worked as executives in organizations and left them to form their own businesses. We chose to interview both executives holding high-level organizational positions, and entrepreneurs who had started their own companies, because we wanted to determine how their responses might differ along what they were seeking from their organizations. In addition, we chose to examine the careers of women professionals in the hospitality industry because many of these women faced the career constraints we identified, and thus we believed would provide insights into what women are seeking from both their careers and organizations. Finally, when it comes to promoting and retaining women professionals, the hospitality industry does not have a strong track record.
While the employee base is comprised of more than 50% women (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014), in 2012, women comprised only 14% of executive officers and 14% of corporate directors (Catalyst 2013). Therefore we thought it useful to examine the perspective of those who chose to remain and ascend versus those who, as we mentioned, chose to opt out.

We identified respondents through a search of top industry leaders; however, we also used a snowball approach and asked respondents to identify other executives with whom we should speak. All but two participants were in their 40s or older. Eighteen (90%) were married and fifteen (75%) were mothers. (The average number of children was two.) Sixty percent of our respondents held senior management positions with organizations that included major hospitality companies, four smaller, high-end hospitality companies, an airline and a food service company. Their representative titles were President of a Division, Executive Vice President of Development, Senior Vice President of Human Resources, Senior Vice President of Operations, Senior Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Vice President of Food and Beverage, Regional Director of Marketing, and General Manager. The remaining eight participants were CEOs and founders of their own entrepreneurial and consulting firms. They were sole proprietors, as well as employers of upwards of 20 employees, and their businesses were focused on financial consulting/investing and consulting in the marketing, human resource, data analytics, and food and beverage domains. In all, respondents were working in a wide variety of hospitality companies, with responsibilities that spanned across all disciplines, and at the corporate, multi-unit and business-unit levels. Their career journeys were marked with significant promotions and increasing levels of responsibilities. All but two interviewees had spent their entire careers
to date working within the hospitality industry. Nineteen resided in the U.S.\textsuperscript{1} and one was based in London.

\textbf{Analyses}

To uncover their insights and reflections, we adopted an interpretative approach (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We chose this methodology because we wanted to uncover the perspectives of women currently building successful careers. Our goal was to specifically understand the organizational initiatives women professionals felt were important to their own career growth and retention. While we had ideas of the types of initiatives that might be central, we did not have an apriori list of programs; thus, asking respondents to complete a quantitatively-based survey would fail to uncover the rich description of what mattered to female professionals. Further, we felt that our goal of identifying a holistic framework of organizational support, as part of an exchange framework, dictated an exploratory methodology.

As a research team of three, we conducted semi-structured in-person or phone interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes (See Table 1 for the interview protocol). To facilitate the identification of central concepts, we first recorded and transcribed our interviews. In-person interviews were recorded with a recording device, and phone interviews were recorded with the assistance of a confidential toll-free recording service. In total, the 20 interviews were transcribed into 255 pages of text and we each, independently, content-analyzed the text and identified 22 categories of concepts around organizational practices and programs that, from a careers perspective, were salient for respondents. Next, we met to reconcile our independent interpretations of the data, reviewing our separate categories of concepts and verifying they were

\textsuperscript{1} Twelve respondents resided in the East Coast, four resided in the West Coast and three were in the Midwest.
similar in meaning.\textsuperscript{2} When they were not, we discussed our interpretations of the data until we reached agreement on what constituted a particular category of a finding. Finally, we collapsed these categories into the three major themes discussed in our results.\textsuperscript{3}

To further substantiate that our identified themes were representative of our data, we reanalyzed the transcripts using Atlas.ti 7, a qualitative software tool designed to assist in systematically exploring large bodies of textual data. The initial Atlas.ti output provided a word count for the entire 255 pages of transcribed interviews. Using the Atlas.ti software word count function and coding process, we searched each theme identified through our initial content review. The software identified all quotations within the transcribed documents that used keyword families. Through this process, we were able to systematically verify and substantiate the themes we identified (Walsh, 2003). A review of the word counts also enabled us to surface any ideas not captured through the initial content analyses. Thus, analyzing the highlighted word families strengthened the validity of the themes generated through our first round of analyses, and ensured that interviewee responses were accurately represented. Thus, in support of the concept that qualitative findings can provide the foundation for understanding organizational phenomena, (McMahon, Watson and Bimrose, 2012), our intent was to identify themes that could be applied to a conceptual model.

\section*{RESULTS}

Respondents discussed three key organizational initiatives that signaled organizational career support. These were making career development a central priority, building organizational role models from senior levels, and sustaining professionals through mid-career challenges.

\textsuperscript{2} As an example, we discussed the meaning, similarities and differences associated with role models and mentors.

\textsuperscript{3} These three themes represented seven, four and eleven separate categories, respectively.
through a) offering autonomy and control, and b) providing infrastructures of support. We noted that, surprisingly, responses from our corporate respondents versus our entrepreneurs did not differ. Both groups had meaningful and almost identical ideas about what organizational support looked like. We discuss each theme and present exact quotations to substantiate the meaning behind each one, as well as to demonstrate the rich language behind the ideas.

**Develop Future Leadership through Long-Term Career Planning**

When we asked what it takes to retain female professionals, respondents noted that organizations need to be proactive and purposeful in identifying, developing, communicating and implementing a path for successful advancement. They identified specific actions including making clear the potential career paths these professionals could take, and initiating steps to implement related plans that reflect a deep and long-term commitment. Respondents noted that implementing such a strategy would help ambitious professionals see the future steps, and better strategize how to keep challenged and growing within their organizations. As one professional summed it up:

“I think just in general, it’s the same as it’s always been, if the company is growing, and there’s growth for you and you’re still learning—once you go in every single day and you’re not learning anything and you’re young, that’s just not good anymore.” Entrepreneur, married, age 40s, 2 children.

As a second respondent reflected:

“When I was at company xxx, there were women across the firm, but women were very, very underrepresented at the partnership level. And there really was never a conversation about what it takes to get there, what the path is going to be, they never really laid it out to the people that they should have been having in their eye-sights. And all of a sudden when I resigned they didn’t want to announce it and really what I found out was a lot of senior women had left around the same time I did. And then all of a sudden these partners are all over me. “Oh, you’ve got a wonderful future here, let’s lay out this path, and lay out that path.” And I felt like saying “Well if you had done this while I was here maybe I wouldn’t be walking out the door.” And then it made it feel disingenuous to me that
now they care about me because I’m leaving. And so it was interesting because I think that it’s probably not uncommon from what I hear for other firms to do that. They have these great programs in place but are just not active in terms of how they’re implementing them to make sure that they’re encouraging and developing women along the way to get to the most senior levels.” President, married, age 40s, 2 children.

To ensure that the programs were viewed as authentic and meaningful, respondents noted that organizations needed to demonstrate a high-level and tangible commitment of support. They also noted that this commitment needed to be long-term and consistent. Among other things, the CEO might take personal ownership of championing women’s leadership development programs, as well as incorporate accountability for gender parity into the performance evaluations systems, (KPMG International, 2014). As respondents explained:

“Organizations have to look at walking the walk and not just putting out policies to check the box. And you know, my experience has been that some organizations like to check the box and they like to get on the cover of Working Women magazine and make sure their firm is featured in all this positive PR about women, but when it comes right down to it, they are not practicing what they’re preaching. And a lot of them will put in place these great committees and initiatives and things like that, but not really carry through and make sure that those initiatives are effective and what they need to do in order to change and be flexible with what they’re doing over time.” President, married, age 40s, 2 children.

and

“We’re not transparent enough to say, back to the beginning of the career, here’s what the potential is. I think it’s making the possibilities more transparent, having the conversations as you’re reaching into the organization to find these people.” Senior VP Operations, married, age 50s, 2 children.

**Build Role Models at the Senior Level**

The next theme refers to benefits that can accrue when senior organizational positions are actually comprised of more women. Respondents commented that greater representation of female executives would provide women professionals and their organizations with a distinct benefit. Lower-level professionals could understand what a successful career path actually looks
like, and model their own career paths in similar ways. This would encourage rising professionals to build their careers in-house versus searching for a preferable employer. As one respondent mentioned:

“If you go to an organization that doesn’t have any senior women at its upper management levels, you’re sending a pretty strong signal to people and so I think that firms really need to make sure that they’re conscious of what they’re trying to say and that they’re honest. I think if you go to a private equity firm and you’re going to be the only woman on the block, organizationally, you need to be able to say, ‘Listen, we may not have had many women at the organization in the past, but here are ten things that we’re going to be more open about.’” President, married, age 40s, 2 children.

Another professional commented:

“I think (we need) more women as role models. You think it’s sort of a token thing, but it really does embolden a lot of younger women to think, ‘Yes, I can do this.’ And I think it’s important to have kind of the internal gumption to say if I saw this other senior executive woman and she could succeed and do that, then I could do that, too.” Entrepreneur, married, age 50s, 2 children.

Respondents reflected that greater representation of women at top organization levels would have been an encouraging sign for them, as they progressed in their own careers. They viewed this signal as representation that their perspectives and input were, and would continue to be, sought and valued.

**Sustain Professionals through Mid-Career Challenges**

Finally, respondents also emphasized that companies would benefit if they provided professionals with greater institutional support, especially during their challenging mid-career years, when they were assuming greater work responsibilities, while simultaneously trying to juggle the demands of having children and raising a young family. Respondents suggested two means by which organizations could provide this support. The first is to offer professionals autonomy and control over the ways in which they accomplish their jobs and the second is to
create an infrastructure – both within and outside of the company – that would provide a sense of community and support for working professionals.

**Offer Autonomy and Control.** Respondents repeatedly told us that providing autonomy and control would facilitate a strong long-term work relationship between professionals and their organizations. Choice over the schedule of work enables professionals to be successful and productive, especially during their mid-career stages. Whether it was offering flexibility, or simply conveying trust that the job would get done (e.g., whether or not the person was in the office from 9a.m. to 5p.m.), these small efforts on the part of organizations were viewed as symbolic and substantive signals of appreciation and value. As one respondent noted:

“When it comes down to looking at what the policies are, I think you’ve got to be supportive of families...I think people can continue to be productive in a lot of different environments. And flexibility is something you have to earn over time. But when you get to the point that you earn it, there ought to be policies in place in a company that they can work with you to retain great talent as people move through different junctures in their lives. Whether it’s having babies or taking time off for family, or even to pursue something else. I know a lot of the law firms have become more supportive of attorneys pursuing pro bono work or other things that may not be directly related to what they do, but it’s related to their long-term satisfaction.” President, married, age 40s, two children

One of our entrepreneurial respondents explained how offering autonomy to employees was a competitive advantage for her firm, enabling her to attract the best talent:

“When I hire just a few people that have worked for me, I’ve said, “This is what I can give you and this is what I can’t give you.” I can’t give them a huge base salary, but what I can give them is flexibility. I said, “I’d like you to be working pretty much during the 9-5, Monday to Friday day, but you know when you schedule your own calls with your clients, your own interviews, your own meetings, and you have a doctor’s appointment or you have a parent/teacher conference, that’s fine. You don’t have to ask me. You just go. You schedule around it. And if you have to work until 7pm that night or you’re coming in early because you’re busy, then you just do it, or you look at your schedule when you’re not busy and try to schedule your appointments then.” So you just have to treat people like grownups, ...I think offering some form of flexibility and treating people maturely,
and if they can’t manage it, then you have to address it, but I think that would be enormous for people—even men who have families and want to try to be there for something important with their family.” Entrepreneur, married, age 50s, 2 children.

Organizations can benefit from taking a long-term perspective on their employees’ careers and allowing them to ramp up and ramp down when needed. One professional mentioned how much the power to create her own schedule meant to her. She said:

“These companies underestimate what all associates are willing to do. If you give them a little freedom and you trust them, they’ll repay that with strong loyalty…I think that was really important for me that I was able to balance at that time in my career.” Executive Vice President, married, age 40s, 2 children.

Another commented:

“Getting people through (mid-career) when they are high-potential employees is something that all the organizations that are having success with retention are really, really focusing on. And they’re not just looking at women; they’re looking at women and men. The thing that happens when you work with somebody through that kind of phase of their lives is you engender such loyalty and commitment. Because they recognize that you understand them, that you appreciate them and you respect their work ethic and the way they feel about the company and their clients and they’re really stars to begin with, and then they somehow…as you say, it spirals upward.” Senior Vice President, married, age 60s, no children.

This professional named this, ‘The flexibility to move with the person as they develop over time.’ She was referring to the fact that organizations benefit when they can adjust to the needs of their professionals, as they work through mid-career challenges. This interviewee argued that having organizational flexibility to adjust to professionals’ needs was crucial to keeping talent from walking out the door.

Create an Infrastructure of Support. The second idea respondents had to ease mid-career challenges is for organizations to create an infrastructure – both within and outside of the company – that would provide a sense of community and support for working professionals.
This built-in community could facilitate the relocation process and make it more attractive and easy for professionals to accept new assignments within their organizations. As explained by one of the professionals:

“One thing that xxx company has done that I really admire is they’ve set up a support network for women moving into leadership positions, helping them find schools, helping them find doctors, helping them find resources that is typically...my husband didn’t do that stuff. That was me...I’ve been focusing on these number twos, and it’s not just female oriented but male and female, how can we continue to develop and train them, and we haven’t taken on the personal side of support.” Senior Vice President, married, age 50s, 2 children.

This executive was reflecting on a time when she transferred to a new city to take a position as the general manager of a large hotel. She commented that it would have been very helpful if her company had provided her with support to help her to take care of her non-work needs - so she could more quickly focus on her new position and ‘hit the ground running.’ However, assistance goes beyond the human resources department providing lists of day-care facilities, for example. Rather, this professional was reflecting that it would have been beneficial if she could have more easily connected into the ‘parent network’ and obtain the advice, camaraderie and support parents need when trying to uncover resources for their families.

Respondents also commented that this type of support is essential within the organization, as well. When professionals need to adjust their responsibilities and even off-ramp for a period of time, respondents commented how providing a plan to do so would be key to their retention. Part of this plan would include getting professionals back to their roles and responsibilities, when appropriate. This is similar to how expatriate assignments are organized, including repatriating professionals when they return to their primary positions and/or offices. As one professional explained:

“At the end of the day it’s about how you create a community and use our resources in the best possible way. And as companies we’re just not doing
that. So anything to help women get off and back on the track is good for everybody. And having a well-orchestrated plan for while she is out: Who’s going to take your responsibilities and how are we going to share the workload, and when are you going to—having very open and honest discussions about that. I think that any organization that has advanced leadership development training—that anyone can opt into—are good things. I think (it’s good) where organizations are sponsoring you to go back to school and are making advanced education available while you are working. Co-funding some of that, or funding entirely some of that with term agreements to follow. Making those types of things more readily available is very helpful.” Vice-President, married, age 50s, 2 children.

Overall, one respondent summed up the entire reason for these types of initiatives. She noted:

“\textit{We didn’t want to lose those people...I think again, the accounting and consulting firms had the same problem that we did. If we lost a manager, it was like them losing somebody who had worked with an audit client for five to eight years. All that relationship equity. So there were very important business needs. And there were two or three business needs that drove all these practices I’m telling you about. First is that the real cost of turnover was extremely high. The second one was growth. Growth made institutional knowledge and experience even more valuable. And it made promotion from within very rewarding, not only for the individual, but for the organization. And you could say, \textquoteprint{You know, we’re not just talking the game. Look at what happens here.} }” Senior Vice President Interviewee, married, age 60s, no children.

DISCUSSION

A Work-Exchange Model of Career Development

Taken together, our findings identify a specific set of initiatives that can signal long-term organizational investment in the careers of professionals, specifically women professionals. From a social exchange framework, the initiatives identified in this study would support professionals as they ebb and flow through various career phases (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Through these initiatives, professionals would know their organizations’ long-term plans for them, and they would be guided by a sightline to the top, as well as advisors to help them get there. As part of these plans, organizations would also signal support through enabling
professionals to reconfigure their work in ways that integrate with their non-work lives, during the most challenging mid-career phase.

While our ideas have applicability for both men and women, research in work-life integration suggests that career challenges are particularly salient for women (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991), especially those that work in industries that require non-standard, shifting schedules (Moen, Kelly and Huang, 2006). Indeed, researchers (i.e. Ladge, Clair and Greenberg, 2012), point out that women face disproportionate (biological and societal) demands and more significant work-role transitions than do men; organizations often compound the stress women experience by failing to provide adequate formal support (Ladge et al., 2012). Thus, while the job features identified in our model are likely to be relevant for men, we would argue they are particularly salient for women professionals, especially when these professionals face non-work demands on their resources, particularly their time.

Comprehensively, these investment-oriented initiatives would signal to professionals that their organizations are committed to the work relationship and ultimately, to professionals’ long-term career success, even, and especially, because women tend to adopt labyrinthine, non-linear career paths (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). We argue that these job features would generate reciprocal investments by professionals. Specifically, it is likely that professionals would return the investment their organizations make in their careers with higher levels of organizational commitment and performance (Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009; Singh et al., 2013). Indeed, Weng et al. (2010) found that employees’ perceptions of career growth within their organizations fueled their commitment levels.

Professionals would also be more likely to experience greater career satisfaction and reduced work-role conflicts (Jawahar and Hemmasi, 2006). Research on work-family balance
and integration has shown that to the degree professionals view their organizations as enabling their many life-roles, including the role of provider, their work attitudes strengthen (Chen, Powell and Greenhaus, 2009). Specifically, when professionals are able to maximize critical resources such as their time, they experience less work-family conflict and stress, which in turn, positively impacts their well-being and life and work satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2014; Judge, Ilies and Scott, 2006; Moen et al., 2008; Trembley, 2002). In addition, if individuals can connect their work and family in a way that enables them to meet both their employment and care needs, they are likely to experience a sense of positive work-life integration or facilitation (Frone, Yardley and Markel, 1997; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Ultimately, we would expect these positive attitudes and behaviors would increase organizational retention rates (Jawahar and Hemmasi, 2006), and strengthen firm performance; professionals would likely be applying their expertise and institutional knowledge to both valuable clients and employees. Taken together, our findings offer a comprehensive way to view the employment relationship and the specific benefits that can accrue when organizations make long-term career investments in professionals. This work-exchange model is depicted in Figure 1, and highlights the potential benefits of an organizational investment-oriented strategy to develop and retain human capital, especially female talent.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

Overall, this proposed exchange model pinpoints the components of perceived organizational support from a careers perspective, and adds to the field’s understanding of ways organizations can fuel long-term employment relationships (Shore et al., 2009). In applying career concepts to the employee-organizational framework, this model provides a basis from
which organizations in any context - international or otherwise - could garner benefit and establish distinct advantage as a preferred employer. Our interviewees stressed how crucial it is to make the long-term commitment to develop the careers of women professionals, and work with them as they move through various work-life challenges. In support of this social-exchange perspective, respondents noted that this kind of care and attention to their career phases, and work-life needs, would generate an incredible sense of commitment to and work output for their organizations (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The model that emerged from these reflections identifies the job features that when provided, may reciprocally, benefit their organizations.

However, while some had experienced savvy bosses who understood the value of this reciprocity, we also note that overall, respondents experienced a lack of consistent, sustained focus on this concept in their organizations. This raises the question of why organizations do not systematically undertake comprehensive initiatives such as these. While the answer to this question represents a point from which to build from our findings, we believe it is because organizations have failed to understand the potential benefit to be gained from undertaking a holistic, relationship-oriented framing of careers. Indeed, careers-based researchers suggest that both professionals and their organizations view organizational tenure as short-term and temporary, as professionals manage their own career progression (Briscoe and Finkelstein, 2009). And piecemeal signals of organizational support, including stand-alone human resources programs, have had limited effectiveness in progressing women’s careers and stemming their organizational exit (O’Neil et al., 2008). This study provides a foundational framework for viewing career initiatives as integral to the employee-organization relationship. Through identifying specific components of career-oriented organizational support, we delineate what POS actually means for women professionals as they manage their own careers. In doing so, we
point to ways organizational investments in the long-term work-relationship can potentially fuel reciprocal efforts from women professionals. In totality, the initiatives we identified would enable women professionals to build a path in-house and ultimately ascend within their organizations.

**Implications for Practice**

The proposed work exchange model offers a framework for how decision-makers can view and signal their long-term investment in their professionals. As a beginning point, decision-makers could potentially benefit from first, examining their organization’s ingrained and fundamental belief systems about career development processes and next, thoughtfully re-evaluating their succession-planning and development initiatives. This includes being willing to both redesign how work is organized and assessed, and reconsider the types of support needed by professionals at various phases throughout their tenure (Maied et al., 2015). Underlying this model is the belief that through a taking long-term view of the work relationship, organizations can instill greater return commitment and performance from their professionals. Thus, this framework can provide the impetus for organizations wishing to re-examine how to build its leadership pipeline and retain its female talent. While none of the initiatives our findings uncovered are groundbreaking on their own, woven together, they have the potential to powerfully create sustained and distinct advantage. As one of our interviewees stated – ‘It’s pretty fundamental’ and yet, also so important.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This is one of the first studies we know of that identifies the components of organizational support from a long-term career perspective. Yet, in identifying a theoretical framework, this initial inductive study is just a beginning. We note a number of ways to extend
and test the implied conceptual propositions. The first step is to test the tenets of this proposed work-exchange model, specifically the components of POS from a careers perspective, across various types of firms and with a larger group of female (and male) respondents. While our respondents represented a cross section of different types of companies within the hospitality industry, they are indeed from just one sector. Expanding the study to women professionals working in different types of industries would be a way to build from and test the concepts embedded in the work-exchange model. One place to begin would be to examine the experiences of those building careers as members of professional service firms.4

In addition, we could imagine different groups for which our proposed model might have applicability. For example, there is a growing research stream examining the experience of migrant professional workers and highly skilled immigrants (Iredale, 2005). This particular group faces unique challenges, not the least of which is significant occupational barriers to entry, and often low-status in their organizations (Iredale, 2002). These professionals often feel marginalized in ways that make it difficult for them to identify with membership in their organizations (Yu, Kim and Restubog, 2015). By providing the job features identified in the work-exchange model, such as autonomy and control, organizations would signals investments in this professional group in ways that likely builds their identity, commitment and interest in continuing the employment relationship. Future work testing the model for this particular group, would be one way to build from and extend our findings.

Also, the vast majority of our respondents were from the U.S., thus representing a contextual limitation of our findings. Indeed, the U.S., which is ranked one of the lowest of developed nations in offering employees satisfactory work-life balance (29th out of 36th) (OCED,

4 We note that professional service firms, such as law and consulting particularly, struggle with creating successful partner-level trajectories for its women professionals.
2015), may not be representative of the experiences of those in other countries. However, many of our respondents were employed in global organizations and had worked internationally. Thus, while our sample was largely from one context, the model does have applicability across global settings. Nevertheless, future studies examining this model in different work-settings, social contexts and cultures, would help to identify the relevancy of these job features, especially in countries and regions of the world with higher levels of structural and governmental support.

Next, it would be helpful to further delineate what an infrastructure of support actually looks like in practice. Identifying structural opportunities to weave these initiatives into an integrated framework represents a way to move beyond basic human resource programs to more fundamental shifts in how work is organized, enhanced and recognized. In addition, it would be helpful to understand more broadly the impact of career-support initiatives at legislative levels, especially for legislation that requires parity on corporate boards. Comparing the impact of countries with more progressive institutional programs against countries with only limited forms of support would be a provocative way to examine the role of cultural shifts, and extend the ideas presented in this paper.

Finally, while similar in size to that of McMahon et al.’s (2012) recent study, our small sample is a limitation; yet, we note that our approach enabled us to uncover the perspectives of those living their careers, and managing its associated challenges. These ‘native’ perspectives are the building blocks of potentially meaningful and relevant theory, and are thus, the precursors for quantitative, generalized research. Overall, this study represents a first step in understanding how organizations can reframe their view of the employee-organization relationship, and signal career support in ways that strengthen the work relationship, retain their current female talent, and develop their future leadership potential.
CONCLUSION

In this study, we applied a social exchange framework to identify a set of organizational initiatives that would signal support of and long-term investment in the career development of women professionals. Specifically, we identified ways in which organizations could retain and develop their female talent through investing in their careers in-house, and providing infrastructures of support as these professionals’ ebb and flow through career phases. Our findings point to a proposed work exchange model, whereby we contend women professionals would respond and reciprocate to investments in their careers with increased commitment and performance, and longer tenure. This model represents a beginning point for reconsidering how to signal support of female professionals’ careers and develop a long-term work relationship that results in women ascending into top leadership roles. The career-oriented investments identified in this study could engage female professionals in ways that provide increasingly substantial and simultaneous returns for both their careers and their organizations.

Acknowledgments

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# TABLE 1

## Interview Protocol

1. If you could create the ideal work setting for women to succeed, what would it look like?

2. Think of a time when the organization helped address a challenge unique to women. What was the challenge? How did the organization address it? Did it last? Did it help?

3. Can you think of small or incremental changes that could have helped you or would help women succeed?

4. Can you provide an exemplar – a company you’ve worked with who developed an innovative practice aimed at developing your career and/or removing a roadblock along the way? What was the practice?

5. What drove the adoption of this practice? Who championed it, what types of resistance or challenges were there, and what was its impact?

6. What do you see as the state of the industry in paving the path for women leaders to make it to the executive level? Do you see the pipeline of rising women growing, contracting, or staying the same?

7. What advice would you provide your company, and the industry, to keep talent such as yourself? Who would you recommend we speak with next?
FIGURE 1
A WORK-EXCHANGE MODEL OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Organization Receives

- Higher Retention Rates
- Enhanced Firm Performance

Organization Offers

- Develop Future Leadership through Career Planning
- Build Role-Models at Senior Levels
- Offer Autonomy and Control
- Provide an Infrastructure of Support

Professional Offers

- Higher Organizational Commitment
- Enhanced Performance

Professional Receives

- Greater Career Satisfaction
- Reduced Work-Role Conflicts

Work Exchange
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