

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE PROMOTION OF FEMALE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGERS TO SENIOR POSITIONS

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Abstract: *The qualitative research was conducted through personal interviews with female HR managers working in the high-tech industry in Israel. The questions are designed to understand the barriers to the career advancement of human resources females to senior positions in the organization. Women mostly staff the human resources field in Israel and the rest of the world. As women took a larger share in human resource management in high-tech companies, they remained at the rank of middle management, which did not correspond to the extensive scope of their positions. The question arises as to why the department responsible for human capital does not have enough representation at the top. The organization's management and are not part of the policymakers in the organization? This study examines socio-demographic factors such as age, motherhood, education, and professional factors such as years of seniority and experience in relevant tasks, as well as their perceptions regarding the importance of the human resources profession in the organization. The conclusion regarding motherhood and children in all age groups was unequivocal that they are not a barrier to career advancement but quite the opposite. In the professional aspect, human resources females advance to senior positions when their attitudes towards themselves are positive, and they are confident in their ability to fulfill the role of vice president in the best way.*

Keywords: *qualitative research, human resources, women's management, senior positions, career, mothers, COVID -19, human capital, inhibiting factors.*

The background of the study

The field of human resources in Israel is staffed mainly by women in all branches of the economy, with 4.6 women compared to 1.1 men, according to Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics data 2018-2019 (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In Israel, before the 1990s, human resources positions were held mainly by men who were in charge of managing the status of employees in all existing aspects, such as recruitment, welfare, wages, rewards, and perks (DeLoatch, 2018). However, with the beginning of the high-tech era in Israel in the early 1990s, the field of human resources, which was then still young, accelerated when most of the human resources jobs in high-tech were already filled by women. Moreover, in other countries such as the United Kingdom, in 1997, 63% of all human resources employees were women, compared to 79% in 2007. However, in large organizations with an active and dominant workers' committee, men remained in human resources positions, and their ranks were senior, such as VP of Human Resources (Weissman, 2014).

As female managers took on a larger share of human resources management in high-tech companies (Sands, B. 2019), they still did not receive the rank corresponding to the scope of their work. Women received 66% of men's salaries in the same position. These

figures are despite female managers performing functions with great responsibility and professionalism that require presence in management and authority (Weissman, 2014).

The situation is such that the department responsible for human resources and human capital does not have enough managers who take part in the management of the organization (Oakley, 2000; Flippin, 2017). The question arises, why are female managers in the field of human resources not part of the policymakers in the organization? Why are so few female managers promoted to senior positions and only some taking part in executive management meetings? (Heliman, M. E. 2012)

Research questions

This study examines why there are not enough female human resource managers in senior positions such as VP. Why is a field staffed mainly by women (CBS data 2019-2018) that is so important to an organization not given the status equal to other areas of management such as that for finance, production, and sales (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021)? Is the reason for this rooted in the fact that this is a female occupation? (Rerdon, J. 2015) Is there a glass ceiling? (Flippin, 2017). To understand this, we will delve into the influence of personal and environmental factors, such as sociodemographic (e.g., family composition) and professional (e.g., years of professional experience in management and other skills). Another topic examined is whether there are barriers based on gender background, such as wage differences between male and female workers (Rerdon, J. 2015). To this end, interviewees were asked questions about their career development and their stand about advancing to senior positions to understand why most female human resource managers do not advance to senior positions.

Methods

Findings are based on questions asked of female HR managers in structured interviews. Questions covered the influence of sociodemographic factors, such as age, marital status, number and ages of children; those pertaining to formal and supplemental education; and those pertaining to career development, such as sector, tasks, responsibilities (including over employees), and external issues such as COVID-19.

In the qualitative portion of the study, 14 HR managers with a background in the high-tech industry were interviewed, some still working in high-tech and some having moved to classical industry. In order to examine the degree of influence of personal and environmental factors on female managers' career development toward the VP of Human Resources, they were asked to tell the story of their career development.

In the qualitative portion, in-depth questions were asked that rely on hypotheses testing claims made in previous studies, such as a barrier that female managers face due to being mothers to children.

Results

Part A: Sociodemographic factors. Promotion over the years according to age

In this study, the human resources (HR) team members interviewed were between the ages of 32 and 62. They described their earlier as well as their current experiences:

when they were in the younger age range of 21-32, they were in the position of coordinators at a stage in which they acquired professional experience, received on-the-job training, participated in internal and external professional training such as professional conferences for HR, as well as mandatory courses such as sexual harassment prevention, first aid, and firefighting. They took part in management training only when the latter was on-site, such as intermediate management courses that they organized for employees wanting to advance to management in the organization. They could participate and listen to the lectures, which are not part of their training program.

According to the testimony of most of the respondents, as they advanced in age and accumulated years of work experience, they could climb the ladder of management ranks through an intermediate position called HR business partner (HRBP), and from there reach the position of vice president (VP). Most interviewees mentioned that experience and various skills acquired over the years were prerequisites for promotion in a career.

At the same time, there were also exceptional cases in the promotion process according to the skills of the interviewed managers and the organization's needs at a particular time. One interviewee stated that at the age of 28, she had already received the position of VP, but this is not common. Most female managers up to the age of 48-50 remain in middle management levels. Only four of the 14 interviewees of this study nevertheless managed to reach the position of VP. In this study, it can be seen from the testimonies of the female managers that career development takes place in a linear fashion, whereby the acquisition of professional experience and knowledge can lead to a level of confidence that enables older female managers (i.e., aged 31-49) to fill advanced roles.

Marital Status factor:

Most of the interviewees (12/14, 85.7%) were married and reported having a partner in the process of raising the children and a more or less equal distribution of tasks, as well as the encouragement and support from their husbands when dealing with challenges in the workplace. Only two of the interviewees (2/14, 14.3%) were divorced. One of the divorced women had a new partner, and even though they were not married, she received help from him. The second woman did not remarry or have a partner, but stated that the need to provide for her two children actually pushed her to acquire an education after the divorce and to develop in her workplace, and that the children have become more independent, saying, "When mom is good, we are also good" .

Number of children factor:

All interviewees (14/14, 100%) had two or more children of various ages. All 14 reported having an active career and were at different stages of career development. According to their testimonies, the children were not a barrier to a career. The fact that they were mothers influenced the choice of jobs from those offered to them, including workplace location. Among other considerations, female managers took into account the need to pick up the children from their educational institutions on time. However, they felt these considerations belong to all genders because "everyone wants to spend part of the day with their children and partners." They noted that their organizations were aware of this and allowed men to get home at reasonable hours as well. In the background of these findings, there are expectations that a typical family will have at least 2-3 children. This expectation is part of Israeli society's culture, nature, and structure. Most people hold that

parenthood is an essential part of life that they will not miss, not even for self-fulfillment and career.

Home and work balance

Interviewees stated that in the past they had less balance between home and work, as they had to prove themselves in the early stages of their careers. All (14/14 100%) reported that because they were away from home for many hours, the children became more independent, and as a result, the ability to work more hours increased. However, women also reported that precisely with time it began to become clear that balance is very important, even more so than career development. Therefore, even though the children were older, the interviewees tended to leave work earlier and spend more time at home. During the early period of the COVID-19 crisis, many people of all genders and sectors of the economy embraced the importance of family and being close to the people they love. This had consequences for the workplace, and employees began to prefer to work at least part of the week from home (UNWomen., 2020). Today, the interviewees reported, it is possible for most employees in their companies to work from home and rely on video conferencing technology, and the resultant ability to be more available to children returning from school and at the same time be part of week in the office contributed to their well-being.

Education

According to the interviewees, an initial condition for career advancement was an academic education. Before or during their careers, female HR managers studied for at least a bachelor's degree. Female HR managers who aspire to advance to senior management positions are continuing to a master's degree. For the most part, the fields of study were in the social sciences: I.e., sociology or psychology, followed by business administration and economics. According to the managers, the reason for the connection between education and promotion to a senior position is that a master's degree prepares them with a background in HR and provides knowledge relevant to their profession. For example, one interviewee started her career only with a bachelor's degree and her work experience in Japan and was hired in the field of logistics. During her job, she progressed to HR management after earning a diploma in the field and then went on to study for a master's degree in order to advance to more senior positions in the organization. Among the career paths reported, there were exceptional cases. One of the interviewees stated that she came from a technical profession and moved to HR management since she did not find satisfaction in her work in the field. She remained in a technological environment, that is, in the high-tech industry, but in a field that tended more to the human side and less to technical aspects. Her understanding of the technical field helped her to recruit employees in this field effectively. Currently, she is a VP of an organization that deals with software. Another interviewee had been an accountant in her company's finance department and progressed there, simultaneously earning a bachelor's degree in business administration. She received the position of HR manager in addition to being promoted to the position of CFO in the company. Such cases are sporadic in the world of HR.

Part B: Occupational background factors

The occupational background data includes factors that directly affect promotion to a managerial position. Most interviewees in this study worked in high-tech (or had

worked in the past). Most remained at the middle management level and did not reach a senior position.

Number of employees in the company

The company's size is determined by the number of employees at a national or global level. However, according to the interviewees, the seniority of the HR manager is measured by the number of employees under her responsibility as the HR manager. The number of employees indicates the responsibility and professionalism and the rank of the HR director. According to the interviewees, the larger the company, the more complex skills and knowledge are required in the professional field of HR. The capabilities and performance of the HR department can be learned from the number of the company's employees. The more employees they are responsible for, the more significant their roles and abilities are. The abilities required of her are both the emotional and cognitive fields.

Number of employees in a company affects the the role of the HR manager

According to the research findings, the number of employees in a company affects the organization's nature and the role of the HR manager in that company. For example, under 50 employees is usually a high-tech startup, while amounts of employees ranging from 300 to 900 is a company that is considered medium in Israel. Companies numbering over 900 and up to 2000 is a company with several sites throughout Israel and the world. (The largest companies in Israel have between 2000 and 5000 employees in Israel and up to hundreds of thousands of employees around the world). According to the research findings, managers who work in larger companies are the ones who acquired skills and experience during their work and also studied and trained throughout their career and reached a senior position. However, according to the testimony of two interviewees, huge international companies will not allow promotion to a senior position just because the senior officials who hold the HR position sit at the company's leading site in America or Europe.

A chronicle of the careers of HR managers according to most of the evidence recorded from the interviews

The first stage of the careers of respondents began with compulsory military service (Forces, 2022). Until the age of 20 or 21 (depending on gender), regular service continued; if the interviewee was an officer, service could also reach the age of 24. In this framework, between the final service year and the first three years of a career, the women acquired practical managerial skills after a managerial course within the army called an officers' course. Following military service and transitioning to civilian life, the interviewees began their careers, during which they sometimes also worked on their academic studies. According to the majority of the qualified, if there was no military service at a high managerial level, the beginning of work was usually in placement companies. Placement companies in Israel are offices for locating job candidates, employed directly by the ordering party and not through a third party. In the placement companies, talent acquires the necessary experience for recruiting employees and can, after a period of time in such work, be transferred to high-tech in a similar position. The difference is that the high-tech company recruits only for itself, and not for different companies as in placement services. The next stage of the career was a 4-6-year span during which the interviewees mostly worked as HR coordinators in companies in the high-tech industry. At this stage, they still

could not be managers because more experience and seniority in the company was required in order to obtain a managerial position, even if they had the required education in a relevant field, such as a master's degree in a social science. After 7-9 years when they had already completed their academic and/or certification studies, candidates could advance to a managerial position. However, some of them reported that they had internal barriers and a personal feeling that they were not prepared enough to accept so much responsibility, since it seemed to them that it required much more knowledge and experience than existed at such an early stage in their career.

In other cases, there are situations where at this stage they already had employees directly subordinate to them. Some interviewees reported that they managed an entire department themselves, but their rank was already a higher one of middle management. Of note, despite the reporting of employees subordinate to managers, most female HR managers are at a middle management level and do all the duties alone, without coordinators working on their department's team. Some of the interviewees stated that only when the amount of work increases, due to the growth of the company or due to the need to lead a change that requires the promotion of various projects related to the personnel system, the need for more employees arises. In this way, when new employees join the team, the original HR managers could take the helm and can also rise to the rank of HRBP.

After female HR managers reached seniority of 10-12 years, there was more of a tendency to give them more of the reins to lead processes from a place of knowledge and experience. They were more likely to attend board meetings and have a more significant role in the organization. They reported that they had more of a part in determining the policy and strategy of their department and that communication and collaboration with senior management were conducted on a daily basis. When the number of years of seniority of female HR managers exceeded 12, this was reported to be a stage at which they were ready and able in terms of experience and professionalism to be responsible for an entire department in their organization. According to two interviewees, they also received responsibility for departments at more distant sites of the company in Israel or abroad, already a position with a wide range of activities suitable for the rank of VP.

The initial period of the COVID-19 crisis was a golden hour for female HR managers

According to the interviewees, when the quarantine days began during the COVID-19 period, there was great uncertainty. Organizations did not know each day what should be done according to health authority instructions and how to continue their activities. This was actually an opportunity for the HR managers to be in a central position and to sit in executive meetings as members of the senior management team even if up to they participated in such meetings less often. The interviewees reported that the crisis and the need to provide an immediate response to directions that were renewed each day, allowed them to be more creative, resourceful, determined, and firm because they were more informed than other members of management (they were informed of their statements through communication in the various forums on social media). They also consulted one another regarding implementation of restrictions and regulations in accordance with the country's labor laws so that there would be no exposure of their companies to lawsuits at later stages after the end of the crisis. According to the HR managers, they knew what was allowed and what was not allowed in terms of layoffs and sending employees on unpaid leave, and knew how to protect and support employees who worked from home, including

helping them function and maintaining the relationship, morale, and formation of the employees. According to the interviewees, this was a great opportunity to prove their ability and also to be recognized for their importance in the organization, and those who knew how to harness this move for promotion were also able to climb the ladder to a higher position or receive reinforcements of employees for the HR department. There were also opposite cases in which the managers found themselves without work, e.g., when part of the recruitment team was laid off because there was no need to recruit for their services while entire teams remained on unpaid leave.

Tasks of HR team members determine, among other things, the rank in the role in the organization

As noted at the beginning of the article, according to most of the interviewees' reports, the beginning of the career for an HR team member was usually at the level of HR coordinator, with tasks including coordination of recruitment, welfare, and/or training. As part of the HR team, she reported to the HR manager, who herself was at an intermediate level, or in rare cases, directly subordinate to the VP of HR. In rare cases, the coordinator was directly subordinate to the chief executive officer (CEO) or the VP of Operations or Finance, in one instance from the beginning of her career (she served as an account manager and began to play an HR role while being subordinate to the chief financial officer [CFO]).

After more tasks were added to the coordinator's responsibilities and her skills in other areas were further improved and refined, she could move up to the middle management level as an HR manager and begin to engage in additional areas. As one of the interviewees said, in addition to recruiting, she also engaged in activities for welfare of the employees, organization of training, and cross-organizational projects such as training of managers for annual employee feedback. At this stage, the rank of HR manager is that of an intermediate manager, but this is reflected only in the salary aspect. According to them, the salary level was equal to that of a department manager in the organization, and the mere fact that she was at the salary level of an intermediate manager did not contradict the fact that she may report directly to the CEO and be subordinate to him/her, though without yet having a role or part in the management team and meetings.

The next advancement step according to experience and qualifications was reported to be the rank of HRBP. This meant being part of the management team, but not necessarily with the corresponding salary (Dagan-Buzaglo, N. et al., 2014), tasks, and responsibilities of a VP (possibly the next level above her). Managers who managed to rise to the rank of VP of HR in the organization managed to do so through a process of learning and training while working and acquiring additional skills and serving on multiple projects. Some of the interviewees stated that they could only advance to this rank outside their organization, because within that particular organization there was no such rank in the field of HR. The reason for this, according to them, was that there had never been someone senior at such a rank in a field considered relatively new and most people are unaware of the importance and need for senior positions. In traditional fields such as finance, legal, logistics, operations, and sales, it seems that a senior position is necessary and the company cannot be managed without it (this can be seen clearly in the report of the Central Bureau of Statistics regarding other fields (Statistics., 2021)). According to the interviewees, the senior management team did not understand the importance of the HR department, which

takes care of people in the organization. However, they qualify their words by saying that since the COVID-19 crisis, the situation has awakened senior management to realize that while if a single person is missing in a certain position, then the organization has a small problem, but if 70% of the employees are not at the workplace because of the epidemic, only 30% of workers were allowed to get to work. In that case, it was crucial to have someone operate this process or organization could be at risk. It was a big operation to coordinate workers when some were sick and in isolation, and some could work but not in 20-hour or 16-hour shifts.

One interviewee said that she knew how to leverage the situation in favor of her promotion. She asked the CEO if he was satisfied with her work and could therefore give her the title of VP, as she actually performed work beyond a normal HR manager in the organization. She did not demand that the salary be updated accordingly, and he agreed to her request and gave her the rank of VP. A year later, she told him that she had worked for an entire year as VP and asked him if he was satisfied with her performance at this senior level and whether she fulfilled the expectations of her position. When the CEO answered 'yes,' she then asked to receive the appropriate salary for the rank at which she works, after having proven her value to the organization. The CEO understood that if he did not upgrade her salary she would find another workplace that would give her a matching position and salary and he would lose her, so he agreed to raise her salary to that of the VPs in the organization.

Is there a possibility of advancing to the rank of CEO?

The question asked here is, to where can the female HR managers move forward at this stage? Is there a possibility of advancing to the rank of CEO?

There are few cases in Israel where a human resources team member became the entire organization's CEO. For the most part, this is a man who held the position of VP of Human Resources, as this is the reality in Israel today. For example, the VP of Human Resources was given the CEO position at El Al Airlines (Tsuk, N. 2008). When the interviewees were asked whether they aspire to reach the rank of CEO, few of them said that, in principle, they would be interested in becoming CEOs, but only in an organization whose essence is social and not business-oriented. Most interviewees stated that at this stage, they refrain from taking actions to bring themselves to this level. This is mainly due to reasons of needing to devote extra hours, as well as to the claim that the position of CEO has additional requirements such as technical knowledge specific to the position or general knowledge of marketing and sales in the organization's field of activity – and that this is knowledge that they lack and are not interested in learning. Another reason why they not want to reach such a position, lies in the fact that a CEO sometimes has to make difficult decisions regarding downsizing and layoffs. They do not want to deal with such complex moral issues, and they also stated that they do not want to enter areas of conflict or dispute. They are only interested in taking on the CEO role and entering the lion's den when there is a vital social goal, such as helping orphans or supporting disadvantaged populations. They emphasized that as CEOs of social organizations, they can bring the knowledge and experience from the business world to the non-profit world. The significant purpose of the organization will justify extra effort with much responsibility and be the reason for them to get up in the morning. However, when nearly the entire purpose of the organization is business and everything is for money and the enrichment of shareholders, the HR managers

have no interest in devoting themselves to the CEO position. Even today, when they work in a business company, Their focus is more on the human side than on the business side: they invest most of their energy in relationships and taking care of the people working in the company. Another response repeated in the interviews was that the HR manager is not interested in advancing to a senior position because she does not want to distance herself from the employees. She is mostly very proud of her relationships with people, where she finds satisfaction in her work. She is not interested in replacing this satisfaction with bureaucracy or strategic level tasks.

Number of employees subordinate to a female HR manager

Another parameter explored in this study is the number of employees subordinate to a female HR manager, in order to assess whether this is a significant factor determining her rank. Most of the interviewees stated that they are in a managerial position at the middle level and are not part of the company's executive team. It is possible that they are not in the position of VP since they do not manage employees under them. Even though she is responsible for all HR issues in the company, since she does all the work without asking for the help of additional employees or a higher salary or title, the management has no need to give her a more senior position. As the number of employees in the HR department increases, so too does its level of responsibility and therefore it should receive a commensurate rank. For interviewees who do manage employees, most of the latter are professional coordinators in the field of recruitment. In such a case, the superior rank is that of an intermediate manager, which is similar to that of a department manager in an organization. Her salary will be similarly higher, though she will not, for the most part, take part in management meetings except in emergencies such as during the COVID-19 crisis.

Subdivisions in the HR team, with coordinators in the fields of welfare, training, and recruitment, tend to occur in larger organization, in which there is a manager for each field. Interviewers opined that in an HR department with several managers and each of them with several coordinators – often teams of approximately 10 people – there should be a dedicated VP who manages these managers. Though the more employees there are under a manager's management, the more senior she can be, it is probable that she will conduct matrix management. The latter is simultaneous management with department managers and assistance from employees from offices involved in projects that are needed in the HR department. The parallel management with managers at her level and below her allows the promotion of projects without the need to provide a title and promote someone to a senior position.

The stage in one's career affects career choices and ambitions

Some HR managers had ambitions to reach one level above them when they were at the beginning of their professional journey. Since the work and the tasks appeared to them from the side as requiring professional knowledge and skills, they did not think that they could skip steps – including the learning process – and simply perform the tasks of a manager even if they were a manager at an intermediate level. As they progressed in their careers, ambitions progressed toward senior positions. This was especially the case for those who had already advanced part of the way to the position of manager or HRBP, and aspired to the next level and set their sights on a higher position already in the belief that

they are able to perform accordingly. Some of the female HR managers who had already reached the rank of VP felt that they are already at the most advanced stage that could be reached in the professional framework of HR. While men in the rank of VP may aspire to become CEO one day (Tsuk, 2008), the female managers who had acquired sufficient knowledge and skill in their field but did not want to distance themselves from the relationship they had with the employees in exchange for more bureaucracy or tasks at a strategic level, preferred to remain in the same position and not advance beyond it. This was especially the case for female managers who were older and preferred to maintain their comfort zone until retirement age.

Discussion and conclusions

In this qualitative study, several parameters were examined that may influence the promotion of female HR managers to senior positions in workplaces, focusing on the high-tech industry in Israel. Interviews were conducted with HR managers in which topics examined comprised the influence of socioeconomic factors such as age, parentage (including number of children and their ages), and perceptions of the balance between home and work. Parameters related to the professional aspect of HR included the level of education required for the position and the effect of the size of the organization and number of subordinate employees on their actual rank. Interviewees were also asked about the stage at which they were in their career and its effect on the motivation for promotion. In addition, the study dealt with the perception of the place and importance of the field of HR in the eyes of senior management of the organization and in the eyes of the female HR managers themselves, and how this affected promotion. Finally, the study examined the reasons for the motivation of the managers to advance to a senior position of VP or even CEO.

The research conducted during the COVID-19 crisis showed that some boundaries and limitations were considered solid and were easily breached in a way that proved to everyone the importance of the HR field in the organization, and some of the female HR managers were able to leverage the situation in favor of their promotion. It was understood from statements that external parameters such as the workplace, the size of the organization, and effects such as the COVID-19 do not constitute a barrier to promotion, but sometimes the opposite. It has been seen that the managers' positions regarding their family status, whether they are married or divorced, mothers of young or older children, and the degree of balance found and desired between home and work do not constitute obstacles to their career, often also quite the opposite. The issue of children is one of the factors that must be taken into account when choosing a workplace, but not the main factor. Other factors that influence the promotion of a female HR manager to a senior position are the size of the company and the number of employees under the manager's responsibility for human capital.

The main reason for the existence of a senior position in the field of HR is the scope of the tasks for which the HR department is responsible. There is also a need for a significant and permanent team that performs many tasks. There is a high probability that a female manager will fill this position since the female gender dominates most jobs in HR.

However, according to the claim of the interviewees, the ambition of the HR manager is not necessarily to reach a senior position because most of them do not want to lose satisfaction from the connection and close relationships they have with employees.

From the responses of the female HR managers, it emerged that the only significant barriers they face stem from their own perceptions and attitudes regarding the position, its importance, and their ability to advance to a senior position. It appears that advancement is affected by several parameters that mainly depend on themselves. The degree of professionalism and experience acquired by a female HR manager in her field of activity in the company throughout her years of work and degree of her confidence in her abilities to perform professional tasks and take on responsibility as required of a senior position holder were crucial to advancement. The interviewees' conclusion regarding the aspiration for promotion is that there will be a more central place to realize their values. HR managers say that if there is a promotion, they want to devote their knowledge, experience, and energy to the social sector in non-profit ventures of high moral value. They would like to be a VP and even in the most senior position, e.g., a CEO, as long as it is in an organization intended for a significant social purpose such as helping the weaker sections of society and not just for business and money.

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