



# ***From Ideal Worker to Ideal Workplace***

Using Behavioral Design to  
Create More Equitable Companies

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## **Executive Summary**

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### The State of the Gender Pay Gap Today

Each year, half of the U.S. population loses millions of dollars and is more likely to be impoverished because of an entrenched inequality: the gender pay gap.<sup>1</sup> Women—who now comprise the majority of household breadwinners in many states<sup>2</sup>—lack the same economic opportunities as men and are paid unfairly for their contributions, significantly reducing their earnings over their lifetimes. Despite greater parity in educational attainment and work experience between men and women, progress on closing the pay gap has stalled since the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> and it remains a persistent problem that exacerbates poverty,<sup>4</sup> harms families,<sup>5</sup> and stalls the economy.<sup>6</sup>

According to Census Bureau data from 2018, women of all races are paid 82 cents to the dollar compared with men of all races.<sup>7</sup> Black women are paid 62 cents to the dollar<sup>8</sup> and Latina women are paid 54 cents to the dollar<sup>9</sup> compared to white, non-Hispanic men.

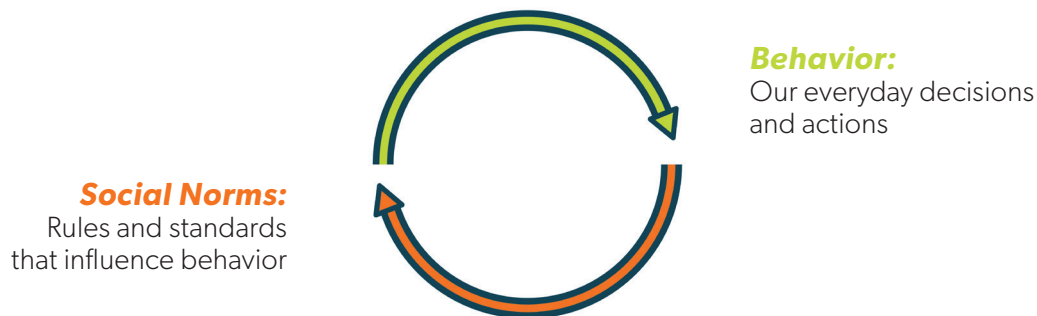
The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to widen these gaps. Social distancing requirements and stay-at-home orders have devastated industries where women, and especially women of color, hold the majority of jobs, while school and child care closures have forced many women to cut back on hours or leave their jobs altogether to deal with caregiving demands.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, COVID-19 has set the stage for a potentially dramatic shift of division of labor at home. Some organizations have begun adopting new policies regarding work from home and flexible hours, which we know can have a big impact on women's earnings and labor force participation. In the past, crises such as the Great Depression and World War II ushered in changes to workplace norms that temporarily benefitted women, but ultimately were not permanent.<sup>11</sup> We urgently need a new approach to create and enforce workplace changes that endure.

### A New Approach to Eliminating the Pay Gap: Behavioral Design

Laws and policies exist to address discriminatory pay practices—including by requiring equal pay for equal work, removing barriers to bringing legal claims, and promoting transparency and reporting on the pay gap. And yet even with those systems in place, discrimination and inequality continue to be both created and perpetuated by human behavior. This paper aims to highlight and address the human factor by introducing a new way of thinking about how to change behaviors—through *behavioral design*.

***Behavioral design is an approach that can help disrupt the cycle of behavior that perpetuates the gender pay gap in part by teaching us something that might seem counterintuitive: the cause of human behavior is often not directly rooted in individuals, but in their contexts or environments.*** While previous attempts to improve gender equality in organizations have focused on debiasing *individuals* through well-intentioned but often ineffective

unconscious bias or diversity trainings, behavioral scientists take a different approach: they design interventions that address the **features** of the environments and systems that individuals interact with to help them make less discriminatory decisions.<sup>12</sup> Changing workplace **contexts** allows employers to shift behaviors away from those that disadvantage women and toward those that benefit all employees.



There are many **contextual features** that can impact everyday decisions and actions in the workplace, such as **social norms**, which are the rules, expectations, and standards that are understood by members of a group, and can influence and constrain behavior.

## Ideal Worker Norms Are at the Root of the Pay Gap

Decades of research suggests that one set of social norms called **ideal worker norms** can impede women's ability to work with dignity and respect. These norms, which date back to the Protestant ethic prevalent at the founding of the United States, reinforce the idea that work demands our complete attention, allegiance, and sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> Designed around the experiences of men who have been able to devote their lives to work only because women took on (and continue to take on) the vast majority of unpaid care work at home, they no longer reflect the realities of workers in the United States: men and women who are increasingly taking on both paid and unpaid labor and therefore have less time to devote solely to work.<sup>14</sup> **Despite these changes to workers' lives, outdated norms continue to both influence current workplace behaviors and inform the design of systems and policies, creating a vicious cycle that in turn reinforces these harmful norms.**

Our research suggests that the perpetuation of ideal worker norms is at the root of the gender pay gap—and that behavioral design is an approach that can help uproot them for good by giving employers a useful set of tools to redesign work and workplaces. We envision workplaces that reinforce positive new standards for employers rather than upholding harmful old expectations for employees, and where employers are held accountable for taking action.

# To Help Close the Pay Gap, Replace Ideal Worker Norms With Ideal Workplace Standards

Following a literature review and interviews with gender equality experts from academia, philanthropy, non-profits, businesses, and a sample of employees, we designed a new set of standards to replace ideal worker norms, which we have titled: **ideal workplace standards**. These standards create new expectations for how employers can and must act to create workplaces where all employees can thrive—workplaces which eliminate the gender pay gap.

Three systems within the workplace stand out as places ripe for change through behavioral design, where outdated ideal worker norms are most likely to create biases that hold workers back and perpetuate the gender pay gap.

1. Hiring and Recruitment
2. Scheduling and Work Hour Expectations
3. Promotions

Below are a set of nine behavioral science strategies designed to create and enforce new ideal workplace standards that employers can implement and test in their workplaces.

## KEY BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES TO IDEAL WORKPLACE STANDARDS



### SYSTEM 1: **Hiring and Recruitment**

#### FEATURED IDEAL WORKPLACE STANDARD: **Design For Caregivers**

Employers design hiring, recruitment, scheduling, promotion, and other systems with caregiving employees—or employees with outside responsibilities—as the default, centering their experience and needs rather than considering them as an anomaly.

1. **Build in checks to a hiring manager's instincts.** Creating explicit and standard hiring criteria is just the first step: Employers should also make sure that the criteria listed is clearly defined, linked to actual, on-the-job responsibilities (which are not unconsciously biased against women). They should also require hiring managers to justify their candidate choices to others.
2. **Frame hiring materials to be more inclusive.** When a woman signals that she is a caregiver, or that she may soon be one, this may activate negative, unconscious biases and flawed assumptions about how those responsibilities could impact someone's performance. **Reframing** caregiving experience as a potential asset, rather than a liability, could help employers make less biased, and more effective, hiring decisions.
3. **Ban negotiation, and make salary-setting processes transparent.** Banning negotiations altogether could benefit both job candidates and employers, who are forced to engage in a protracted, sometimes **hassle-filled** back-and-forth with candidates who *do* try to push for a higher salary. Beyond this, employers could also take steps to make clear how they came up with a particular salary so candidates are informed.



SYSTEM 2:  
**Scheduling  
and Work Hour  
Expectations**

FEATURED IDEAL  
WORKPLACE STANDARD:

**Embrace  
Culture Change**

Employers intentionally build flexibility and predictability into practices, policies, and systems, cultivating a workplace environment that welcomes culture change and new ideas from all employees.

FEATURED IDEAL  
WORKPLACE STANDARD:

**Penalize  
Poor Planning**

Employers hold managers accountable who encourage and perpetuate a norm of working around the clock, and sacrificing life for work.

- 1. Make scheduling rules clear and hours predictable.** Flexibility may not always benefit workers if the norms around it are unclear. Managers can help employees take better advantage of schedule change flexibility by being clearer about how and when employees can request schedule changes, or even by providing a default number of flexible shifts available to all. They can also give employees more control over schedules and hours to improve productivity, predictability, and stability.<sup>15</sup>
- 2. Hold managers accountable for burnout.** Managers will only become better at scoping and delegating work so that it doesn't put unreasonable demands on employees time if they're able to get consistent **feedback** on their performance. Employers could build this opportunity into manager evaluations.
- 3. Create a default process for taking leave.** To reduce the demand on employees to plan for challenges that may be unknown to them, companies should **default** employees into a recommended length and structure for their time off based on the type of leave they are requesting.



SYSTEM 3:  
**Promotions**

FEATURED IDEAL  
WORKPLACE STANDARD:

**Reward Broader  
Leadership  
Characteristics**

Employers promote and advance employees who exhibit an expansive set of leadership qualities, not just those limited to stereotypically masculine traits (for example, assertiveness or aggressiveness).

- 1. Evaluate accomplishments, not personality.** Employers can use evaluation criteria to increase the **salience** of a more expansive set of leadership qualities, using evaluations not only to reward those qualities but also to help **reframe** and broaden the way leadership is defined.
- 2. Create regular, automatic moments to document accomplishments.** Employers can automate **reminders** that prompt employers and employees to document achievements in real time while they're fresh.
- 3. Automatically consider employees for promotion at pre-set milestones.** Employers could opt-in employees to be considered for promotion at a set frequency, eliminating uncertainty around when the right time is, or who should be determining readiness.



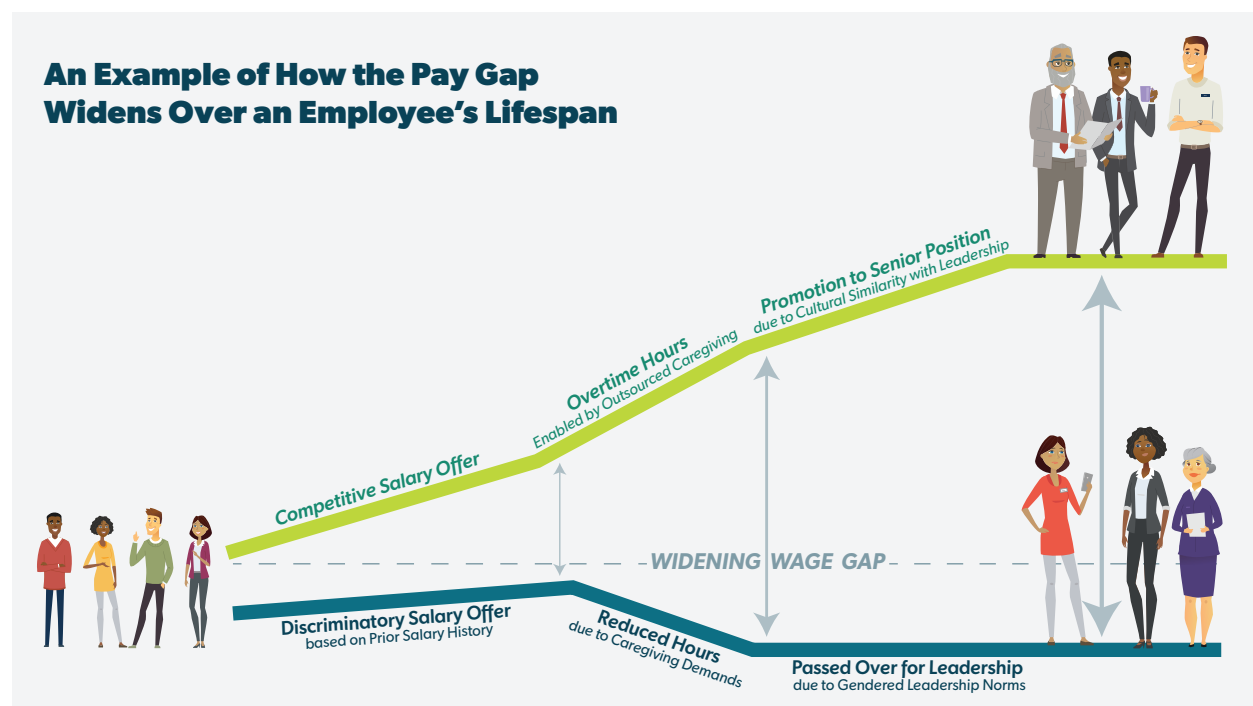
Trying and testing these behavioral strategies is an important first step (among many) for employers who have committed to uprooting outdated ideal worker norms and enforcing new ***ideal workplace standards***.

These ***ideal workplace standards*** and behavioral strategies are not comprehensive, but rather are a starting point to help employers reimagine their role in creating fair and dignified workplaces for all. While behavioral design can play a vital role in reducing the inequalities that perpetuate the pay gap, it isn't a silver bullet. Eliminating the gender pay gap and creating real and lasting change in workplaces **will require many different concurrent tactics**—including the passage of federal, state, and workplace policies. This report offers important, actionable steps employers can take to address workplace norms and policies.

## >> The Problem

### An Invisible Force That Perpetuates the Gender Pay Gap: Outdated Ideal Worker Norms

Each year, women in the United States lose millions of dollars and are more likely to be impoverished because of an entrenched inequity: the gender pay gap.<sup>16</sup> Despite greater parity in educational attainment and work experience between men and women, progress on closing the wage gap has stalled since the 90s,<sup>17</sup> and the pay gap today remains a persistent inequality problem that drives poverty,<sup>18</sup> harms families,<sup>19</sup> and stalls the economy.<sup>20</sup> The pay gap is an issue that impacts women up and down the pay scale in both salaried and shift work.<sup>21</sup> Women in lower paid jobs with volatile schedules, in which weekly or monthly hours can shift with little notice—such as hospitality or retail—often experience additional factors that can suppress wages, such as wage theft or a reliance on tipping.<sup>22</sup>



There are many interrelated barriers to wage parity, such as gendered divisions of labor inside households that can prevent women from pursuing paid work, discriminatory promotion practices that hold them back, and a lack of support for women caregivers that forces many to leave their jobs after having children. While all of these barriers can prevent women from receiving equal pay for equal work, or bar them from higher paying positions or fields altogether, this report will focus on the existing barriers within the workplace.

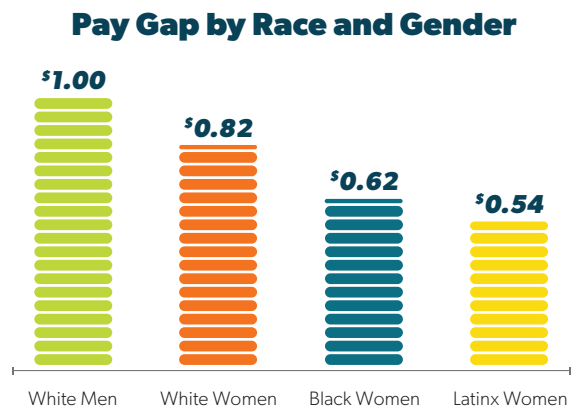
In almost every case, these barriers are higher and more formidable for women of color. For instance, occupational segregation, which is the often biased or discriminatory funneling of women into specific (and lower-paid) industries and roles,<sup>23</sup> is a phenomenon that is compounded by the U.S.'s long history of systematically devaluing the labor of women of color.<sup>24,25</sup> The result is an even larger pay gap, particularly for Black and Latina women.

According to Census Bureau data from 2018, women of all races are paid 82 cents to the dollar compared with men of all races.<sup>26</sup> Black women are paid 62 cents to the dollar<sup>27</sup> and Latina women are paid 54 cents to the dollar<sup>28</sup> compared to white, non-Hispanic men.

COVID-19 has exacerbated these gaps. Research from TIME'S UP Foundation reports that more than half of women surveyed—and almost three-quarters of Latina women and 60% of Black women—suffered job-related consequences from the pandemic in 2020, including losing their job, losing hours, getting a pay cut, or being laid off.<sup>29</sup> While recent economic downturns previously impacted fields dominated by men (such as construction and manufacturing) first and most-heavily,<sup>30</sup> stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures forced workplace closures in industries where women outnumber men, such as hospitality and retail.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, child care center and school closures also prompted by the pandemic led to a significant increase in unpaid care work at home, which still falls predominantly on women.

The larger patterns of discrimination and inequality made starker through COVID-19 are perpetuated by human behavior—namely, the small decisions and actions we take each day. These include choices like whether to apply for a job, hire someone, or offer someone a raise. There are many factors that impact our everyday decisions and actions, but one influential factor is **social norms**. These are the rules, expectations, and standards that are understood by members of a group, and can influence and constrain behavior.<sup>32</sup> Laws influence social norms by setting the bounds for what kinds of behaviors are acceptable, but the consequences for violating social norms are often extralegal. For instance, violating a social norm could mean you get fired from a job or miss out on a promotion. Social norms can be **injunctive** or prescriptive—in other words, defining how people think others should or ought to behave in certain situations (for example, saving for retirement or staying quiet during a movie are two prescriptive norms). Or they can be **descriptive**—a norm that reflects the reality of what most people do in a given situation (for example, most people applaud after listening to a concert). Shifts in social norms can lead to changes in laws and policies over time, creating a reinforcing cycle.

Our everyday behaviors also reinforce and uphold those same social norms. Sometimes, this cycle of influence can be helpful. For instance, in many places there is a visible social norm of not



littering, which is reinforced when someone doesn't litter and the environment remains clean. In other cases, this cycle can be harmful, such as an unspoken expectation that employees will work on the weekends, which is reinforced every time someone sends an email on a Saturday. This expectation can lead to burnout, among other negative consequences. Social norms can also impact how workplace systems are designed. For instance, a norm that dictates ideal employees don't take paid leave or time off—or that they put their personal life second to the mission of the company—could translate into a system that makes it harder for an employee to request any time off, or more challenging to return to work with their previous responsibilities and career path intact after taking leave.

Decades of research now suggest that one set of social norms, ***ideal worker norms***,<sup>33,34</sup> can have a particularly harmful impact on women and on the gender pay gap.



### **SPOTLIGHT:** A Short History of Ideal Worker Norms

Ideal worker norms are a set of expectations that dictate how employees should behave if they want to succeed at work. They have their origins in the 17th century Protestant work ethic and have evolved over time to become a force for excluding and oppressing women and people of color.<sup>35,36</sup>

At a high level, these norms suggest that an ideal worker is someone who considers work a higher moral calling, and responds to that calling with complete devotion and constant sacrifice.<sup>37</sup> As they evolved during the 19th century market and industrial revolutions, they also helped inform a gendered definition of what work is and who deserves to be paid for their work. During this period, “work” and “home” became separate, gendered spheres—one was considered “productive” while the other was not.<sup>38</sup> Ideal worker norms inherently define the formal labor market as the only place where “work” happens, thus excluding the vast amounts of unpaid labor that is performed at home. As a result, these norms have long privileged people without caregiving responsibilities, which include taking care of children, aging parents and other family members, and household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Historically, men have been able to devote their lives to paid work only because women take on the vast majority of unpaid care work elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

***Ideal worker norms*** have also been weaponized to oppress Black workers, especially Black women, during and after slavery.<sup>40</sup> Slavery constructed an expectation that Black women should prioritize taking care of other people and put any caregiving for their families second. This racist expectation continues to funnel Black women disproportionately into caregiving and service roles, where they are expected to show complete devotion and often earn poverty-level wages.<sup>41</sup> While we recognize that the economic engine of the United States runs on the often unacknowledged infrastructure of underpaid caregiving labor, in this paper we focus specifically on the role of unpaid care.

## Behavioral Design Offers A New Approach to Uproot Ideal Worker Norms

Today, these outdated ideal worker norms still influence how modern workplaces are designed. Behavioral design is an approach for changing behaviors and norms by changing the contexts in which people make decisions and take actions, and is informed by decades of behavioral science research from the fields of psychology, sociology, economics, and neuroscience. Behavioral science research helps us understand why people behave the way they do—for instance, why we choose to hire one candidate over another or decide to offer one person a raise instead of another—and offers tools and strategies to change the workplace contexts that perpetuate the pay gap.

For example, managers are often given wide discretion in how they set employees' compensation, leaving room for unconscious bias that leads them to set pay based on qualities unrelated to performance. Rather than try to eliminate an individual manager's bias through an unconscious bias training, which evidence shows is largely ineffective, behavioral design works by changing the manager's decision-making context. In this case, that could mean standardizing the evaluation process to have consistent performance criteria for all, helping to prevent factors unrelated to performance—such as stereotypes—from affecting a manager's decision. This shift in the design of the workplace not only circumvents bias in the moment, but over time can create and reinforce new norms about what qualities really matter to get a raise or promotion.

Behavioral scientists have introduced tools into the workplace to improve equity, such as eliminating gendered language from job postings, which research has shown can impact whether women see themselves in a role, or find it appealing.<sup>42</sup> Outside of the workplace, behavioral solutions have increased voter turnout,<sup>43</sup> retirement savings,<sup>44</sup> and the uptake of crucial medications,<sup>45</sup> and reduced energy consumption<sup>46</sup>—just to name a few applications.

Behavioral design tools and strategies like the ones illustrated above enable us to look into what can seem like the black box that exists between our intentions and the actual outcomes of our actions. By shifting the features of our environment, these tools allow us to:

- 1. Debias Workplace Systems.** Changing an individual's biases, beliefs, and attitudes is hard work—and may not always be possible. Behavioral design focuses on designing solutions that circumvent bias to promote equitable outcomes.
- 2. Experiment and Discover What Works.** Behavioral design gives us an approach not just to design solutions, but to experiment to find out what works and what doesn't. The same methodology we can use to identify and design solutions can also help us test whether or not those solutions work.

Based on the academic literature, there are three outdated ideal worker norms that play a significant role in perpetuating the gender pay gap and are ripe for change.

► **Outdated Ideal Worker Norm #1: An ideal worker works around the clock →**

In practice, this means someone who sacrifices their personal life to meet unpredictable or inflexible schedule demands. In part because women are more likely to be responsible for caregiving responsibilities at home, employers enforce schedules that are harder for women to meet than men. This has exacerbated the gender pay gap by an estimated 10%, effectively erasing the gains that came from closing the gender gap in educational attainment between 1979 and 2009.<sup>47</sup> Women who can't work around the clock are punished with reduced wages, fewer opportunities for development, and by being stereotyped as less committed.<sup>48,49</sup>

► **Outdated Ideal Worker Norm #2: An ideal worker is well-liked and easy to work with →**

In practice, there are different definitions of what “easy to work with” means that vary based on gender. Women are expected to be less assertive and take on more administrative and “volunteer” tasks, which hurts them in evaluations for promotion and compensation.<sup>50</sup> They can be passed over for promotions if they act in accordance with their gender stereotype—such as being agreeable and timid—or branded as abrasive and difficult to work with if they attempt to express stereotypically masculine traits like assertiveness.<sup>51</sup> For men, there is no such conflict because stereotypically masculine traits—such as being confident and decisive—align with ideal worker norms. Women, in other words, experience a conflict between gender norms and work norms, where if they uphold one set, they violate the other.

► **Outdated Ideal Worker Norm #3: An ideal worker fits the existing culture →**

In practice, this means the ideal worker is someone who doesn't try to change the culture. Existing workplace norms can sometimes signal to women that they don't belong if they don't feel affinity with the culture, or reinforce expectations for behavior that women are penalized for if they don't measure up.<sup>52</sup> In order for workplaces to be more inclusive, culture will need to shift.

***"If you're going to reward people with pay, promotions, and advancement based on your perception of the ideal worker . . . you've created a system that will reward and reinforce a work devotion mindset that frankly men have been more able to achieve."***

—Interview with Director of a Think Tank

Outdated ideal worker norms have contributed to workplace systems that limit access and opportunity for women. Instead of reinforcing impossible expectations that create inequity and harm for a significant portion of employees, we have envisioned a new set of standards outlining how **employers** can take responsibility for fostering fair and equitable workplaces. We propose replacing ideal worker norms with **ideal workplace standards**. Drawn from a deep understanding of the academic literature and interviews with experts, these standards help highlight some of the most valuable actions employers can take to close the pay gap and allow *all* of their employees to thrive. They are also based on the idea that workers are critical stakeholders in the health and well-being of a workplace.

## Sticking With the Status Quo Has a Financial, Medical, and Moral Cost

There is a clear business case for employers to counter the forces that lead to bias in the workplace. Discriminatory and outdated ideal worker norms that encourage prioritizing work at all costs (including expectations for evening and weekend work) can lead to increased absenteeism and turnover for businesses, as well as reduced productivity.<sup>53</sup> In one study of the U.S. service sector, researchers found that 26% of workers quit their jobs because of an unsustainable work schedule.<sup>54</sup> Other research shows that the stress that flows from overwork—defined as working more than 50 hours per week—can lead to a variety of health problems (heart disease,<sup>55</sup> depression,<sup>56</sup> and Type 2 Diabetes<sup>57</sup> to name a few) that make it impossible for employees to do their jobs well, or at all.

The pay gap not only harms individuals and businesses, but the economy at large. In a 2017 study, the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that if women earned as much as men, the poverty rate of working women would be cut in half and the U.S. economy would grow by half a trillion dollars in additional income.<sup>58</sup> The pay gap is a missed economic opportunity and acts as a barrier to good work itself. Awareness of unfair pay practices decreases employee motivation, attendance, and output.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, companies that have the strongest cultures of equality—including transparent goals for closing the gender pay gap—have been shown to create six times greater innovation.<sup>60</sup>

Beyond what any metric can tell us, there is also a moral imperative to address these norms and the harmful and unequal outcomes they can produce. Creating workplaces that enable women—half the population—to thrive alongside men is simply the right thing to do for society.

# **The Opportunity**

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## The Promise of Behavioral Design

Tackling gender inequality by addressing behavior in the workplace is not a new idea. Historically, gender equality advocates have focused on addressing behavior and biases in individuals, resulting in an avalanche of unconscious bias and diversity training in workplaces. While well-intentioned, these strategies do not lead to lasting behavioral change. Instead, they predominantly improve attitudes that do not translate into actions that benefit underrepresented groups.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the attitude changes that do occur are likely to quickly fade away<sup>62</sup> and can even prompt backlash against the very groups they are designed to help.<sup>63</sup>

Behavioral design takes a different approach by focusing not on the individual, but rather on the contexts and features of environments and systems that individuals interact with to help them make less discriminatory decisions.<sup>64</sup> By changing the workplace context, we can shift behaviors in a way that benefits all employees, rather than consistently disadvantaging a particular group, in this case women. And by changing behaviors, we can interrupt the routines that propagate outdated ideal worker norms.

## Where Our Work Begins: Three Workplace Systems that Reinforce Ideal Worker Norms With Few Existing Solutions

The key workplace features that reinforce outdated ideal worker norms fall within three major systems that employees and their managers interact with:

| <b>THREE WORKPLACE SYSTEMS THAT REINFORCE IDEAL WORKER NORMS</b>   |  |
|--|--|
|  <b>SYSTEM 1:<br/>Hiring and Recruitment</b>                | Hiring managers are less likely to consider and hire women based on certain characteristics, including appearance, group identity, or caregiving roles. Women of color in particular are more likely to hold caregiving responsibilities in their household, <sup>65</sup> and to be screened out early in the application process. <sup>66</sup>  |
|  <b>SYSTEM 2:<br/>Scheduling and Work Hour Expectations</b> | Women do the vast majority of unpaid care work at home, and yet expectations for work schedules across industries make it impossible for them to combine these roles with paid work. Women, who comprise the majority of low-wage shift workers in the United States, <sup>67</sup> are especially likely to be exposed to volatile schedules, such as consecutive closing and opening shifts and involuntary part-time schedules. <sup>68</sup>                     |
|  <b>SYSTEM 3:<br/>Promotions</b>                            | Unstructured or poorly structured evaluation processes can result in managers deferring to stereotypes when making decisions about who to promote, such as those suggesting that women do not possess leadership qualities. This combination of unstructured processes and stereotyping contributes to the underrepresentation of women in senior roles. Racial stereotypes can compound gender bias to put women of color at a distinct disadvantage. <sup>69</sup> |



These are also features and systems with few effective solutions in the academic literature. While barriers within each of these systems are contributors to inequality, employers who want to eliminate the pay gap and replace outdated ideal worker norms will have to think beyond any single fix. ***These systems and others that drive the pay gap are interrelated, meaning reducing inequality in one element of the workplace will be insufficient if women experience inequality elsewhere.*** For example, improving recruitment practices may get more women in the door, but it doesn't account for other issues that may suppress women's pay progression once they are employed. There is no panacea for gender inequality; employers have to approach change holistically and iteratively if they want to build an equitable and inclusive workplace.

***"Application barriers are one thing, and we know that can change. But if you don't change the hiring process, you get this perverse effect where more women are applying and more are getting rejected from the industry. We're actually potentially leading to a backlash where women don't feel they belong, are incentivized to apply, are rejected, and then it confirms their feelings of unbelonging."***

—Interview with Scholar and Author on Gender Equality

## A New Set of Ideal Workplace Standards are Necessary to Close the Pay Gap

Employers who follow and uphold new ideal workplace standards would:



### **Design For Caregivers**

The needs of employees with caregiving responsibilities (i.e. caring for children, older parents, or other family members, or shouldering a larger share of household work like cooking and cleaning) are often considered *after* hiring, recruitment, scheduling, promotion, and other systems are defined. Instead, employers could design systems and processes with caregiver employees as the *default*, centering around their experiences and needs rather than considering these as an anomaly or afterthought. Accounting for individuals' caregiving responsibilities can also normalize this behavior for all employees, enabling everyone—not just women—to step into caregiving roles, potentially serving as a catalyst for more equality in care work as well.



### **Align Manager Success with Employee Success**

Hold accountable those managers who encourage and perpetuate a norm of working around the clock and sacrificing life for work, and make managers' success contingent on the success of their employees.



### **Reward Broader Leadership Characteristics**

Promote and advance employees who exhibit an expansive set of leadership qualities, not just those limited to stereotypically masculine traits (for example, assertiveness or aggressiveness).



### **Embrace Culture Change**

Intentionally build flexibility and predictability into practices, policies, and systems, cultivating a workplace environment that welcomes culture change and new ideas from all employees.

While behavioral design is a powerful tool, it can't work without the buy-in and leadership of employers. ***Ultimately, it is the employer's responsibility to lead holistic and comprehensive changes in culture, norms, and practices that will help to replace outdated ideal worker norms with new ideal workplace standards and close the pay gap.***

Employers will also need to adapt solutions to the individual needs of their respective workplace and workers. The factors that contribute to the pay gap differ across industries, occupations, geographies, and individuals. Hourly workers will require solutions unique from salaried workers, and corporate managers will face distinct challenges from their employees. Within any position, women with different intersectional and structurally excluded identities—for instance, low-income women of color who may identify as LGBTQIA+—often have very different experiences than their white, cis-gender, heterosexual women colleagues. In other words, *context and identity matter*.

## **The Solutions Illusion**

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### Without Real-World Testing, We Don't Know What Really Works to Fight Discrimination

Beyond speaking with over 30 employees and managers from across the retail and technology industries, our research consisted of an extensive literature review of more than 100 papers and interviews with two dozen experts from across academia, business, philanthropy, and non-profit sectors. The goal was to find evidence of discrimination and bias that perpetuates the pay gap, and rigorously tested solutions for addressing it. Though there were some rigorously tested solutions in the literature, our search also surfaced another insight: **many of the field's canonical findings have not been proven to work in actual workplaces.**

This is an insight that researchers have come to, again and again, over the past decade.

“Experience has led to the identification of ‘best practices’ that have been subsequently recommended for creating equal opportunities for all employees . . . however, there is scant research-based evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of these recommended practices. This paucity raises the question of which ones truly deserve to be labeled best,” write the researchers Quinetta Roberson, Eden King, and Mikki Hebl.<sup>70</sup>

For example, much of what is known about how candidates behave in interviews—from evidence that suggests women tend not to self-promote and that they hesitate to negotiate<sup>71</sup>—is drawn from laboratory evidence with undergraduates or on MTurk.<sup>i</sup> Even one of the more popular findings on joint versus separate employee evaluation—that joint evaluations can lead to more equitable outcomes<sup>72</sup>—is drawn from a simulation with college students, rather than with actual managers conducting workplace evaluations. While this research presents possible strategies to further explore, conclusions or policies drawn from outside the workforce lack external validity for women in the workforce. We can't be sure that what's true in a simulated environment will hold up in the real world.

Even more significant, many of the common narratives about women in the workplace—that they are more risk averse, that they prevent other women's advancement under a “queen bee” mindset—are similarly based on laboratory studies, often with undergraduates, and have frequently been challenged by other studies. Much of this research is focused on uncovering fundamental differences between men and women that can explain unequal outcomes at work, often overlooking how the different contexts men and women experience at work shape their resulting behavior. These narratives can also be harmful: **When research identifies women undermining one another or failing to take initiative as the barrier to equality, it can suggest to employers (and**

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<sup>i</sup> Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) is an online platform that some researchers use to distribute paid research tasks to targeted groups and demographics.

**women) that it is women's responsibility to change themselves, rather than employers' responsibility to change their systems and practices.**

**"We need to stop talking about women being more risk averse, because any woman in business is taking on far more risk than a man by just being in the role. The cost of making a mistake in that role is far higher for women than men. Women surgeons who have an adverse outcome, their referrals go down, AND referrals to all other women surgeons go down. This isn't true for men. Women are not risk averse. To walk out the door at night you have to be taking more risk as a woman."**

—Interview with Scholar and Author on Gender Equality

Instead of relying on narratives about women's tendencies that lack evidence, employers need to adopt solutions that have been rigorously tested and proven to work, and adapt them to the unique qualities of their own workplaces. **Where evidence-based solutions are unavailable—particularly research that centers on the experiences and perspectives of structurally excluded populations—they need to test new ideas to see what has an impact.** The strategies shared in the next section offer a useful starting place for employers by illustrating behavioral approaches that may overcome common barriers for working women within systems for hiring, scheduling, and promotions.



## **SPOTLIGHT:** We Still Don't Really Know How To Foster Inclusion

Creating a more diverse workforce requires not just inviting in more women and people of color, but making them feel a sense of belonging and ensuring that they are supported and valued for being their full selves at work.<sup>73</sup> Research clearly points to the existence of microaggressions in the workplace that disproportionately affect women, especially those who hold intersectional identities of historically structurally excluded groups—for instance, Black, Latina, or LGBTQIA+ individuals. These microaggressions erode one's sense of fitting in (or desire to fit in). They include being talked over during meetings,<sup>74</sup> having one's appearance commented on,<sup>75</sup> and having one's ideas attributed to someone else,<sup>76</sup> among other experiences that prevent an individual from feeling meaningfully connected with their colleagues. Even seemingly benign features of an employee's environment, such as sexualized imagery<sup>77</sup> or stereotypically masculine office decor,<sup>78</sup> can exacerbate a feeling of "otherness."

A connection to other individuals or groups is an important determinant of motivation and performance.<sup>79</sup> And yet, there is limited evidence from the real world for any effective strategies to better foster feelings of inclusion. Common attempts to address barriers to belonging can actually be misguided or come with detrimental consequences. Diversity trainings, among the most popular inclusion strategies, have been shown to affect beliefs more than subsequent behaviors,<sup>80</sup> or benefit white women at the expense of employees of color.<sup>81</sup> Because many studies on belonging may only evaluate the effect of a solution on attitudes and perspectives, proclaimed benefits may not translate into behavior changes that impact women.

Other posited solutions, from increasing the visibility of women role models in the workplace<sup>82,83</sup> to social belonging trainings,<sup>84</sup> have shown positive impacts on belonging, but not within a workplace setting. Instead, they have only been simulated in lab settings or conducted with students, and thus lack the external validity necessary to support their benefit to women in the workplace. As a result, employers who want to improve the experience of employees are left in the dark about what actually works, an evidence gap that demands rigorous testing of these strategies and other solutions.



## IDEAS TO SHIFT NORMS

### *by Changing Systems and Structures*

Three systems stand out as areas ripe for applying behavioral strategies within the workplace: hiring and recruitment, scheduling, and promotions. When employees interact with those systems, they experience key moments where outdated ideal worker norms can hold them back and perpetuate the pay gap. This section explores the barriers that can hold employers and women employees back during those key moments, behavioral strategies that employers can adapt for and test within their workplaces, and proven ideas that employers can use immediately.

These strategies and recommendations are based on a combination of what has been proven in the field, interviews conducted with 30 employees and employers, and interviews with 25 academic, practitioner, and non-profit experts. We spoke with individuals from across racial, sexual, and gender identities, and focused our research on two industries that serve as divergent examples of how workplace systems and employee experiences can vary for women: **tech** and **retail**. These industries offer an illustrative dichotomy to understand the unique challenges women face in different environments—shift versus salaried, low versus high proportions of women employees (~56.5% in retail<sup>85</sup> versus ~26% in information technology,<sup>86</sup> for example), and across a wide range of salaries (the national mean salary for a full-time software engineer in March 2020 was approximately \$146,000<sup>87</sup> versus \$29,360<sup>88</sup> for retail salespeople).



# RECRUITMENT & HIRING

## What's the problem?

Poorly designed recruitment and hiring systems result in employers evaluating candidates and making offers based on personal biases<sup>89</sup> and stereotypes of workers,<sup>90</sup> rather than their actual qualifications for the role. As a result, women—and particularly women who are also members of structurally excluded groups such as Black or Latina women—are put at a disadvantage and ultimately funneled into part-time, lower-paid, or lower-level positions. Research has shown that the sorting of women into specific industries, known as occupational segregation, can explain roughly 50% of the gender pay gap,<sup>91</sup> with U.S. Census data revealing that industries dominated by women are more likely to pay less than industries dominated by men.<sup>92</sup>

## What's the opportunity?

Employers can rethink how they recruit, hire, and make offers to candidates, and design systems that more fairly evaluate candidates based on their actual performance and likelihood to succeed in the job.



## BARRIER #1: The Need To “Fit the Part”

Some hiring managers lack clear, explicit criteria that tells them what to look for in a job candidate. “I have never been told what to look for [in a candidate], but I know what the job entails so I look from that perspective,” one retail hiring manager said. “It’s not written down or anything.” In the absence of clear criteria, managers may instead make hiring decisions based on **stereotypes** (oversimplified and often inaccurate views of a person, which are accepted as fact without question) that they hold about particular groups or identities, or based on mental models (our internal representations of how we think the world works) of who they envision as the right fit for a role. Combining these **mental models** with stereotyping can lead managers to prioritize characteristics unrelated to whether someone can actually do the job. In particular, when managers look for candidates who are the right “cultural fit,” they often end up simply selecting individuals who share a similar background to those already employed.<sup>93</sup>



## STRATEGY #1: Debias hiring managers’ decision-making

**What We Know Works:** Research suggests unstructured interviews are ineffective at accurately assessing someone’s likelihood to succeed in a job,<sup>94</sup> and yet hiring managers still rely on them for hiring and promotion decisions.<sup>95</sup> A better approach is to **create standard questions and hiring criteria to assess individuals**. This type of system has been associated with more women proportionately landing senior leadership roles and can reduce reliance on biased stereotypes or heuristics.<sup>96</sup>

**New Behavioral Ideas:** Simply standardizing interview materials isn’t sufficient on its own to hold hiring managers accountable, or to reduce bias in the process. Employers should ensure hiring criteria are linked to actual on-the-job responsibilities, rather than amorphous qualities like “cultural fit” that leave room for subjectivity or misinterpretation and can impede effective decision-making. One potential way to do so is through **checklists** of essential criteria, a simple but effective tool that makes important information **salient** and clear, and has been shown to reduce medical errors<sup>97</sup> and racial profiling.<sup>98</sup>

Hiring managers could also be **required to justify their candidate rankings with higher level supervisors, making explicit their rationalization for a hiring decision**. In medicine, **justification prompts** requiring doctors to provide a reason as to why they were prescribing antibiotics before they could complete the order in the Electronic Health Record reduced overprescription rates from 23.2% to 5.2%.<sup>99</sup> They might similarly improve decision-making in hiring by slowing down their decision-making process and providing a final check that managers are correctly using the right criteria.





## SPOTLIGHT:

### Why Our Choice of Language Matters in Hiring and Recruitment Materials

**First impressions matter.** Even seemingly small choices such as the words used in a job posting can have an outsized impact on who applies by signaling who “belongs” in the role.

Recent experiments in workplace settings have demonstrated several successful strategies for casting a more inclusive net with job descriptions. In more technical industries where women are historically underrepresented, **adding language to recruitment materials encouraging applicants to apply by name has been shown to increase application rates by women**, which researchers suggest could be because women systematically receive less encouragement and information about pursuing some technical careers than men.<sup>100</sup> Encouragement also extends to removing unnecessary language, as researchers did in a randomized controlled trial of over 600 job postings for roles in Uber’s U.S. corporate offices. Excising optional qualifications and adjectives such as “excellent” when describing desired skills led to a 5% increase in the number of women applicants,<sup>101</sup> in part bringing down the perceived barrier for women who feel they need to meet more of the listed criteria to be hired for a role than equivalent men.<sup>102</sup>

**Highlighting available flexible working options in job descriptions can also increase the number of women applicants.** At the insurance company Zurich, a shift to advertise almost all open positions as allowing the option of “part-time, full-time, job share or flexible working,” in addition to the use of gender-neutral language, led to a 16% rise in women applying for jobs, with 20% more applicants for management roles. Those additional six words added to job descriptions led more men to apply as well, signaling that greater flexibility is coveted by many potential employees.<sup>103</sup>



## BARRIER #2: A Bias Against Caregiving

Hiring managers can hold negative **stereotypes** of women caregivers, reducing the likelihood that they'll consider or hire them for a job. The motherhood penalty—a phenomenon in which employers are less likely to offer jobs or competitive salaries to mothers or women of a certain age due to stereotypes about their level of commitment, competence, and flexibility—is well documented in salaried industries.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, men with kids—particularly white and Latino men—often experience a fatherhood *bonus*, or a rise in earnings after welcoming a child. This is in part because this new responsibility may signal to some employers that fathers are more committed, stable, and deserving of a salary bump.<sup>105</sup>

Research into shift environments suggests that hiring managers are also less likely to hire women who have kids, and when they do, they offer them lower salaries.<sup>106</sup> This type of discrimination is technically illegal, but some companies have devised practices to circumvent hiring laws. “It’s illegal to ask if a woman is pregnant in the interview—we can’t ask how many kids they have, how old their kids are, if they’re expecting,” a hiring manager at a retail outlet described. “But I’ve heard HR plays tricks, like putting up fake photos of kids in the room so candidates comment on it and then you can ask them about it informally.”



## STRATEGY #2: Frame hiring practices to be more inclusive of caregivers

**What We Know Works:** Creating a fair playing field for caregivers means first tackling the deep-seated misperceptions employers may hold about their qualifications for a role. There is evidence that **presenting information about pregnant job applicants that challenges common stereotypes**—that mothers are actually flexible and committed to the position—leads managers to treat those candidates more fairly.<sup>107</sup>

**New Behavioral Ideas:** Rather than put the onus on women to volunteer stereotype-challenging information to affirm their credibility,<sup>108</sup> employers could **prompt hiring managers to rethink their approach to any referenced caregiving responsibilities**. They can do this by **reframing** caregiving experience as a potential asset, rather than a liability. For instance, employers could experiment with listing caregiving experience as a valuable qualification on standardized rubrics used during hiring processes, specifying why it could signal that caregivers possess transferable skillsets: parents may be especially equipped at problem-solving in high-stakes scenarios, and those with elder care experience may be masters at managing complicated logistics. **Reframing** can have a powerful effect on decisions and actions across contexts; for instance, reframing health worker recruitment materials to emphasize that the job was high-paying, rather than emphasizing the job as an opportunity to serve the community, attracted more high-skilled candidates and sent a signal that the work is valued.<sup>109</sup>



### BARRIER #3: Negotiation Penalties

When the expectations around salary are ambiguous, women are less likely to negotiate than men.<sup>110</sup> Since managers can often start employees at different salaries based on their discretion, a tendency to accept what is offered can put women at a disadvantage. An employee who works on the floor at a clothing company described such a discrepancy in her workplace, noting how hiring managers “can basically choose based on your experience level how much they want to pay you. I was lucky enough to start at \$14.50, but it definitely ruffled some feathers among coworkers who had been working for years at other retail stores but only got \$11 to start.”

But here again, women can find themselves in a catch-22: if they don’t negotiate, they could lose out on extra salary. However, if they do try to negotiate, research suggests they are ranked worse on applications, their peers are less willing to work with them, and they are less likely to be hired relative to men who negotiate.<sup>111</sup>



### STRATEGY #3:

#### Ban negotiation and make salary-setting processes transparent

**What We Know Works:** Since women and structurally excluded populations are more likely to have been paid less in their previous roles and avoid negotiating their salaries, employers who set wages relative to prior salaries or based on self-advocacy can perpetuate the pay gap. States that have **implemented salary history bans** have made progress toward closing the gap by increasing the average pay for individuals who change jobs by about 5%, with particularly high gains for women (8%) and Black people (16%).<sup>112</sup> Making salaries transparent not only to job candidates but to the entire workforce has also been shown to shrink or eliminate the pay gap altogether.<sup>113</sup>

**New Behavioral Ideas:** Banning negotiations altogether could benefit both job candidates and employers, who are forced to engage in a protracted, sometimes **hassle-filled** back-and-forth with candidates who *do* try to push for a higher salary. Beyond this, employers could also take steps to make clear how they came up with a particular salary, so candidates are informed. Employers can **make the process for setting salaries more salient for job candidates by showing them a salary formula** (for instance, describing how they weigh particular kinds of job experience and years in the workforce) when making an offer. Standardizing the process also sets the norm that **employers should be using a standard formula or set of guidelines to determine salaries.**



# SCHEDULING & WORK HOUR EXPECTATIONS

## What's the problem?

Scheduling expectations and systems in the workplace aren't always designed with the realities of women's lives in mind.

## What's the opportunity?

Employers can change scheduling systems to give employees more control, and normalize the idea that any employee, not just women employees, can also be a caregiver, which can potentially shift the expectation away from one that only women should be responsible for caregiving. Below are three scheduling barriers that limit women's ability to lead successful lives, both in and out of the workplace, and three strategies with the potential to overcome them.



## BARRIER #1: Uncertain Rules for Rescheduling

In many retail environments, employees are hired with the explicit or implicit expectation that they will have “open availability.” While schedule changes are allowed, the rules for rescheduling are often ambiguous or opaque, leading people not to ask for changes when they need them. This is significant in part because of **ambiguity aversion**, which is the tendency we have to prefer known versus unknown risks, and to avoid behaviors when we aren’t sure what the risk might entail.

Employees may be unsure—and justifiably afraid—of what the consequences might be. Since women tend to have more obligations outside of work, this disproportionately impacts them. As one employee described, “I didn’t request any schedule change because I didn’t feel like I could, I guess. Since they were hiring someone with open availability, if I had requested a schedule change [I worried] they would let me go since they needed someone who was flexible.”

This fear was confirmed by another employee working in retail, who said, “People don’t request schedule changes because they’re afraid the manager may say no, or down the road he may fire them.”



## STRATEGY #1: Make scheduling rules clear and hours predictable

**What We Know Works:** Increasing **predictability, stability, and scheduling control** can increase worker productivity and sales. In 2015 and 2016, the Gap Inc. saw just that when they conducted a randomized controlled trial to test an intervention designed to increase stability in scheduling. It gave store managers more payroll hours to work with for scheduling, created set start and end times for shifts, and allowed employees to swap shifts without involving a manager.<sup>114</sup>

**New Behavioral Ideas:** Flexibility may not always benefit workers if the norms around it are unclear. For instance, unlimited paid time off policies can actually lead to employees taking less time off than they might with some guidelines around how much to take.<sup>115</sup> Managers can help employees take better advantage of schedule change flexibility by **being clearer about how and when employees can request schedule changes, or even by providing a default number of flexible shifts available to all.** **Defaults** are predetermined options that are automatically followed if a decision-maker doesn’t actively make a different choice. A powerful behavioral tool, defaults have proven effective at changing behaviors and helping people navigate complex decisions in everything from saving money<sup>116</sup> to managing their end-of-life care plans,<sup>117</sup> in part by reducing the ambiguity that can shroud particular decisions and actions. Building clear expectations around flexibility reinforces the norm that last-minute changes are a part of life. Having managers model this flexibility in their own workday can encourage employees to follow suit, and ultimately create reciprocity that further strengthens the trust between managers and employees.

It's also important to remember that solutions rarely work perfectly the first time, and often need to be tested and tweaked to make them stronger. In the Gap experiment above, for example, **providing workers with greater clarity and control** increased productivity and median sales, but it didn't solve all scheduling-related problems: the intervention reduced hours for associates overall, a negative consequence since most workers in retail want more shifts, not fewer.<sup>118</sup>



## BARRIER #2: Expectations of Overwork

Because of the underlying moral ethics of outdated ideal worker norms, many leaders valorize working long hours in the name of dedication to work—hours which are harder for women with outside responsibilities to meet, but are punishing for all employees. These work hour expectations are then reinforced by unrealistic timelines, set by managers who may be unaware of how long the work they assign actually takes, and never adjusted as employees push themselves to meet deadlines. Our psychology is partly to blame: people have a tendency to underestimate how long completing a project might take, also known as **planning fallacy**, and a tendency to be **overconfident**—relying on unrealistic optimism in the face of signals that suggest otherwise—about how quickly they can accomplish certain tasks.

This norm of constant work is reinforced by employees who succumb to the pressure. Colleagues emailing or staying at the office late can reinforce a social norm that this is the expectation. Employees may see their coworkers sacrificing their personal lives for work and believe they need to do so as well. As one tech worker we spoke with described, “People at my company are dedicated to working at all times, [so] I’m like I guess I have to do this too. People will make small comments, ‘I have nothing else to do on the weekend anyway.’”



## STRATEGY #2: Hold managers accountable for burnout

**What We Know Works:** A U.S. tech company created a workplace intervention known as the STAR (Support Transform Achieve Results) initiative that significantly increased employee well-being. A key feature of the intervention, which also gave employees more control of their schedules and made it easier to work from home, was training supervisors on balancing employees’ personal lives with professional development. The results suggest that **having managers that support employees’ family and personal lives** can reduce feelings of burnout and improve job satisfaction.<sup>119</sup> Another initiative allowed employees the freedom to organize their work around their lives, with **managers emphasizing only the importance of results rather than time spent working**. Family caregivers in particular were enthusiastic about the policy and how it validated a new norm for prioritizing one’s personal life.<sup>120</sup>

**New Behavioral Ideas:** Managers will only become better at more reasonably scoping and delegating work if they're able to get consistent **feedback** on their performance. **Giving people consistent and immediate feedback** has been shown to adjust behaviors in everything from reducing water consumption<sup>121</sup> to increasing medical treatment adherence.<sup>122</sup> Employers could build in feedback from direct reports on how burned out they feel, how many hours they put in on weekends or nights, and whether they think that work is distributed equitably across the team directly into manager evaluations. Managers who aren't taking steps to reduce or prevent burnout on their teams—for instance, by trying to reduce the scope of work or distribute it more fairly—could lose the opportunity to get a raise or promotion themselves.



### **BARRIER #3: Inadequate Planning Around Leave**

Only 19% of U.S. employees have access to paid leave through their workplaces, and fewer than 60% have access to unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).<sup>123</sup> For those employees who do have access to these crucial supports, there are often no standardized systems for managers to help employees take leave, plan for their transition, or offer support, resulting in challenges and disengagement upon reentry. For instance, employees could return to a new manager unfamiliar with their previous work or come back to reduced responsibilities. In particular, the lack of planning for a future work transition could be partly due to **tunneling**, which is when our brain gets stuck on a problem that feels urgent in the present at the expense of focusing on other, potentially equally important problems. When the focus is on wrapping up current workloads or figuring out how to cover people who are taking leave, there may be little preparation done to ensure a smooth transition out and back into the workplace.

Our interviews with mothers at tech companies confirmed that companies can be woefully inadequate at creating consistency for employees who go on leave. As one described her experiences having two kids at the same company, “I sometimes had new leadership come in while I was gone. I went back to the start of the cycle of having to prove myself, with no one looking at my track record.” Another described how, “[Without guidance from my manager about my return], you go for a while and think, ‘Do I still have my job? Did my responsibilities change?’ If people have gotten by without you, [they] might question if we need the person in this role or not. Leaving for a few months, you come back and it’s a totally new company.”



### STRATEGY #3:

Create employee-informed, default processes for taking leave

**What We Know Works:** At a minimum, **all employers should institute gender-neutral paid family and medical leave policies**—in other words, policies that offer the same amount of paid time for both men and women. Research suggests these policies enable women to stay in the workforce throughout their careers and can help balance unpaid caregiving at home.<sup>124</sup>

**New Behavioral Ideas:** With those policies in place, employers can then experiment with new processes for taking leave, aimed at reducing the burden on employees that need to take it. As soon as leave is approved, employees and managers could have a set of meetings scheduled to go over needed support, anticipate challenges for the employee or projects for when they leave and come back, and co-create solutions and alternatives. To reduce the demand on employees to plan for challenges that may be unknown to them, **companies could default employees into a recommended length and structure for their time off based on the type of leave they are requesting** and informed by guidance from other employees who have gone through similar periods of leave. Employees can deviate from these recommendations, but the defaults help managers and employees avoid **overconfidence** while setting realistic norms for all workers.





# PROMOTIONS & COMPENSATION

## What's the problem?

Managers are sometimes given wide discretion in how they conduct the employee evaluations that inform promotion and compensation decisions, leaving room for subjective decision-making influenced by personal biases. As a result, fewer women, and especially women of color, end up serving in higher paid and senior roles. Women of color, for example, comprise only 3% of women in the C-Suite and 12% of managers; white women make up 19% of the C-Suite and 26% of managers.<sup>125</sup>

## What's the opportunity?

Employers control the pathway to promotion and are therefore best suited to remove barriers preventing more women from attaining senior leadership positions. Below are three barriers preventing women from advancement and three strategies to overcome them.



## BARRIER #1: Managers Overweight Personality Traits

When writing performance evaluations and making promotion decisions, managers tend to give women feedback that is more likely to be tied to negative **stereotypes**, and less likely to be connected to specific professional outcomes. One field study suggests that women are more likely to receive negative personality-based feedback (for instance, being described as inept, gossipy, scattered, or temperamental) than men on their evaluations.<sup>126</sup> They're also less likely to receive clear, constructive feedback on how to improve.<sup>127</sup> These personality-focused evaluations are fueled by narrow expectations for women's workplace behavior that often put them in a catch-22,<sup>128</sup> namely that women who want to succeed in traditionally masculine spaces (such as corporate environments) are encouraged—implicitly or explicitly<sup>129</sup>—to behave more like men, even if that hurts them in the long run. This puts the onus on them to change while simultaneously devaluing stereotypically feminine skillsets, like listening and collaboration. At the same time, women who follow this “be like a man” advice and deviate from stereotypical feminine gender norms (for instance, by being assertive or demonstrating anger) can face negative professional consequences (for instance, more negative evaluations<sup>130</sup>) and social consequences (such as diminished power and influence<sup>131</sup>).



## STRATEGY #1: Evaluate accomplishments, not personality

**What We Know Works:** Developing structured, standardized evaluation criteria is the first step to reducing managers' reliance on subjective, personality-based evaluations and stereotypes to make promotion decisions. These criteria should be built around specific outcomes and designed to prompt a manager's constructive, objective feedback.<sup>132</sup>

**New Behavioral Strategy:** Employers can use evaluation criteria to increase the **salience** of a more expansive set of leadership qualities, using evaluations not only to reward those qualities but also to help **reframe** and broaden the way leadership is defined (See [SPOTLIGHT: How Do We Define 'Ideal Leaders'?](#)). For instance, an evaluation might ask for an example not only of a specific performance outcome, but also for an example of the individual helping a teammate build their skills or abilities, or being able to help a team come to an agreement—in other words, illustrations of a more collaboration-oriented leadership style that is stereotypically feminine.



## **SPOTLIGHT:** How Do We Define ‘Ideal Leaders’?

When individuals are asked to reflect on the most essential qualities of leaders, most think men and women are equally capable of possessing them.<sup>133</sup> At the same time, other research that asked people to select the most important traits for a leader found that participants tended to devalue traits that are perceived as stereotypically feminine.<sup>134</sup> Together, these findings make a couple of important points: 1) the leadership stereotypes we hold are rooted in unconscious biases—the simplistic conclusions we form about certain people or groups that happen outside of our conscious awareness; and 2) how we *think* we feel about women in leadership positions may not always show up in the way we act, in part due to the influence of unconscious bias. In other words, intentions to promote women equally may fall short if managers aren’t encouraged to use a more expansive set of qualities associated with strong leadership—qualities that could be integrated into evaluation and promotion guidelines or spotlighted through organization-wide narrative profiles.

### ***Highly Valued Agentic (Stereotypically Masculine) Traits***

- ▶ Ambitious
- ▶ Self-Reliant
- ▶ Assertive
- ▶ Confident
- ▶ Competitive
- ▶ Competent
- ▶ Decisive

### ***Devalued Communal (Stereotypically Feminine) Traits***

- ▶ Cooperative
- ▶ Sensitive
- ▶ Cheerful
- ▶ Tolerant
- ▶ Patient
- ▶ Sincere
- ▶ Polite

What could a more expansive set of leadership traits look like? Some researchers have proposed a few ideas of effective and valuable leadership qualities:<sup>135</sup>

- 1.** Share responsibility and credit
- 2.** Prioritize helping others develop their skills and abilities
- 3.** Build and maintain connections and relationships
- 4.** Engage in collaborative decision-making (in other words, asking for others’ opinions and input)
- 5.** Model honesty and authenticity; stand up for what they believe in
- 6.** Hold up under pressure



## BARRIER #2: Invisibility of Accomplishments

In many workplaces, evaluations happen infrequently—sometimes once a year, or once every six months. This poses a challenge for employees due to **recency bias**, our tendency to better remember more recent information, sometimes at the expense of more important details. As a result, managers may fail to consider the full breadth of an employee's accomplishments when determining their readiness for promotions.

As one employee described, “It would be nice to have some way across the year to mark [others’ accomplishments], so if I’m not your team lead in the future, whenever you get a review they can go back and see the kudos in context. Instead of lumping it together at one time and hoping people remember a full year’s worth of achievements for 20 people.” This issue can be exacerbated for women: some research suggests that because women are socialized to be modest, they may have a tendency to self-promote less than men, meaning that they are less likely to explicitly talk about accomplishments and strengths.<sup>136</sup> When managers rely on fallible memories or an employee trumpeting their own successes through self-evaluations to make promotion decisions, women may be at a particular disadvantage. What’s more, some research also suggests women may be more likely to volunteer for less promotable tasks—such as regularly taking notes during meetings or planning office gatherings. This is another dimension of their accomplishments that may remain invisible, though this work can be essential to employee productivity and retention.<sup>137</sup>



### STRATEGY #2:

Create regular, automatic moments to document accomplishments

**What We Know Works:** When review processes are unstructured, research suggests that women are more likely to be assessed based on negative stereotypes, resulting in less accurate and worse evaluations. However, building in a protocol that requires an evaluator to separately consider both positive and negative qualities of a candidate has been shown experimentally to help mitigate this gender bias,<sup>138</sup> suggesting the need for employers to **set up structures for managers to comprehensively evaluate their direct reports**.

**New Behavioral Strategy: Reminders** are a simple behavioral tool that have had an outsized impact on everything from getting students to apply in time for the FAFSA<sup>139</sup> to increasing vaccination rates.<sup>140</sup> They can be put in place to **automatically prompt employers and employees to consider and document achievements in real time while they are still top of mind**. This includes both those that are pre-defined milestones for projects (for instance, an email reminder could be scheduled after a big presentation or sale) and what are unplanned successes (email reminders at the end of the week, prompting reflection on the previous few days). To make documenting easier, employers could create physical or digital places to store successes that they could reference during evaluations. This

could look like a shoebox with a hole cut into the top placed in a break room, an email account, a Slack channel, or a text chain where employees and managers can send their accomplishments.



### BARRIER #3: Ambiguous Path to Promotions

Promotions processes and timelines can be hazy for both employees and managers: employees don't necessarily receive clear signals about when they're eligible or ready for a promotion, and for managers it may not always be clear if one of their direct reports is ready or eligible.



### STRATEGY #3:

Automatically consider employees for promotion at pre-set milestones

**What We Know Works:** Employers should opt employees in to be considered for promotion at a set frequency, such as every year or at the end of a project, creating a proactive **default** that eliminates uncertainty around when the right time is, or who should be determining readiness. Some research suggests that opting women employees into consideration for promotions rather than putting the onus on employees to ask or managers to nominate them, could increase the likelihood that more women will be promoted.<sup>141</sup>

**New Behavioral Strategy:** Beyond ensuring that all employees are regularly considered for promotions, **managers could be given clear rules of thumb for when to nominate employees for promotion** outside of that default. Rules of thumb act as actionable, digestible guidance, and have had impacts on improving entrepreneurial business practices<sup>142</sup> and improving neonatal care by new mothers.<sup>143</sup> Within the workplace, these could be tied to specific accomplishments rather than competencies that can be hard to consistently define. For example, managers could put employees under consideration for review when they hit a discrete, prespecified sales target, rather than waiting to decide when they have sufficiently demonstrated “exceptional sales acumen”. To effectively curtail ambiguity, these benchmarks need to trigger promotion consideration automatically when they are hit, rather than leave it up to employees to self-advocate based on their accomplishments.

# WHAT ALL EMPLOYERS

## *Can and Should Do Right Now to Close the Pay Gap*

While many of these ideas and solutions will require some tailoring and testing, there are immediate actions companies can take **now** that have been shown to help close the pay gap in workplaces.

- 1 Remove restrictions on discussing salaries with coworkers.** A lack of transparency or even outright warnings against discussing salaries prevent women from identifying discrimination so they can resolve it. Industries with regulations enforcing salary transparency are associated with greater pay equity.<sup>144</sup>
- 2 Ban questions about previous salary and salary expectations during interviews with potential new hires.** Because women are more likely to have been paid less in their previous roles, the practice of setting an employee's wages relative to their prior salaries (or more covertly asking about "salary expectations") perpetuates the pay gap. Banning the practice has already been shown to help close the pay gap in starting salaries, notably for women of color.<sup>145</sup> The onus should be on employers to determine a competitive salary and to offer it to any candidate.
- 3 Give employees more control over their schedules.** Evidence from the STAR (Support Transform Achieve Results) initiative demonstrated that giving tech employees more control over their schedule can significantly reduce burnout and ameliorate work-family conflict, especially for women. In particular, making it easier for employees to work from home and training supervisors on supporting employees' personal lives were key features to improving outcomes.<sup>146</sup> In the retail industry, one experimental program that gave employees more schedule control also led to increased productivity.<sup>147</sup>
- 4 Standardize interview questions and order.** Setting clear and consistent evaluation criteria and pre-determined, pre-ordered interview questions has been shown to increase the likelihood of women receiving senior leadership roles, based on a national sample of 516 work organizations. This is especially impactful for larger companies that have greater adherence to formal practices.<sup>148</sup>

**5 Implement gender-neutral paid family and medical leave policies.** Paid family and medical leave policies—which provide employees with a number of days that they can use to care for a new child, an ill family member, or to address another health issue—are a proven tool to help women stay in the paid workforce. One analysis found that states that implemented paid leave policies saw a 20% reduction in the number of women who left their jobs after the arrival of a child.<sup>149</sup> Paid leave policies should be gender-neutral, offering and *encouraging* both mothers and fathers to take the same amount of time off when they have a child. Research has also shown that gender-neutral leave policies that offer and encourage both parents to take the same amount of leave when they have a child can help rebalance caregiving responsibilities at home, better enabling women to pursue paid work.<sup>150</sup> Paid leave policy experts suggest workers be given a minimum of three months of paid leave, and guaranteed job security when they return.<sup>151</sup>

**6 Set explicit diversity goals and dedicate resources to the cause.** As one of the experts we spoke to put it, “if you’re not willing to put some numbers and concrete goals to diversity, you’re not going to reach it.” The policies with the strongest track record for increasing diversity at organizations are affirmative action and the creation of diversity task forces because they establish organizational responsibility for hiring and promotion outcomes.<sup>152</sup>

## **What's Next for Employers**

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Our research points to a common and pervasive set of outdated ideal worker norms that drive and exacerbate the pay gap. These norms are entrenched in seemingly innocuous workplace practices and cultures, meaning that addressing inequality will require shifting our understanding of how organizations attract and retain talent, set hours and scope workloads for employees, and evaluate candidates for senior roles, among other aspects of work life.

Employers should not only signal that they commit to championing new ideal workplace standards, but also make the steps they're taking to uphold those norms transparent. This could include developing key metrics to help gauge progress as they make changes (such as measuring retention rates for women or the number of women promoted to senior leadership), along with a commitment to reporting publicly on those metrics. Leading this cultural shift is both a responsibility and opportunity for employers—a strategy not only to better attract and retain talent, but to do the right and moral thing to help all employees advance and thrive. This is one step of many that employers must take to create more safe, fair, and dignified workplaces.

***"If you're not willing to put some numbers and concrete goals to diversity, you're not going to reach it."***

—Interview with Founder of a DEI Consulting Firm

While employers, behavioral scientists, policy-makers, and advocacy organizations all have crucial roles to play in this effort, employers and business leaders are the main foot soldiers. ***If employers and business leaders don't make changes, the pay gap will remain unchanged.***

Behavioral design offers tools to help employers make these changes and to begin testing, tailoring, and implementing high-impact behavioral design strategies in their workplaces. At the same time, behavioral strategies are part of a larger ecosystem of necessary changes needed to ensure pay and wealth equity. Changing our workplaces to be more equitable will require a holistic approach, including changes to federal and state policies.

Taken together, these actions could help to tell a new, more inclusive story about who and what an ideal worker looks like. Equally as important, they can help us envision what it looks like when business leaders put their employees first as champions of ideal workplace standards. Embedding these norms in workplaces can be transformative—catalyzing behavior change that can help eliminate the pay gap once and for all. Employers have both a responsibility and an opportunity to act now.

***Interested in applying behavioral design strategies within your workplace?***

Email us at [gender@ideas42.org](mailto:gender@ideas42.org).



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