

Retaining Women in the Workforce



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50 Champions List

The following is a full list of the 50 Champions of Gender Diversity who graciously lent their time to this report. TalentCorp and ACCA are indebted to these 50 Champions for their input into making this a well-rounded report:

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About TalentCorp

Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp) was established on 1 January 2011 under the Prime Minister's Department to formulate and facilitate initiatives to address the availability of talent in line with the needs of the country's economic transformation. Collaborating closely with relevant Government agencies and employers in priority economic sectors, TalentCorp develops demand-driven initiatives focused on three strategic thrusts, specifically (1) Optimise Malaysian talent, (2) Attract and Facilitate Global Talent and (3) Build Networks of Top Talent.

We see ourselves as the bridge between the public and private sectors in Malaysia. We listen to the private sector to better understand their talent needs for tomorrow. We partner with the public sector to introduce and implement facilitative policies and initiatives to nurture, attract and retain top talent for the country. We believe that Malaysia truly has talent and that talents of all backgrounds will be able to find meaningful professional opportunities in this country. Towards this end, we collaborate with employers and engage with talents at home and abroad to promote the dynamic and diverse professional opportunities available in Malaysia.



About ACCA

ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) is the global body for professional accountants. We aim to offer business-relevant, first-choice qualifications to people of application, ability and ambition around the world who seek a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and management.

We support our 154,000 members and 432,000 students in 170 countries, helping them to develop successful careers in accounting and business, and equipping them with the skills required by employers.

We work through a network of 83 offices and centres and more than 8,500 Approved Employers worldwide, who provide high standards of employee learning and development.

Through our public interest remit, we promote the appropriate regulation of accounting. We also conduct relevant research to ensure that the reputation and influence of the accountancy profession continues to grow, proving its public value in society.

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Introduction

“Corporate Malaysia needs to do more to retain women in the workforce. Not for welfare reasons but because it’s good for business and it’s the right thing to do.”
Johan Mahmood Merican, Chief Executive Officer, TalentCorp.

A key principle of current management holds that 21st century knowledge economies are competing on skills and talent. Since women make up roughly half of the global population, unlocking the female talent asset through **gender diversity and inclusion** initiatives could be the differentiating factor or even a deal-breaker for economies aspiring to move up the value chain.

Across the globe, a key challenge for economies today is to attract and retain more qualified women in the workforce. While there is a consensus among women-focused research studies that the increased presence of women in the workforce mitigates business risks and increases competitiveness and productivity, albeit governments and employers still lag behind in capitalising on this relatively untapped talent pool.

This is the case in Malaysia. According to the World Bank - Malaysian Economic Monitor; November 2012 Report, the labour force participation rate among women remains low at 46% compared to ASEAN countries like Singapore (60%) and Thailand (70%)¹. Likewise, the report found that “the number of working age women who are employed or looking for employment is lower in Malaysia compared to other countries with similar income levels.”

Harnessing its female talent in larger numbers could conceivably unfetter Malaysia’s economic potential and facilitate its journey to high-developed status. “Malaysia has the opportunity to accelerate its transformation into a high-income economy if more women were in the labour force” said Annette Dixon, World Bank Country Director for Malaysia. “Closing gender gaps and encouraging women to bring their skills to the labour market could leapfrog Malaysia to high income status.”

Recognising the power of womenomics, the Malaysian Government is aggressively taking steps to leverage on women. Ambitiously, the 10th Malaysia Plan aims to increase women’s labour force participation to 55 percent in 2015, within the broader framework of labour market reform. Women are similarly integrated into the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP): as part of the Strategic Reform Initiative on Human Capital Development, a Roadmap for Leveraging Women’s Talent was developed outlining measures targeted at all stages of a woman’s career.

Apart from these policies, the Government and its agencies have initiated targeted incentives to retain and recall women back to the workforce. These include the Double Tax incentive on the training expenditure incurred by companies that hire women on career break, fund allocation and assistance for child care centres at organisations. For sharing and benchmarking of best practices in attracting and retaining women in the workforce, listed companies are also encouraged to disclose these policies and practices in their Annual Report.

Meanwhile, Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp), an agency dedicated to championing Malaysian talent through collaborations with corporate Malaysia and other stakeholders has identified women as a key segment of the Malaysian workforce. Cognizant of the challenge that most women face in having to juggle personal and work responsibilities, TalentCorp is a strong advocate of flexible work arrangements and support facilities. Hence, in July 2012, TalentCorp in collaboration with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development developed Talent Wanita, a career microsite to connect women with companies that advocate gender diversity and inclusion by offering jobs with flexible work arrangements and support facilities. TalentCorp believes that womenomics could bring significant positive changes to the talent landscape and calls on Corporate Malaysia for support because it is good for business and the right thing to do.

¹ Malaysian Economic Monitor – Unlocking Women’s Potential by The World Bank; November 2012

About The Survey :

Understanding Female Talent In Malaysia

While these initiatives are to be lauded, it is crucial to further analyse the factors behind the scarcity of women in the Malaysian workforce in order to devise the appropriate solutions.

The prevalingly low rates of women participating in the Malaysian labour market raise several compelling questions: Why do fewer Malaysian women participate in the workforce? What are the unique pressures and challenges they face in the Malaysian context? Is there a lack of gender diversity and inclusion initiatives to level the playing field? How can government and employers facilitate a favourable environment for working women to encourage retention? How can organisations embed gender diversity and inclusion into their corporate DNA to attract and retain female talent?

To gain insights into these issues, TalentCorp and ACCA mooted a joint survey on the state of female employment and retention in Malaysia in mid-2012, entitled “Retaining Women in the Workforce”. This survey is a critical element in TalentCorp and ACCA’s initiative to promote gender diversity and inclusion through sustainability reporting via the ACCA Malaysia Sustainability Reporting Awards (MaSRA) 2013.

Gender diversity and inclusion is particularly relevant for ACCA as a leading global professional accountancy body whereby women comprise more than 50% of its members and students. ACCA supports equal opportunity workplaces and environments where all its members can thrive without prejudice or penalty. As a leading global professional accountancy body, ACCA champions sustainability reporting as a means to influence sustainable behaviour among organisations. Peter Drucker, a well-known management guru said that “what gets measured gets managed”. In that vein, what gets reported, gets managed, and this applies to sustainability reporting and behaviour.

On TalentCorp’s part, championing gender diversity and inclusion is synergistic with its mandate to augment and enrich the talent pool to fuel the needs of the country’s economic transformation. TalentCorp subscribes to sustainability reporting as an effective means to create awareness of best practices in gender diversity and inclusion, and to persuade organisations to become women-friendly.

There are compelling reasons to undertake a survey of this nature in order to proceed effectively in designing, refining and discharging policy interventions and talent initiatives. First, the survey aimed to determine the reasons behind Malaysian women’s low participation in the labour force. Linked to this is the education and employment mismatch – although women account for 60% of university enrolment and graduates, these numbers are not reflected at middle management and senior management levels, much less in the boardrooms.

Second, how can the survey identify mechanisms and strategies to support women in managing their family commitments? The pattern of female employment in Malaysia shows that the numbers of working women in their early and mid-20s are high presumably upon graduation, but numbers decline quickly and fail to recover as women get married and start families, noted World Bank research². Thus, the issue here is to create a family-friendly working environment as well as an optimal work-life balance, all of which are key issues in the arena of gender diversity and inclusion.

To kick off the survey in mid-2012, an invitation to participate in an online survey on ‘Retaining Women in the Workforce’ was sent out to all ACCA members in Malaysia. A total of 824 responses were received by early September 2012. While the survey was limited to members of the accounting and finance profession, their views should be generic and fairly representative of the working population in Malaysia, particularly professional women.

² Malaysian Economic Monitor – Unlocking Women’s Potential by The World Bank; November 2012

50 Champions Campaign

Gender diversity and inclusion are pivotal to corporate sustainability going forward. Currently, awareness of these issues is still nascent within corporate Malaysia. To move Malaysian employers more swiftly up the learning curve, TalentCorp and ACCA formulated the 50 Champions of Gender Diversity Campaign which will surface benchmarks, best practices and role models on gender diversity and inclusion programmes for local organisations.

Fifty of Malaysia's leading organisations from a cross-section of multinational corporations (MNCs), public listed companies (PLCs), government-linked corporations (GLCs), government agencies and regulators were carefully selected to participate in the 50 Champions campaign. This campaign aims to distinguish and laud these 50 leaders and their organisations in Malaysia for gender diversity and inclusion initiatives, which includes rewarding women's contributions in the workplace equitably and supporting women's advancement into the C-suite and the boardroom. At the same time, these 50 Champions will serve as role models for other organisations in the Malaysian environment as the latter strive to improve their own talent development and retention structures modelled on the best practices of the 50 Champions.

The insights of the 50 Champions played an indelible role in shaping the conclusions of the ACCA-TalentCorp survey. In September 2012, we approached the 50 Champions to share their views and existing policies on issues related to gender equality and diversity in the workplace. Their perspectives can be found in the section entitled '[50 Champions: Leaders in Gender Diversity & Inclusion](#)' and many of their insights confirm previous research and match the opinions offered by our survey respondents. TalentCorp and ACCA are indebted to these 50 Champions for their input into making this a well-rounded report.

TalentCorp and ACCA believe that the findings presented through our report will be useful in innovating and refining gender diversity and inclusion strategies to help achieve full participation by women in the workforce, whether in the public or private sector. It is only when all stakeholders work together to create a conducive environment that genuinely supports women's multiple roles, can Malaysia truly expect inclusive economic participation from skilled and qualified women.

By unleashing the full force of its female talent, Malaysia will be much nearer to achieving its vision of high-income and highly-developed nation status by 2020.

Key Findings And Recommendations

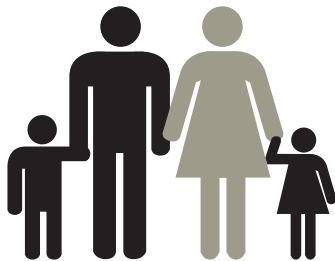
Key Findings

The survey on 'Retaining Women in the Workforce' revealed recurring central themes that confirmed the findings of previous women-oriented research. From the survey, Malaysian women visibly desire flexible work arrangements that accommodate family commitments, support for maternal needs, optimum work-life balance and equal opportunities and rewards. These factors are repeatedly emphasised in gender diversity and inclusion initiatives; therefore it seems quite natural that employers investing in diversity and inclusion programmes which are oriented to the circumstances of women will be more likely to attract and retain female talent.

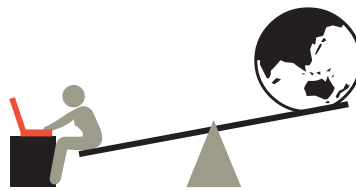
1) Why do women leave?:

According to the findings of the survey, the top three reasons "why women leave the workforce" are as follows:

#1 TO RAISE A FAMILY



#2 LACK OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE



#3 TO CARE FOR A FAMILY MEMBER



2) Barriers to re-entry:

While many women on hiatus want to return to work, they face many barriers to re-entry such as career obsolescence and employer bias.

93%
OF FEMALE RESPONDENTS ON A CAREER BREAK
CONSIDERED RE-ENTERING
THE WORKFORCE



63%
FIND IT
DIFFICULT
TO RETURN TO THE WORKFORCE

3) Employers (in) action:



and **ONLY 30%** of employers have Flexible Work Arrangements policy



5) Women on top:



67% want better support for flexible work arrangements to tackle the shortage of women in c-suites and boardrooms.

Recommendations

The survey found that gender diversity and inclusion programmes are currently not in wide practise among Malaysian employers, which affects the retention rates of female talent. The following is a summary of key recommended initiatives which the government and employers may want to consider based on the findings of the ACCA-TalentCorp survey and feedback from the 50 Champions:

WOMEN TALENT RETENTION

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS



Flexible work arrangements are the key to attracting and keeping women at work. Integrate flexible work arrangements within company human resource policy and ensure transparent communication and enforcement to prevent abuses and marginalisation of employees.



CAREER FLEXIBILITY

Incorporate options for formal career breaks into human resource policy so women can take longer career breaks if necessary to manage family and childcare commitments, without marginalising their prospects.



MATERNITY BENEFITS

Companies are urged to be more attuned to the needs of new parents by increasing maternity leave from 60 days to 90 days, which could in turn improve retention rates. To manage fluctuations in productivity, companies could employ contract staff to take up the slack and provide alternative options for fathers to take flexible paternity leave, which would enable working mothers to return to work instead.



QUALITY CHILDCARE

Working parents desperately need reputable, reliable, accessible and high-quality child care. Organisations could cater to employees with families by setting up crèches and childcare services onsite, encouraged by the government through the upcoming 2013 Double Tax Incentive. Yet, further regulation and enforcement is needed to ensure quality childcare and parental peace of mind. Equally urgent is to resolve the ongoing issue of limited supply and affordability of live-in maids and household help.

RETENTION FACTORS

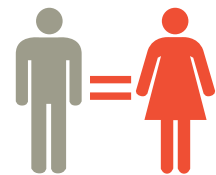
Organisations should build a business case for diversity and inclusion which emphasises women’s needs. By sidelining women, companies lose half of their talent pool and ignore 50% of their consumer markets. The government should consider adopting global best practices on diversity and inclusion, such as mandatory reporting on gender diversity to influence corporate behaviour.

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION POLICY



Implement a culture of equal opportunities, combined with a robust and transparent process for leadership development to eliminate women’s perceptions of gender bias in the workplace.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES



Flexible work arrangements, particularly remote working and mobile working arrangements, must be supported by affordable world-class infrastructure. Perhaps the government could offer more subsidies or tax breaks for high-speed internet broadband usage to reduce connectivity costs. Meanwhile, employers need to invest in the devices and systems to support flexible work arrangements.

LEVERAGE ON TECHNOLOGY



As Malaysia evolves into a knowledge-based economy, higher-value jobs will emerge and women must be upskilled to fill these positions. Government and employers must collaborate to deliver the intensive and remedial training required and encourage professional qualification.

UP-SKILLING WOMEN



Government-backed affirmative action and legislation is vital to support working women and family-friendly workplaces. Many survey respondents wanted government to take the lead and influence corporate behaviour by initiating diversity and inclusion programmes in public sector workplaces. Specifically, government should initiate flexi-jobs in public sector workplaces and legislate flexible work arrangements to afford them legal protection.

GOVERNMENT INCENTIVES



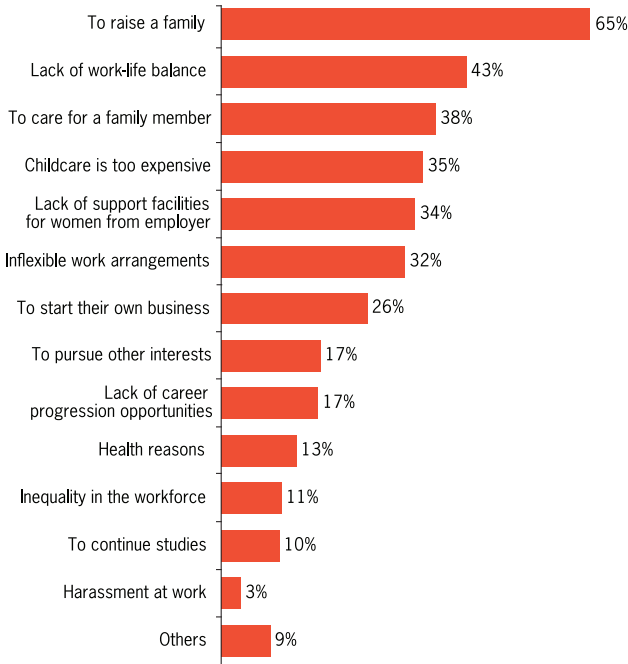
Survey Findings In Detail

Why do women leave?

According to World Bank research, the participation rate of Malaysian women in the workforce stands at 46%, considerably lower compared to its ASEAN peers and other countries with similar development and income levels. While qualified women may join the workforce in larger numbers at the beginning of their careers, mid-path their numbers begin to decline as they quit formal employment.

In order to stem the exodus, it is necessary to understand exactly why women leave whether on a permanent basis or to take a career break. According to the findings of the survey, the top reason why women leave the workforce was to raise a family, followed by lack of work-life balance and to care for a family member [Figure 1].

FIGURE 1 What were the main reasons given by you, your female friends, colleagues or female family members for leaving the workforce?



Apart from resigning permanently, it seems quite common for women to take career breaks in the Malaysian environment. Interestingly, reasons for taking a career break and for leaving the workforce differ significantly among those women who took a hiatus and those who left permanently. Further analysis shows that among female respondents who have taken a career break, only a quarter stopped working to raise a family compared to 65% of females who left the workforce and did not return.

Notably, the lack of work-life balance was a common denominator across both segments and it was raised frequently by respondents.

Further comments from the respondents indicate that not all mothers who leave the workplace are pressured into doing so by finances or family commitments. It may be a personal choice, whereby women wish to spend quality time with their offspring or to hothouse their children’s development and education. Affluence could be another reason; women may leave because their spouses’ income is sufficient to support the household.

Barriers to Re-entry

Many women who leave the workforce only intend to do so temporarily. However, their hiatus may segue into unintentional permanent unemployment if they fail to secure re-employment before their skills become rusty. According to the survey findings, most women who have left the workforce and are currently unemployed are keen to come back to work. An overwhelming 93% of female respondents who are currently not in employment welcome the idea of returning to work [Figure 2].

FIGURE 2 Do you plan to return to the workforce? (Re-based: female respondents currently not in employment)

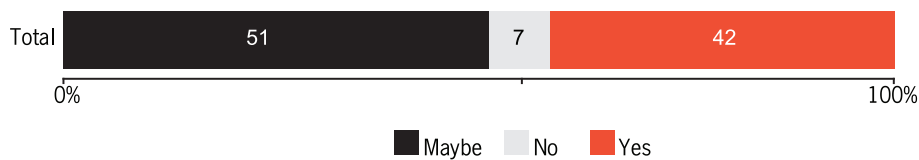
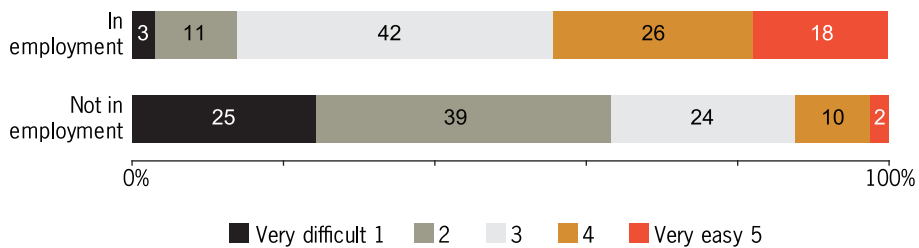


FIGURE 3 Did you find it easy or difficult to re-enter the workforce/ do you think you will find it easy or difficult to return to the workforce? (Re-based: female respondents)



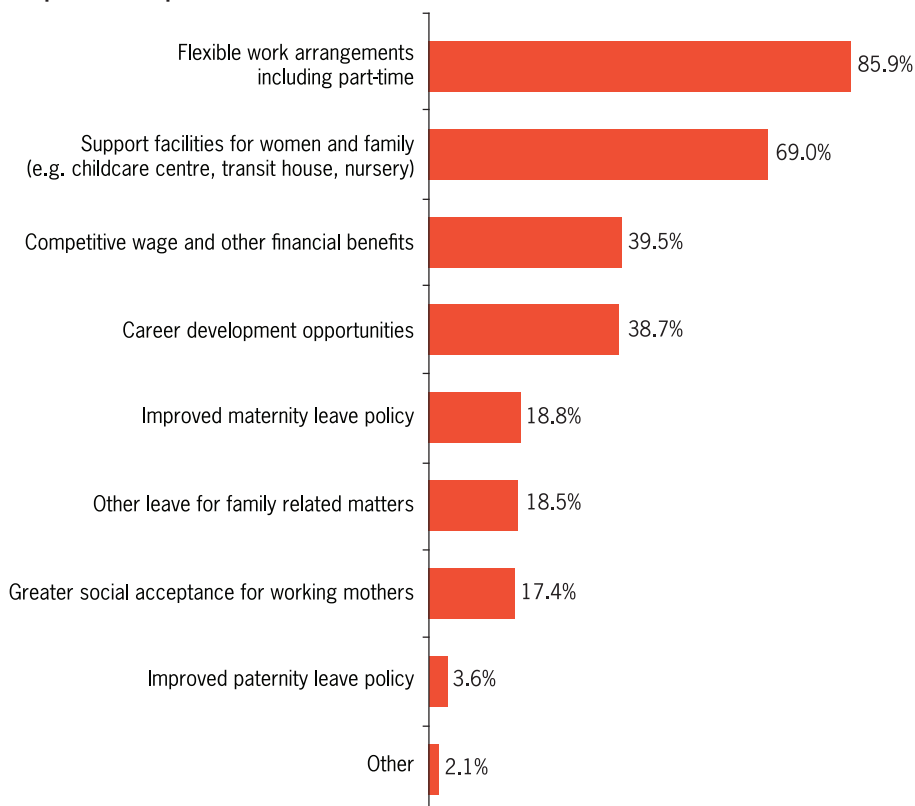
[Figure 3] shows that more than half of female respondents who are **not in employment** think that it would be difficult to re-enter the workforce. Many expressed concern that their skills and knowledge are out-of-date, putting them at a disadvantage in a highly competitive employment market. Women who have taken a hiatus are also perceived to be less committed than employees who have never left; they may be penalised in terms of slower career progression and passed over in favour of other candidates.

Base on another survey question, conversely, respondents who took a career break and returned promptly to employment found it relatively easy to re-join the workforce. Many respondents attributed their success to a short hiatus whereby their skills and knowledge did not date, meaning that their on-the-job experience and qualifications were still valid. Some women noted that it also pays to keep abreast of the latest industry developments to ensure that they are still marketable and employable.

Employer (In) Action

The survey respondents were asked to identify top 3 important measures companies should put in place to help retain women in the workforce. An overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) think that flexible work arrangements could help retain women in the workforce. Other popular measures include support facilities for women, competitive wages and career development opportunities [Figure 4].

FIGURE 4 What do you think are the three most important measures companies should put in place to help retain women in the workforce?



Given that family commitments are the main concern of many working women, it is not surprising that many respondents chose flexible work arrangements and support facilities. These measures allow mothers to better juggle family and work commitments, instead of sacrificing one or the other.

Further analysis shows that female respondents are more inclined towards the idea of competitive wage; 46% of female chose this option compared to 25% of males. In the cost-benefit analysis of staying at home versus working, a competitive salary would tilt the balance towards work.

The survey also delved into the types of support facilities available at the survey respondent’s workplace. Despite the importance of having flexible work arrangements and support facilities to retain women in the workforce, the survey results shows that, the majority of companies in Malaysia lack a formal policy for such benefits [Figures 5 & 6].

FIGURE 5 Does your current, or previous, employer have a formal policy for: flexible work arrangements (by sector)?

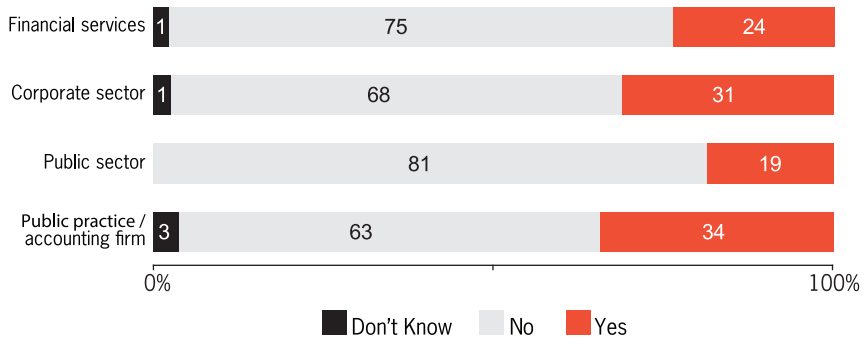
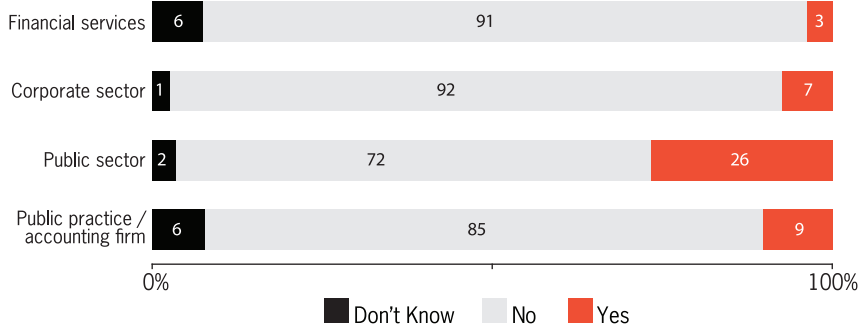


FIGURE 6 Does your current, or previous, employer have a formal policy for: childcare support facility (by sector)?

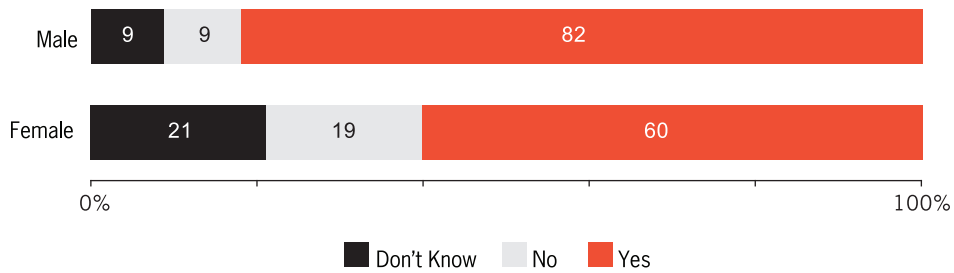


Although employers in the public sector are most supportive in addressing the issue of childcare support facilities, it seems that they need to put in more effort to implement flexible work arrangements. Private sector companies also fall short when it comes to providing childcare and maternal support facilities for working mothers.

Levelling the Playing Field

The prevailing perception that women are victimised by unfair and unequal career opportunities and lower compensation may also be turfing them out of the workforce prematurely.

FIGURE 7 In your opinion, does your employer practice a culture where women and men have equal opportunity in career progression?



Notably, men and women perceive equality differently: 82% of male respondents were more likely to think that they work in an equal opportunity environment compared to 60% of female respondents [Figure 7]. 21% of the female respondents picked the option 'Don't know', possibly because of ambivalence and lack of awareness of the issue. Many respondents also singled out the challenges in providing equal opportunities in the workplace. Another survey question indicates that one in five respondents do not know if their employers have a formal policy against discrimination.

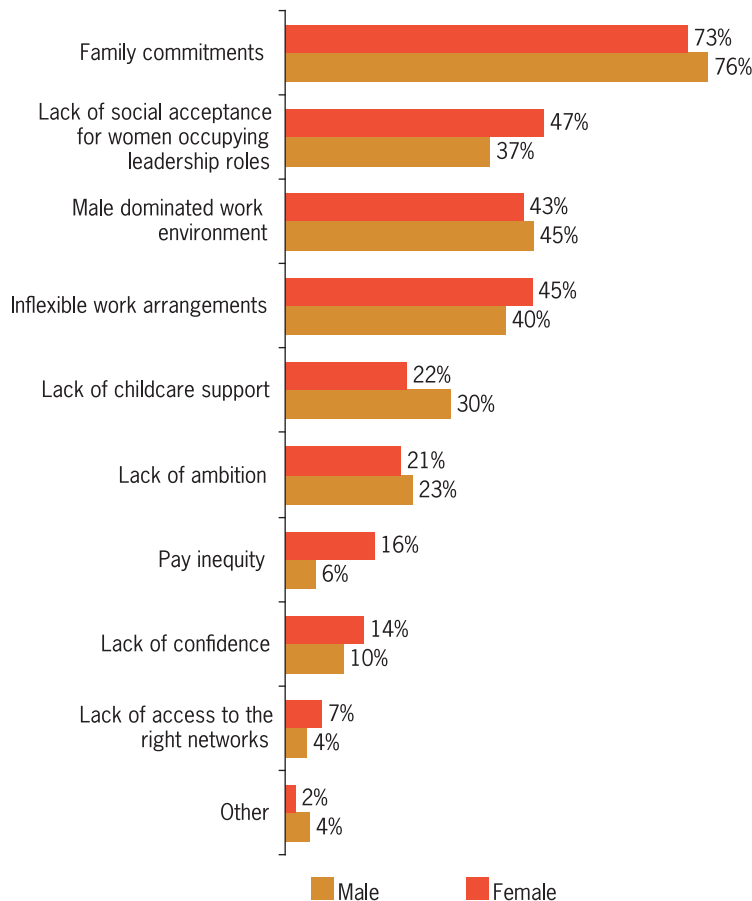
Furthermore, companies that advocate a culture of equal opportunities may not be translating theory into practice on the ground. Many respondents perceive that Malaysian workplaces tend to be patriarchal and male-dominated. Indeed, some respondents reported that Malaysian women are less likely to receive a promotion or enjoy access to career development opportunities due to gender issues. Respondents also perceive that women are being penalised predominantly because employers believe they prioritise family over work. Salary and compensation discrimination based on gender still exists, with a number of respondents voicing concern about the gap in pay between men and women performing similar tasks.

Women on Top

What prevents women in Malaysia from reaching senior management positions? Both male and female respondents think that family commitments are one of the main factors hindering Malaysian women from achieving senior management positions, supporting earlier research findings about the double burden of women at work and in the home [Figure 8].

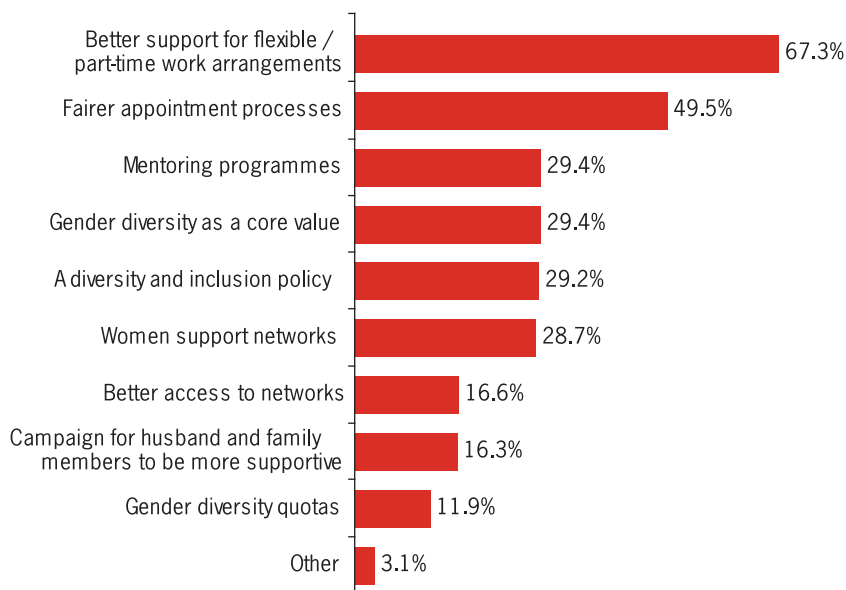
Almost half of all respondents also think that a male-dominated work environment is a main reason for the under-representation of women [Figure 8]. Male perceptions about equitable work culture and compensation could be perpetuating inequities against women. Men are more likely than women to think that employers offer adequate family support and equal pay and opportunities.

FIGURE 8 What do you think are the three main contributing factors to women being under-represented in senior management positions in malaysia?



Perhaps cultural and social mores are also a barrier to women rising up the ranks. Opinions about social acceptance for women in leadership roles differ between the genders too. Female respondents are more likely to cite lack of acceptance as one of their three main barriers to female ascendancy, whereas a smaller proportion of male respondents consider it important.

FIGURE 9 What three measures do you think companies should put in place to enable more women to occupy senior decision-making positions?



The survey respondents were asked to rate the top three measures companies should put in place to enable more women to occupy senior management positions. 67% of respondents thought flexible work arrangements would be the most effective measure to increase women in senior decision-making positions [Figure 9]. About half think that there should be fairer appointment processes; companies should promote talent based on meritocracy and capability while being gender-neutral. Again, these are key highlights of gender diversity and inclusion policy that companies should consider to improve performance and talent retention.

While respondents agreed that more women should be at the top, only a minority supported affirmative action and gender diversity quotas, favouring meritocracy instead. One respondent remarked that positive discrimination should not be acceptable because it deprives more deserving candidates of the opportunity for promotions.

Government Incentives

Based on the survey, respondents wish that government would act as a role model in influencing the adoption of gender diversity and inclusion best practices in Malaysian workplaces. More than 70% of respondents think that the Malaysian government could help by initiating job opportunities that have flexible work arrangements [Figure 10 (e)]. Meanwhile, 63% are of the opinion that improved legal protection for flexible work and better maternity leave arrangements would be effective in driving greater participation of women in the workforce [Figure 10(b)].

FIGURE 10 How effective do you think the following government measures would be in assisting greater participation of women in the workforce?

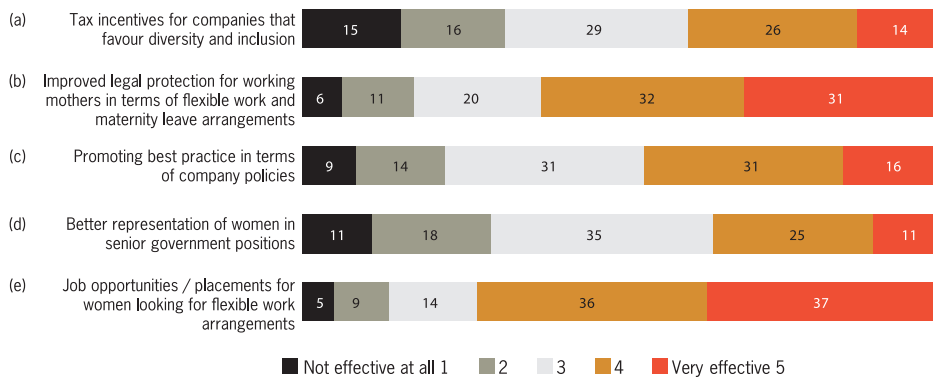
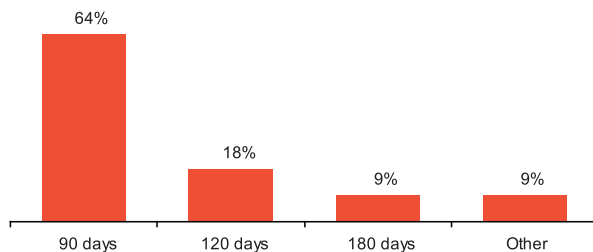


FIGURE 11 What do you think would be a fair maternity leave policy for Malaysian women in the workforce? (Re-based: respondents who think that current maternity leave is insufficient)



Overwhelmingly, respondents expressed dissatisfaction with current maternity leave arrangements which fall short of global best practices. Current policy in Malaysia provides for 60-day maternity leave with full pay. 54% of respondents felt that 60 days was too short a time for mothers to regain their health and to bond with their newborns. Based on the respondents who thought that current maternity leave is not sufficient, 64% voted for maternity leave periods of 90 days [Figure 11] which is in line with the current maternity leave given to the public sector. The survey probed respondents further to find out their opinions regarding pay if maternity leave was extended; about half of female respondents think they should be given full pay for the next 30 days.

One of the respondents mentioned that mothers do not only need time to identify reliable childcare services; even if they do find day care within 60 days, many mothers are uncomfortable leaving an extremely young baby to childminders. Although there may be additional costs to a longer period of maternity leave, employers ultimately benefit from mothers' improved wellbeing when they return to work. They may be more productive and high-performing post-partum, and importantly, female talents could be retained in the workforce.

A number of survey respondents indicated that government could play a key role in mandating and enforcing lengthier maternity leave in the private sector as equivalent to the public sector of 90 days maternity leave.

Encouragingly, 69% of employers have a formal policy for paternity leave, even though it is not required by law.

50 Champions: Leaders In Gender Diversity And Inclusion

Perspectives From Employers

TalentCorp and ACCA proposed the 50 Champions Campaign aimed at identifying and engaging with outstanding role models on gender diversity and inclusion for local organisations, especially those which prioritise equal opportunities for women in the workplace. It is hoped that these 50 Champions will inspire others in corporate Malaysia to embed diversity and inclusion in their work culture to prosper over the long-haul.

Fifty of Malaysia's leading organisations from a cross-section of multinational corporations (MNCs), public listed companies (PLCs) government-linked corporations (GLCs), government agencies and regulators were carefully selected to participate in the 50 Champions campaign. The insights of the 50 Champions added immense value and were crucial in shaping the recommendations and conclusions of the ACCA-TalentCorp survey.

The following are the key findings and comments from this exclusive group. ACCA and TalentCorp are optimistic that these will be invaluable to other employers as they strive to optimise their own talent development and retention structures.

Why do women leave?

The 50 Champions overwhelmingly identified the lack of structured support systems for women, particularly working mothers, the lack of work-life balance, and lack of equal opportunities as key obstacles to retaining women in the workforce at all levels, especially in senior management. The predominantly male-dominated environment is also a deterrent.

“Still there are many Malaysian women who are not part of the workforce due to reasons ranging from perceived unequal employment opportunities and practices, social norms, meeting family obligations as well as self-limiting beliefs.”

Johan Mahmood Merican, Chief Executive Officer, Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad

“Even with the modernisation of the economy, the women's workforce in Malaysia is considered low as compared to international standards due to their primary responsibility for home and family matters. In the oil and gas sector, women workers will have to deal with health and safety hazards and some jobs which may require physical ability are currently dominated by men.”

Raiha Azni, Vice President of Human Resource Management Division, PETRONAS

“We actually conducted a survey pertaining to this topic. One of the main reasons given was that women nowadays put more emphasis on their family especially once they have children. According to the survey, the majority of our female respondents (64%) expect their career goals to change after having children. About 44% also plan to stop working after having children.”

Chook Yuh Yng, Country Head, Jobstreet Malaysia

“Malaysian women, even though they are well educated and have the ability or choice to join the workforce, may choose to stay home as their spouses' income may be sufficient for the whole family due to better remuneration scales and benefits that the family enjoys.”

YBhg Dato' Paduka Ismee Ismail, Group Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer, Lembaga Tabung Haji

Peak, then trough

Many employers observed that women are most prolific in the workforce in their twenties. Their ranks then begin to thin out once they start families. As a result, women in senior management and the C-suite are outnumbered by their male peers, and the environment becomes male-dominated.

“The low labour participation rate of women can be considered a form of brain drain. In that whilst the pipeline of talent emerging from universities comprises prominently women, many are not retained in the workforce. The leakage of talent is also reflected in terms of levels, whereby women account for more than 50% of entry level professionals, but only make up about 5% of CEOs and board members.”

Roshan Thiran, Chief Executive Officer,
Leaderonomics

“It is also worrying that we seem to be losing these women as they get to middle management, with only 11% remaining in the workforce. This is in contrast to Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong which are able to retain 20% of women, similar to Scandinavian countries like Norway - and only 5% of women making it to the Executive Committee or Board Room in Malaysia.”

Diaan-Yi Lin, Partner, McKinsey &
Company

The business case for women

These leading employers insisted that there must be a mindset change in recognising female talent as an economic imperative, and to build a business case for women in the workforce. Companies that ignore gender diversity and inclusion are effectively taking the short-term view by disregarding half of the talent pool. Studies by consultants like Catalyst and McKinsey & Company have shown that companies with more women, especially at senior and board level, outperform male-dominated companies on several dimensions, e.g. return on equity, invested capital and sales. Several employers also noted that by enlisting more women in their workforce, enlightened companies will be in tune with prevailing consumer preferences, optimising marketing and sales efforts.

“If you look at the statistics, today, not only do women form the majority of graduates from tertiary institutions but very often, they also come out at the top of their class. As such, it is imperative to make changes in processes to give women equal opportunities to climb the ladder.”

Sanjeev Nanavati, Chief Executive Officer, Citibank Berhad

“To cash in on women’s strengths (like an eye for details and meticulousness, patience, persistence etc) which are generally more prominent among the women; women promote a greater sense of purpose for the company, the recognition of positive emotions in the workplace, building and nurturing a closer sense of community within the company, and a more collaborative leadership style.”

Maheswari Kanniah, Chief Regulatory Officer, Group Regulatory, K&N Kenanga Holdings Berhad

“Studies have shown that companies with more women avoid bad decisions as businesswomen tend to be more risk averse than businessmen. Women are also intrinsically more detailed and careful – traits which are highly valued, particularly in the audit profession. Statistics also show women generally work harder, if only to prove themselves worthy for executive roles and promotions. This would more often than not result in improved business and financial performance for the company.”

Mohd Raslan Abdul Rahman, Managing Partner, KPMG Malaysia

“A disciplined focus and emphasis on gender diversity is also plain and simple risk management and good sense. It ensures the organisation/business is not vulnerable to opportunity losses arising from results it could have had with the right (woman) person for the job. This is a good enough business case for having policies that are non-gender biased but instead forces the right talents to be surfaced.”

YBhg Dato’ Sri Abdul Wahid Omar, President and Chief Executive Officer, Malayan Banking Berhad

“It is really important to not just attract and recruit women - what we have seen across organisations is that women are generally, well-represented in the workplace but the issue is that the pipeline for women breaks down somewhere between middle management and the C-Suite. It is important therefore, for organisations to ensure that there is a balance at the leadership level to address this pipeline issue.”

Nor Azah Razali, Partner and Managing Director, Boston Consulting Group

“As Managing Partner of the firm, my primary focus is to grow our business and at the same time develop our people. And to do this, I need to meet the needs of our clients who are increasingly sophisticated, globalised and multicultural. Clients expect our teams to be diverse and have complementary skills, experiences and viewpoints. So to me, attracting, retaining and developing women in the workforce isn’t just the right thing to do. It is a business imperative.”

Sridharan Nair, Managing Partner, PwC Malaysia

Upskilling women

Some employers noted that women must move up the learning curve to be ready for the value-added jobs arising from the implementation of the Economic Transformation Programme and the New Economic Model. Therefore, intensive and remedial training and education are a must to fill the talent void in commerce and industry. Retraining will also be necessary for women who wish to reenter the workforce after a career break.

“Providing the necessary training and development programmes to female employees for them to upgrade their level of competencies.”
Ho Foong Moi, Chief Executive Officer,
Malaysian Institute of Accountants

“The Government has allocated RM50 million in the 2013 Budget, to train women as board members under the Women Director Programme. Other initiatives include promoting and incentivising childcare facilities at the workplace, introduction of flexi working hours, job matching and placement for university students, industry training to prepare graduates to join the workforce, re-skilling and promotion of on-line business.”

YBhg Dato’ Hafsah Hashim, Chief Executive Officer, SME Corporation

“At Shell, we have a range of targeted programs and initiatives to achieve our goals and to attract and retain talented women. These programs and initiatives ensure that our female employees are well supported, have access to learning and development opportunities, are rewarded for what they do, and are well connected for the next stage of their career.”

Iain Lo, Chairman, Shell Malaysia

“In 2009, sparked by the women executives in the company, AMD globally introduced its AMD Women’s Forum (AWF) as a means to generate more active and proactive participation and networking among its women workforce. This forum was set up to ensure that the potential of women in its entire global workforce are fully harnessed to meet its corporate objectives.”

Boonsiri Somchit-Ong, Corporate Vice President,
Finance and Global Services, AMD

“We believe that when employees perform at their best, our company performs at its best. This means that every member of our staff, regardless of gender, receives the training they need in order to bring the best out of them. Interestingly, our 2012 Sustainability Report shows that women at all levels received, by average number of hours, more training than men did.”

YBhg Tan Sri Bashir Ahmad, Chief Executive Officer, Malaysia Airport Holdings Berhad

“Women role models, programmes on women leadership, such as the Diamond Edge (a women leadership development programme) and The Powerful Women programme (available to all female employees); opportunity for aspiring women leaders to network with women leaders, participation in external women’s conferences (as speakers and delegates), mentorship programmes, career sponsors. We also celebrate International Women’s Day every year.”

Jocelyn Ng, Head of Commercial – Food and Beverage, PepsiCo

“With more Gen Ys coming in, today’s workforce is seeing a very different dynamic than 15 years ago, when I was first started out in my career. Employees, especially women, no longer shy away from expressing their dissatisfaction with unfavorable working environments. Instead of job hunting, we find that employees are more proactive. They will find ways to improve their skill sets and seek the training, resources and people who can help them reach their goals at their workplace.”

Chua Chai Ping, Country Human Resources Director,
Accenture Malaysia

Leverage on diversity

Gender diversity and inclusion was brought up repeatedly by the 50 Champions. Resoundingly, the majority said that these add value to organisations and are priority agenda items for policymakers and business leaders internationally. Organisations which capitalise on the strengths and differences of men and women can benefit by leveraging a much larger pool of best practices and perspectives.

“We want the best and the “best” includes all sorts of people – women, men, people of different ethnicities and generations, and people who think differently. In the war for talent, we intend to win!”

Jason Crimson, Director Asia Pacific Shared Services, Kimberly-Clark Regional Services (Malaysia)

“In ACCA, we strongly believe diversity goes beyond visible differences; it is about diversity of experience, knowledge, cultures and backgrounds. By bringing together diverse teams, businesses can expect innovative thinking and encourage productivity that is needed to steer them through economic and global challenges.”

Jennifer Lopez, Country Head, ACCA Malaysia

“Inclusive cultures do better on retention, customer satisfaction, productivity and profitability. In inclusive cultures both men and women feel valued, included and supported. Malaysia Wise is an employee resource group that champions the interest of Dell Malaysia’s female team members.”

Tang Ching Siang, Managing Director, Dell Malaysia

“We believe diversity contributes to new ways, ideas and provides different perspectives on how we can provide solutions to our clients. Since our clients come from a multitude of industries, hiring professionals from various diverse backgrounds regardless of their gender would certainly help us add value to the needs of our clients.”

Tan Theng Hooi, Managing Partner, Deloitte Malaysia

“The uniqueness and instinctive intuition within each individual is usually gender-based and different situations call for the strengths in both men and women. We can’t deny that there is a higher level of innovation in a diverse workforce – be it diversity in terms of age/ gender / race / etc. and this would undoubtedly be a boost for business and financial performance.”

Sharifatu Laila Syed Ali, Chief Executive Officer, Valuecap Sdn Bhd

“By adding gender diversity, we hope to create a positive working environment which due to diversity will cause a healthy exchange of ideas and contribute innovative ideas. A little bit of a cliché but we strongly believe that by having better representation of gender, we also get a better perspective of the needs of users, customers and also stakeholders who themselves are a diverse bunch.”

Balan Krishnan, Director Human Resources Asia, Altera

“Whether you are a baby-boomer or Gen-Y, a man or woman – we all bring different perspectives to the table; but it is this difference that gives an organisation its greatest strength.”

Shidah Ahmad, Vice President, Agilent Technologies

“We support any efforts to ensure that gender diversity is one of the strategic agendas of the organisation as it will ensure we have the best talent in the organisation without any gender bias, but based on the merit and suitability of the individual to the position.”

YBhg Dato’ Tajuddin Bin Atan, Chief Executive Officer, Bursa Malaysia Berhad

“Diversity in the workplace allows us to leverage the strengths and complement the weaknesses of each employee to make the impact of the workforce greater than the sum of its parts, hence bringing great value to the organisation. Telenor Group which DiGi is a part of is a strong advocate of this principle.”

Henrik Clausen, Chief Executive Officer, DiGi Berhad

Playing to Women's Strengths

Women are fundamentally different from men in terms of their strengths. Employers noted that certain characteristics of women e.g. attention to detail, meticulousness, and aversion to risk make them particularly suited to specific industries and functions such as banking and finance, audit and risk management. Their collaborative leadership and nurturing styles also make them excellent bosses and mentors.

“Women are more amenable to teamwork and are better at propagating a team culture in organisations. Of course, gender diversity alone does not guarantee the results; the right quality and characteristics of staff of both genders are more important in creating a successful workplace.”

Azman Hisham Che Doi, Chief Executive Officer, Securities Industry Development Corporation

“For McDonald’s, gender diversity in the workplace is a reflection of our customer base. Women make the bulk of the purchase decisions in households. 75% of women identify themselves as the primary shoppers for their household. Women control or influence two-thirds of the overall global consumer spending. As such, having women in our workforce helps us to understand our customers better. This ‘inside information’ is invaluable in helping us chart winning business strategies, which will of course impact the bottom line in positive ways.”

Sarah Casanova, Managing Director, McDonald’s Malaysia

“Generally, women are said to have a higher emotional quotient and many organisations today value this trait in employees for team work and customer relationship building. Within GE, we have some very capable women leaders in C suite positions contributing significantly to business and financial performance. But they are there purely on merit, not a decision that was gender-based.”

Stuart Dean, Chief Executive Officer, GE ASEAN

“Women characteristics like empathy, listening and nurturing skills tend to make them more persuasive leaders. Coupled with strong sixth sense and judgement they provide a much warmer environment to nurture learning, failure, as well as stress. With a strong sense of EQ, women tend to give a practical approach to problem solving and decision making.”

YBhg Datuk Yvonne Chia,
Chief Executive Officer, Hong
Leong Bank Berhad

Tone from the top

Commitment must come from the top if male-dominated corporate culture is to change and enable an equal opportunity workforce. To quote a member of the 50 Champions: “Leaders in every industry are substantially men still. The soft issues are harder to drive down and changing mindsets of all senior leaders in public and private sector is key.”

Senior women in leadership positions should also step up to the plate and act as mentors and role models for their younger counterparts. However, they may be reluctant to do so to avoid any negative perceptions that they achieved their positions due to gender and affirmative action targets, not merit. As one employer noted, “Sometimes senior women leaders are seen not to push openly on gender diversity because we do not want to be perceived as achieving our positions by being women.”

“The key factors in encouraging women to aspire to leadership and to climb the career ladder are their motivations, dedication and capabilities. In the SC, women in many senior positions, from General Managers and above also act as role model and mentors for the others.”
YBhg Datin Teh Ija Mohd Jalil, Executive Director, Corporate Resources, Securities Commission Malaysia

To help women succeed as professionals and leaders, we provide education, mentoring and networking opportunities geared to the professional needs of women every step of the way. We measure our results as well as recognise individuals who serve as role models and facilitators of women’s development among us. Indeed, a strong “tone at the top” from senior leaders holds our partners and principals accountable for the development and advancement of women in the organisation.”
Abdul Rauf Rashid, Managing Partner, Ernst & Young Malaysia

“Role models of successful women are a powerful tool to encourage more young women in our organisation to aspire and work towards reaching senior management positions.”
Zainun Nur Binti Abdul Rauf, Executive Director, Human Resource & Group Corporate Affairs, Nestlé (Malaysia) Berhad

“Creating an inclusive workplace is key to fostering a corporate culture where all people have the resources they need to grow and succeed. At Google, we make sure our diversity initiatives hold our business leaders accountable. A strong “tone at the top” from our senior leaders ensure the development and advancement of the women in our organisation. Inclusive leaders understand diversity, demonstrate a commitment to diversity and are active and visible champions.”
Sajith Sivanandan, Country Head, Google Malaysia

“Senior women academics are encouraged to guide, mentor and coach younger academics towards leadership positions in both research, teaching and administration, just as I take the responsibility to mentor them and form a substantive collegial relationship so that they don’t feel “shut out” or marginalised. Such associations also boost the self esteem of younger academics and give them more confidence and ambition to accept challenges “to go up the ladder”.
YBhg Prof. Tan Sri Dato’ Seri Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin, Vice Chancellor, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Multinational vs Local Conglomerates

Interestingly, multinational corporations among the 50 Champions were more likely to have implemented flexible work arrangements, flexible career development pathways and tools such as networking, mentoring, role-modelling and female forums to cater for the wellbeing and retention of their female talent. Government-linked organisations and agencies were less likely to implement these, perhaps because their workforce comprises a majority of women even at senior and leadership levels and existing policies are considered sufficient. Instead, they claim to practise a meritocratic system of equal opportunity. However, most of these local government-linked organisations have set up on-site childcare centres and crèches to support the needs of working mothers, which is aligned with current Government policy.

Change legislation, provide more incentives

Some employers noted that there is a need to revamp legislation such as the Employment Act to effectively reflect, enforce and protect progressive trends on employment, such as flexible work arrangements and gender diversity. Other items on employers' wish lists were increased tax deductions for childcare centres and retraining costs for women who wish to return to work after taking a career break.

“Matching grants provided by Government for small to mid-sized organisations for training expenditure incurred to re-train women employees who are returning to the workforce”

Rita Benoy Bushon, Chief Executive Officer, Minority Shareholder Watchdog Group

“The government may also look at the possibility of lengthening school hours to enable parents to pick up their children after office hours. This would reduce the dependency on foreign domestic help and would enable more women to go back to work.”

YBhg Dato Mohd Bakke Salleh, President and Group Chief Executive Officer, Sime Darby Berhad

“Government and organisations need to work together to come out with a set of enablers to increase women’s participation in the workforce or to ease women’s progress through the organisation. These include tax, subsidy or incentive from the government in support of mechanisms such as help to establish childcare facilities, working from home, longer maternity leave, women development programmes which equip women with skills and raise their ambition and profile while organisations should adopt more flexible working hours and result-oriented performance evaluation instead of hours worked.”

YBhg Tan Sri Dato’ Seri Dr Jeffrey Cheah, Chairman, Sunway Berhad

“Provide tax incentives to companies that can demonstrate high participation of women in their workforce particularly at the senior level. Provide tax relief for costs incurred by companies in promoting participation of women in the workforce and initiatives for promoting awareness of the importance of the women’s workforce.”

Osman Morad, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Standard Chartered Bank Malaysia

The Family Agenda

Many employers noted that women typically prioritise family over work once they start a family. Therefore, any effective policies or interventions to retain women in the workforce must be family-oriented if women want to balance career and family.

“It is important to create a conducive infrastructure and environment for increasing participation of women in the workforce. Women sometimes leave the workforce when they start a family or when they take on the caregiver’s role to the elderly and there is little incentive for them to return.”

Ramanathan Sathiamutty, Managing Director, IBM Malaysia

“There are very few options for working mothers to consider in determining who will take care of her newborn babies or children while they are away for work. The rising cost of maids, substandard services by privately owned childcare centres, inflexible working hours, lack of support for new/young working mothers are some reasons that keep them away from joining the workforce. These issues may be tackled by encouraging employers to establish a childcare centre that provides quality services and one that has nursing room facilities either at the workplace or at some other conducive locations.”

Nor Azimah Abdul Aziz, Director - Corporate Development and Policy, Companies Commission of Malaysia.

“We also have a Child Development Centre to support working mothers who have young children apart from a conducive working environment.”

YBhg Dato’ Noorizah Hj Abd Hamid, Managing Director, PLUS Malaysia Berhad

“Most women would be the ones to give up their careers to take care of the children. If Malaysia is to increase its women’s workforce, this can be done provided employers could provide child care centres for its women employees.”

Nicole Choe, Group Assistant Vice President of Human Resources, See Hoy Chan Group

“We provide an on-campus and excellent facility for children in kindergarten and school going students in transit (after school hour) with qualified teaching staff to manage the facility in order to ease women with families in their daily routine to reduce the stress of bringing up family and concurrently building careers. This is one of our organisation’s strong retention initiatives for high performance and talented women. Their kids are guided with many activities to improve their academic performance and extra-curriculum activities plus awards and recognition for TOP examination results.”

Abd Aziz Abd Kadir, Chief Operating Officer, MIMOS Berhad

Changing Mindsets

While the government can put hard incentives such as tax breaks in place to drive the retention of female talent, employers noted that there are certain core fundamental soft issues and psychological and cultural factors that also hold sway, notably the perception that women belong at home and lack of support for women in leadership roles. Mindsets must change to effect a paradigm shift with regards to female talent.

At the end of the day, it must also be remembered that work is a right and a personal choice, noted some of the 50 Champions. Society should refrain from judging women whether they choose to pursue a career or to stay at home with their families. Women are capable of contributing and adding value in virtually any sphere, at home, in the workplace or in the highest government echelons.

“To attract and retain valuable women staff, organisations need to embrace a paradigm shift in mindsets. By creating a supportive work environment, women will be able to balance work and family commitments prudently. Facilitate transitions from working part-time or flexi work hours to full-time work gradually. This will allow working mothers to manage their family needs without compromising their performance at the workplace.”

Mohd Khalis Abdul Rahim, Chief Human Capital Officer, Telekom Malaysia Berhad

“Performance and capabilities are primary factors in leadership positions. Culture and environment encourage diverse groups and diverse thinking, opinion, constant respect to individuals which are among major factors to sustain leadership in women. Provide flexibility per needs, for example, nursing hours, nursing facilities, flexible work hours. The effort in creating a diverse leadership was not by accident, it was a planned effort from the mid-level managers to grow to the senior level positions.”

Mohd Rauf Nasir, Country President, Motorola Solutions Malaysia

Recommendations: Retaining Women in the Workforce

Based on the findings from the survey responses and the insights from the 50 Champions, it is safe to conclude that gender diversity and inclusion initiatives will be key strategies for companies that intend to hone their competitive edge and achieve long-term sustainability in an internecine environment. Moreover, the survey confirms previous research findings that work places must become increasingly supportive of women and family-friendly if employers intend to attract and retain their female talent pool.

Based on the results of the survey, ACCA and TalentCorp have drawn up key recommendations that are heavily attuned with the themes of gender diversity and inclusion:

Implement Flexible Work Arrangements

Resoundingly, most respondents said that flexible work arrangements are the key to attracting and keeping women at work. The majority of employers also identified flexible work arrangements as a primary tool for female talent retention.

Ideally, such flexible work arrangements should be tailored to fit the needs not just of working mothers, but should be offered to all employees who qualify and might benefit. Importantly, employers should incorporate criteria for flexible work arrangements within company human resource policy. Transparently communicate and enforce these flexible work arrangements to ensure that there are no abuses or biases.

Benchmark employees against performance metrics to gauge if flexible work arrangements are improving or diminishing results and employee productivity. Employers and senior management also have the responsibility of ensuring that employees on flexible work arrangements are not unfairly marginalised in their job advancement prospects.

Both employers and employees would welcome efforts by government to support flexible work arrangements. One suggestion was for government to offer positions with flexible work arrangements, perhaps as role models and benchmarking for the private sector. Another recommendation was to legislate flexible work arrangements into employment regulations, thereby giving these arrangements the force of law.

The following are examples of flexible work arrangements at leading companies which accommodate the needs of their female talent. It is worth noting that organisations promoting diversity offer these privileges to all qualified personnel, not just working mothers:

- **Flexihours.** Provides employees the opportunity to adjust their daily start and finish time around a set of required “core hours”.
- **Telecommuting/home working/remote working:** This enables employees to work from a location other than in an office or project site and can reduce the time, costs and stress of commuting for employees while helping employers control and often reduce the cost of fixed office space.
- **Other arrangements:** Some companies offer job sharing, for example through partnering and shadowing where two employees share the responsibilities of one full-time position, and regular part-time work.

For flexible work arrangements to succeed, it is imperative that management and bosses do not penalise or marginalise employees for taking up flexible work arrangements by denying them equal access to career development and advancement. More specifically, to support flexiwork, there needs to be a move away from the mentality of equating hours spent at the office to commitment to work. Instead, management must make an effort to instil accurate metrics that measure performance and goals met.

Career Flexibility

There are times when individuals may need an extended career break from the workforce to fulfil their goals, be it personal development, raising a young family full-time or caring for elderly parents full-time. According to leading employers, it is important to provide career flexibility so women can take longer career breaks if necessary to manage these demands, without the break impacting negatively on their career progression or compensation.

It pays to provide formal avenues for these career breaks within human resource structures. The benefits are two-fold – employees are assured of a job when the time comes for them to return to the workforce and employers have a larger pool of talent to draw on that enhances business sustainability.

Some of the best practices to consider inculcating at the workplace are:

- **Time to learn.** Grant employees study leave or time off for education to enhance their personal development and eventually, their contribution to the organisation.
- **Leave of absence.** Instead of enforced career breaks whereby an employee resigns, offer formal leave of absence to accommodate employees who are on a career hiatus, sabbaticals, accompanying spouses working overseas, raising children, caring for relatives and other relevant reasons. Employees on leave of absence are thus guaranteed a job on rejoining, although not necessarily the same job. This pre-empts the fear and need to job-hunt, enhances employee loyalty and ensures that employers have access to a large pool of talent.
- **Transfer to a different division:** Provide opportunities for employees to transfer to a different division within the organisation. For example, a transfer from a client-facing division to a support division which requires less travelling and offers more flexibility.

Women who are returning to the workforce after a hiatus may require training to brush up their skills and update themselves with the latest developments and industry trends. It was recommended that government provides tax breaks for such training to incentivise employers to offer these programmes to women, thereby easing their transition back into the workforce. This is clearly aligned to the announcement made by YAB PM on 29th May 2012 that double tax deduction will be granted on the training expenditure incurred by companies that hire women on career break effective 2013.

Other proposed ways the government could assist this target group is by developing and marketing “refresher” training courses, and to provide work experience/ internship opportunities for women looking to return to work. In the longer term, perceptions also have to change in order to remove the negative stigma associated with being out of the workforce for a long period. Employers may view long breaks as lack of commitment to careers. To achieve this mind-set change, employers should seek to be more understanding, and the government could take the lead in hiring these workers.

Become Family-friendly

Family commitments and raising a family were cited as the main reason for women leaving the workforce, according to the survey and employer responses. Therefore, respondents and enlightened employers emphasised the importance of creating a family-friendly working environment to retain women in the workforce.

To create a truly family-friendly environment, companies are also encouraged to provide other facilities and benefits such as extended maternity leave, paternity leave, nursing rooms at their premises, and medical benefits for the entire family. In light of rising medical costs, the latter could be an incentive to encourage employee loyalty and to attract and retain the best talents.

Other best practices provided by leading employers included providing celebratory lunches for pregnant employees to celebrate impending motherhood and employee assistance programmes which feature counselling for family, marriage and stressful life changing events.

It was suggested that the government could help incentivise employers to offer these family-focused benefits by offering tax breaks and deductions for the establishment and operation of such facilities and programmes.

Maternity Benefits

Longer maternity leave was frequently cited in the list of women's and employers' expectations to make the workplace more family-friendly. Ideally, the Government could step in to regulate, enforce and subsidise a longer duration of paid maternity leave along with a longer period of semi-paid and unpaid leave for working mothers with young children. Longer maternity leave enables women to recover better from the stress of childbirth, to bond with their babies, to breastfeed and to make reliable childcare arrangements. It could also be a tool to improve retention rates for female talent, since working mothers would perceive that companies are being more responsive to their needs.

To be more on par with global standards, perhaps Malaysian companies could start by increasing maternity leave from 60 days to 90 days. To manage fluctuations in productivity, companies could employ contract staff to take up the slack. Companies could also provide alternative options for fathers to take additional and flexible paternity leave to care for their newborns, which would enable working mothers to return to work instead. Ensuring that parents share more equitably in bringing up baby would lessen the burden on working mothers, strengthen the parental bond between father and child, and nurture close-knit families for social wellbeing.

High Quality, Affordable Childcare

One of the biggest challenges facing working parents today is the availability of reputable, reliable, accessible and high-quality child care centers.

Many parents today opt for private kindergardens and day-care. However, stricter regulations and stringent enforcement must be put in place to ensure the wellbeing and security of children at these centres. It is also essential to train the personnel at these centres in early childhood development so that children benefit from enrichment and learning activities during their time here.

Accessibility is another important factor for childcare, bearing in mind the long commute time on Malaysia's gridlocked roads during peak hours. Establishing more childcare centers within close proximity of the workplace would cut down commuting time and boost productivity.

Ideally, organisations should set up their own crèches and childcare services onsite to cater for employees with families. Organisations within the same locality and community might come together to set up joint childcare centres to better manage investment and operating costs.

The government must be applauded for its measures thus far to promote corporate childcare, such as the Double Tax Incentive for compliant companies which will be launched in 2013, and fund allocation and assistance for child care centres at organisations. However, response remains lukewarm. With the enhanced tax incentives, the next immediate steps to take-on are perhaps the methodology to regulate and encourage more companies to establish well-regulated and high-quality childcare centres, and embark on a campaign to create awareness and change mindsets.

Childcare is also essential for older children who are still in school. One of the suggestions was for the government to consider setting up secure and well-regulated single-session schools where children are in school from 8am – 5pm for study and enrichment activities. This would remove the burden of afterschool childcare for working parents, especially mothers who are primarily responsible for childcare.

Also linked to childcare is the issue of live-in and part-time maids and household help. It is becoming increasingly expensive to hire reliable full-time live-in maids, and this issue is a factor for women choosing to quit their careers. Perhaps the government could strive to resolve this matter by providing alternative sources of maids, subsidising the costs of maids and providing training to local women who are interested in becoming entrepreneurs or service providers in the homehelp service industry. It was also mentioned that it would help if government could review the minimum wages set in this industry for part-time help to protect both maids and employers. Other options brought up that would help working mothers would be for government to provide grants and taxbreaks to offset the increasingly expensive cost of childcare.

Sexual Harassment and Security

Respondents also mentioned sexual harassment as well as personal and family safety and security as key reasons for staying out of the workforce.

Employers are advised to be more sensitive towards the safety and security of women employees at the workplace. Some best practices could include establishing and enforcing a broad sexual harassment policy and providing security guard escort or transport services for women who work late nights from the office premises to their chosen mode of transport i.e. car in the carpark, LRT station.

Many respondents also mentioned that the perceived hazards of the Malaysian environment e.g. snatch thefts, kidnapping risks, makes it preferable for them to become stay-at-home mothers and ferry their children around from home to school, tuition and extra-curricular activities. While the government is to be commended for diminishing crime as measured by the crime index, there is a need to improve the perception of Malaysia as a safe environment to persuade qualified mothers to return to the workplace.

Escalate Women Up The Economic Value Chain

The initiation of the Economic Transformation Programme and the New Economic Model is designed to move the country up the value-chain and build a knowledge-based economy with an emphasis on services. As a result, some employers noted that there is a concomitant shift in the Malaysian economic landscape from labour-intensive manufacturing and production jobs to higher-value jobs that require the nation's workforce to upgrade their skills and knowledge.

To fulfil the growth in these value-added jobs, the labour force, including women, must move swiftly up the learning curve. It is vital that the government and employers act to deliver intensive and remedial training and education to fill the talent void in commerce and industry. What Malaysia needs is a workforce that is constantly adapting, learning, and improving their skillset and knowledge base in order to capitalise on these value-added jobs.

Leverage On Technology

Flexible work arrangements must be supported by affordable world-class infrastructure, especially high-speed and inexpensive broadband. To effectively work from home, there must be fast, reliable and affordable connectivity. While Malaysian telecommunication companies have taken the initiative to deploy high-speed broadband services such as Unifi, these services are not available across-the-board and are usually priced beyond the reach of many middle-class families grappling with high costs and inflation. Cheap high-speed connectivity is a necessity if workplace virtualisation is to be effective. To improve connectivity, it was proposed for government to provide subsidies or tax breaks for high-speed internet broadband usage.

Apart from infrastructure, it is also essential to provide the tools that facilitate flexible work arrangements. These includes digital devices such as laptops and smartphones, tele- and video-conferencing equipment and secure access to corporate IT networks to help employees stay connected wherever they are. Some leading employers also provide monthly allowances for mobile connectivity.

Demolish the 'Glass Ceiling'

Many employers and employees singled out a male-dominated work environment and an inequitable work culture prejudiced against women as key reasons for women's exodus. To counter this, companies need to put in place a culture of equal opportunities, coupled with a solid and transparent process for leadership development to eliminate women's perceptions of unfair selection and gender penalisation compared to their male counterparts. This would also address the lack of perceived clarity and flexibility in career development paths for women, which are cited as a key factor repelling them from the workforce.

In the leadership development and succession planning process, companies should identify potential leaders from both genders to undergo specialised development, coaching and mentoring from early on in an individual's career path. Assign a mentor or an experienced career counsellor early on to guide them along their career journey and ensure that they are on the right track. Communicate performance metrics clearly and evaluate a candidate's progress regularly against these metrics to determine reward and career progression. Such a meritocratic structure leaves little room for gender biases.

Some employers have also put in place best practices specially targeted at empowering and optimising their women talent, thus improving retention. These include:

- Accelerating recruitment and strengthening retention of women and minorities
- Tracking the percentage of female talent representation in the organisation with an emphasis on ensuring they reach senior management and director roles
- Benchmarking themselves against industry on the percentage of women in the workplace
- Identifying, coaching, training and mentoring women to reach senior leadership roles
- Providing specific development initiatives for women that include training programs, conferences, mentoring, etc. for career development and advancement
- Ensuring that senior women act as role models to juniors
- Providing opportunities for aspiring women leaders to network with other women leaders.
- Supporting participation in external women's conferences (as speakers and as delegates) and celebrating International Woman's Day annually.
- Encouraging more men in leadership roles and business leaders to champion gender diversity issues.

Organising and supporting such programmes will send strong signals to women that their talents and contributions are highly valued by management, and ultimately increase retention rates.

Freedom From Stereotypes

Much more complex and difficult to achieve will be changes in mindsets that can drive paradigm shifts in human capital.

These changes need to take place both overtly and subliminally, so as to alter deeply ingrained perceptions of women that hold the fairer sex back – views which are held and perpetuated by both genders. For instance, in Malaysia women take on the bulk of household chores and childcare even though they work, what McKinsey referred to as the stereotypical “doubleburden” of women. Men, although they may be husbands and fathers, hold far less responsibility.

Changing this mindset among men and women so that men share equally in the doubleburden will require vast re-education. There must also be ample time for mindset change to take place. Very importantly, government and influential entities must be committed enough to champion this cause and to see this endeavour for gender and cultural change through to fruition. It would be highly effective if male role models among senior government and management personnel could be profiled to show how they share this double burden equitably with their spouses.

If both the government and companies can establish initiatives that recognise both parents’ roles and respects each individual’s needs, Malaysia can start to effect this cultural and mindset change. Offering initiatives such as flexible work arrangements and family-oriented benefits and compensation across the board and irrespective of gender can lighten the double burden for both parents and puts the focus firmly on the wellbeing of children and family. For example, either a mother or a father should be entitled to take time off to bring their unwell child to see the doctor, subject to work commitments, instead of laying the burden solely on the mother. In this way, both parents have the opportunity to share the responsibility of raising the family and this promotes family cohesion.

Capitalising on Diversity

At the end of the day, whatever measures are implemented must take into account the holistic development of women as well as men and all other interest groups, such as minorities and Generation Y. Malaysia must not champion women at the expense of alienating or devaluing other sources of talent, rather we should optimise all sources of talent.

Most leading employers noted that diversity is a vital secret to their success. Other jurisdictions also value diversity. One best practice for encouraging diversity in Australia / South Africa was to introduce requirements for reporting on gender diversity as part of corporate governance, similar to mandatory reporting on Sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The theory is that what gets reported is acted upon; therefore companies will be pressured to implement diversity measures in order to be able to report positively on the issue.

Where companies are concerned, it might be pertinent to frame the need for change as an economic imperative. At the end of the day, the company needs to realise that empowering and retaining women actually comes down to dollars and cents. It makes economic sense to take these measures to retain and promote women. Companies that don’t take steps to retain women are losing out on half of the talent pool and failing to tap into the needs of 50% of their consumer target markets.

Conclusion

Both ACCA and TalentCorp believe that the findings of the 'Retaining women in the Workforce' report will be invaluable in refining and innovating gender diversity and inclusion initiatives going forward. In particular, it is hoped that employers will find these recommendations useful in making their workplaces supportive of women and family-friendly. Tapping into female productivity will be critical if companies want to enlarge and enrich their talent pool in an era of scarce resources. In turn, this will assist Malaysia in achieving its vision of becoming a high-income economy by 2020.

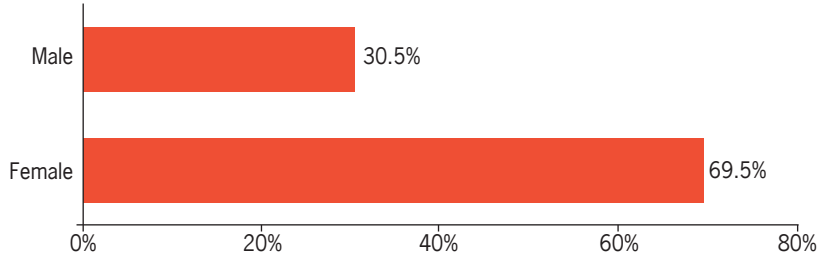
It cannot be denied that the concept of high income encompasses development on all fronts – the triple bottom line of economy, environment and society as espoused by the champions of sustainability reporting. The women's talent agenda must support women as they discharge their multiple roles in family and society for overall national wellbeing. In other words, Malaysia's talent development strategies must be holistic, accommodative and sustainable; equally high priorities must be placed on social, communal and familial wellbeing as well as economic progress. What we want to achieve is a healthy balance.

On a final note, it must be said that Malaysia must look beyond gender and across all dimensions of diversity for ultimate success. While gender diversity is a great starting point, holistic diversity and inclusion measures are imperative to capture the full value of our talent pool, especially in a melting pot like Malaysia comprised of different races and generations. To quote one of our 50 Champions, "we hunger for talent irrespective of gender."

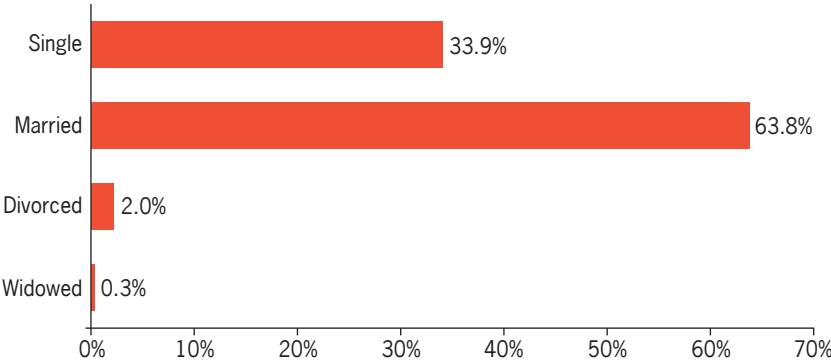
Only when Malaysia capitalises on all our diverse sources of talent – not just women – can we achieve our full potential.

Profile of Survey Respondents

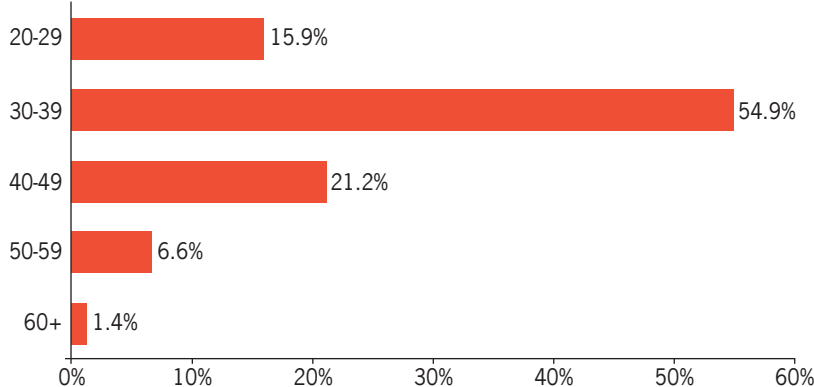
Gender



Marital Status



Age



Notes

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