

Women Employees' Perception of the Effect of Individual Characteristics on Career Advancement

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This study was to investigate the individual characteristics women perceive to be important for them to progress into managerial positions in Kenya. The study was a cross-sectional survey carried out among women employees of the Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) member organizations. Stratified and random sampling was used to select a sample of 400 women employees. Data were collected using a self administered questionnaire. Data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The analysis indicated that there were no significant differences in the individual characteristics between the women who received promotions and those who did not but there were differences in the characteristics of those whose earnings increased and those whose earnings did not increase. The study recommended that women employees should continue to invest in their education and training because it pays off and that affirmative action was required in Kenya to enhance the career advancement of women.

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Introduction

One of the millennium development goals is to promote gender equality and empower women. In line with development, women have continued to be empowered by receiving education and training and this has enabled them to get into the work place and hence start careers. According to Emerson (2005), women's increased participation in the workforce brings economic benefits to organizations thus enhancing women's leadership will generate greater positive impacts in the highly competitive global economy. Although women have access to professional openings, their role in management especially in Africa remains of little significance (Omar and Ogenyi 2004). This means that women have not been advancing enough in careers to form a critical mass and so they are misrepresented in decision making positions. The situation calls for effort to establish factors which can lead to career advancement of women if the gender equality is to be achieved in order to attain the millennium development goals in Kenya.

One of the factors which affects career advancement is individual characteristics. Individual characteristics are important because success in organizations is often gained through an individual's own achievement, such as a successful application for promotion (Wood and Lindorff 2001). Researchers indicate that individual characteristics play an important role in career advancement of women (Vinnicombe and Bank 2002). The definition of key individual characteristics are made based on views of the western world. However there is evidence of cross-cultural differences in career and

managerial advancement although not yet studied comprehensively (Garavan, O'brien and O'hanlon 2006). This observation implies that there is need to take into account views from of different national cultures when applying the western practices on career issues. This study is an effort to fill into the gap of career literature with regard to individual characteristics which are important for women's career advancement to managerial positions in Kenya. The research question was "Which are the individual characteristics that lead to career advancement of women to managerial positions in Kenya?"

Literature Review

According to Ackah and Heaton (2002), career advancement includes promotions and also how well any individual is doing in his or her career in terms of earnings. Several individual characteristics were found to be important for women's career advancement. These include: motivation, education and training, competency and confidence (McStravog 2006, Singh, Vinnicombe and Kumra 2006). According to Tharenou (1997) such individual traits were found to be important in facilitating individuals entering and advancing in management in hierarchical organizations. Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn (2003) say that individual motivation refers to the individual forces that account for direction level and persistence of a persons effort expended at work where direction means an individuals choice when presented with a number of possible alternatives. The authors say that the amount of effort one puts forth in doing something could be little or a lot and that persistence is the length of time one sticks to a given choice. With

regard to motivation, Tharenou (1997) states that individuals who advanced in their careers were ambitious, advancement and career motivated, capable of self monitoring, with high achievement needs and work participation, high levels of enthusiasm for to manage, intelligence and suited to the tasks of managerial jobs. According to Salami (2007) there is need to encourage women so that they can develop high achievement motivation and high self efficacy to overcome stereotyping at the work place and to be able to go into male dominated careers according to their interests and abilities. Van Vianen and Fisher (2002) state that an employees who wants to advance in career needs a strong motivation and interest in an upward career because ambition is necessary for one to be perceived as a potential manager.

White, Cox and Cooper (1994) say that individual motivation is important for any one to achieve or advance in his or her career. Their statement is based on the McClelland Motivation Theory which states that individuals with high achievement motivation have a tendency to attempt tasks which seem moderately difficult, persist in the face of difficulties and show evidence of good performance and achievement over time. Findings by other authors support this observation. For instance, Gray (1999) found that individual motivation is an important competency for seniority in organizations. Ismael and Arokiasamy (2007) state that an individual's motivation is a key determinant of his career advancement. Wood (2006) states that individuals who had advanced in their careers had high levels of motivation and achievement needs.

Employee interests are important for career planning because one is most likely to perform better in jobs that one is interested in (Dessler 2008). The author adds that interests are important for career planning because they determine the preferred occupation of the person. In this connection, Robbins and DeCenzo (2007) state that an employee ought to think of previous jobs held satisfaction what one liked most and least about the job.

Another important characteristic for career advancement is competency as mentioned before. Price (2004) defines competence as skills, knowledge and abilities possessed by people who work for organizations. Crobler, Warnich, Carrel, Elbert and Hatfield (2006) say that competencies are linked to exemplary performance by individuals or teams. Price (2004) states that competencies can be brought to an organization through recruitment of skilled people or developed within existing employees by investing in training, education and experiential programs.

Getting an opportunity for developmental training is important for career advancement because one main goal of training an employee is to ready them for their next position or make them promotable (Martinez 1997). Employees are also trained for other reasons like to improve their deficiency in skill or knowledgeable. An employee needs to improve on his or her knowledge through education to advance his or her career (Price, 2004). According to Sullivan (1998), educational credentials form a basis for career success. Hansen (2008) states that the worlds is increasingly dependent on education and training provided by colleges and universities and so the

knowledge is power equation is what can help women to crash the glass ceiling. Educational achievement is necessary for a managerial or professional career and making access to college and graduate school an important factor for career attainment (Wernick 1994). The basis for this is the Human Capital Theory which suggests individuals are rewarded in their current jobs for their past investment in education and training (Dessler 2008). Wood (2006) in her study found that 85 percent of managers perceived ongoing training as necessary to achieve promotion. Following this reasoning, Cox and Harquail (1991) argue that individuals with comparable education, training and experience would achieve similar levels of success.

Skill development is important for career advancement and it requires learning new things on ones job especially acquisition of skills to keep one up to date in his or her profession (Lee 2002). An employee should discuss the activities he or she most or least enjoys and the challenges faced with the supervisor so as to assess needs and goals in setting development goals (Martinez 1997). This is because supervisors are involved in nominating and selecting those to attend short courses or company specific programs (Wernick 1994).

Woods (2006) found that personal skills or competencies like communication skills, leadership skills, people skills and hard work were attributed to successful promotion to senior roles in organizations. Identifying personal skills involves discovering what one is good at and by so doing one is able to assess his employment skills (Zajas 1995). Employees need to discuss their personal skills with their supervisors to be able to come up with

career advancement objectives (Edmonstone and Watt 1995). To be able to accomplish that an employee needs to be able to identify strengths which carry potential relevant to a higher position, or weaknesses which affect the position (Baehr 1992). The weak areas ought to be targeted for skill development because career advancement emphasizes on skill development (Lee 2002). Zajas 1995) states that employees who developed a high level of competencies and professional skills were able to move up the ladder of success.

Kobia (2007) states that important characteristic for women in management include self confidence and assertiveness or personality required to overcome obstacles to reach the top. Personality is an all embracing and imprecise term that refers to the behaviour of individuals and the way it is organized and coordinated when they interact with the environment (Armstrong 2006). Research by Roberts (1997) in Armstrong (2006) found that personality is a predictor of work performance. A person's sense of self-esteem can lead to the to undertaking a range of responsibilities and to the spillover that he or she can effectively interact and handle different tasks (Nikandrou, Panayotopoulou and Apospori 2008). High self-esteem gives persons mental abilities that help them deal successfully with job-related issues and improve their work performance (Mossholder, Bedeian, and Armenakis 1981). Confidence is key to self esteem and putting oneself forward for promotion (Vinnicombe and Bank 2002). McStravog (2006) posits that individuals need to stick their necks out to go for promotion. In his study, the author found that many women

(46.6%) did not apply for promotion because they underestimated their ability. Fernandez (1993) suggests that there are few women who put themselves forward as candidates for higher level posts. According to Singh et al., (2002) women tend to understate their achievements and may have less confidence about their competencies when compared to men. Singh et al., (2002) say that the modesty nature in women results into their being more modest than men at the work place and women who are assertive and act in a confident manner are likely to be despised and evaluated negatively by colleagues especially other women because of being out of traditional role. Vinnicombe and Bank (2002) argue that lack of self confidence can lead to self-doubt, questioning one's competence and limiting one's career potential. The authors add that when women are confident they are more resilient in handling the barriers they face and they may go further by programming themselves not to see the barriers.

Research has shown that employees have attributions about their individual characteristics about past career progress and reasons for promotion, their expectations of and aspirations to obtaining management positions and promotions and why promotions may not be achieved (Wood and Lindorff 2001). As such, it may be interpreted that there may be differences in perceptions for promotion among women employees. Such perceptions could contribute to explaining one of the reasons why some women progress in their careers and why others do not progress. Many researchers have focused on the importance of individual characteristics for career advancement. Researchers in Kenya (Kobia 2007,

Majanja and Kiplagat 2003) focused on individual characteristics with regard to barriers to the progression of women managers. They have not focused on the individual characteristics which are important to success or advancement. This study seeks to establish what individual characteristics women perceive to be important for them to progress into managerial positions in Kenya.

Methodology

The study employed the cross-sectional survey research design where data was collected at one time. In this study a questionnaire was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Respondents had to give their opinions in relation to career advancement and individual characteristics. Career advancement the dependent variable was measured with two items: promotion received and increased earnings. The respondents were given using yes and no responses. The independent variable individual characteristics was measured using six items ranging from interest in being promoted to applying for promotions. The measures involved likert type of questions with responses ranging from 1 as strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree

The Sample

The study involved Federation of Kenya (FKE) member organizations. FKE has 34 member organizations which fall in 14 sectors. The population of study was the women employees whose population was 7,353. To cater for all the 14 sectors stratified sampling was applied. After that a sample size of 400 respondents was drawn using simple random sampling.

Results

With regard to promotion only 12 respondents representing 3.3 percent had received promotion as shown in table 1. The reasons they gave included hard work, possessing high qualifications and attaining a master’s degree. Those who had not received

promotion 96.4 percent cited lack of fairness in the promotion exercise. In this connection they said that many bosses preferred the promotion of male employees over women. Other reasons included favouritism, and the companies’ policy of recruiting senior staff externally

Table1: Have you received any promotion over the last three years?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	12	3.3
	No	353	96.4
	Total	365	99.7
Missing	System	1	.3
Total		366	100.0

From the findings, 53 or 14.5 percent of the respondents had received bonus pay as shown in table 2. They attributed this to their investment in education and training. They said that they were included in additional paying activities in their organizations which enabled

them to earn more than before. Their superiors had noticed that those with higher education could be engaged in activities which had previously been performed by consultants like developing training programs, and departmental plans.

Table 2: Received bonus or merit pay over the last three years

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	53	14.5
	No	310	84.7
	Total	363	99.2
Missing	System	3	.8
Total		366	100.0

The results of the descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3. In the table typical scores are given. A high mean depicts a high level of the construct or aspect measured. The next 6 constructs constitute individual characteristics. The means for promotion and receiving bonus pay are low at 1.97 and 1.85 respectively. Ability to undertake managerial position had a high mean of 3.82 indicating that a large portion of the women employees were confident they could do the job. Women reasoned that that they were ready and confident to take managerial positions and the only reason why they were not in managerial position was because they had not been given the opportunity to serve those positions. Interest in promotion had a mean of 3.77 followed by performing job well due to competencies with 3.61. The women observed that they had the requisite

skills for entering to managerial positions and to perform just as well as other managers. Applying for higher positions had a mean of 3.47. Some women said they sometimes found it a waste of time to apply for positions which were earmarked for some special individuals. Investing in higher education had a mean of 3.20 while investing in training for managerial position had a mean of 3.12. Many of the women reasoned that they had been furthering their education by sponsoring themselves for evening degree programs. Those who had not yet invested in this area cited financial constraints as the hindrance. There were also those who could not get time off from their work place to attend classes. The women said that they attended managerial training and seminars to further equip themselves for higher positions.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interest in promotion	356	1	5	3.77	1.162
Perform due to my competencies	359	1	5	3.61	1.237
Invest in education to be promoted	359	1	5	3.20	1.148
Invest in training for managerial position	358	1	5	3.12	1.154
Ability to undertake responsibilities	357	1	5	3.82	1.261
Apply for higher positions	359	1	5	3.47	1.223
Valid N (listwise)	353				

The women reasoned that interest in promotion should not be displayed in an overly competitive manner because that could lead to a negative perception that one had become aggressive. The women said that behaviour could even lead to badmouthing and rejection by both fellow female and male employees. In the Kenyan culture women were expected to be resilient at the work place. There were those who reasoned that they did not apply for promotions because their organizations preferred to promote male employees to the higher positions. The women said that most managers were men and perceived men

as the ones with the right characteristics for promotion.

The results of bivariate correlations showed highest correlations between interest to be promoted and performance ability to undertake managerial position and also applying for higher positions. There is a high correlation between performance and ability to undertake managerial duties and also between investment in education and training, and ability to undertake managerial positions. The results are shown in table 4 below.

Table 4: Bivariate Correlation analysis: Pearson Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Interest in promotion	1					
2. Perform due to my competencies	.643(**)	1				
3. Invest in education to be promoted	.473(**)	.674(**)	1			
4. Invest in training for managerial position	.369(**)	.604(**)	.669(**)	1		
5. Ability to undertake managerial position	.560(**)	.771(**)	.723(**)	.668(**)	1	
6. Apply for higher positions	.554(**)	.488(**)	.495(**)	.479(**)	.568(**)	1
N	356	359	359	358	357	359

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Mann-Witney test performed to test if there were differences in the individual characteristics between those who had received promotions and those who had not as shown in table 5 below. The output indicated that there was no difference between the individual

characteristics of the women who received promotion and those who had not. The women also said that those who were promoted had support from superiors or influential people. They added that it was not because they had higher qualifications than others.

Table 5: Individual Characteristics and Promotion (Mann-Whitney Test)

	Interest in Promotion	Perform exemplary due competencies	Invest in education to be promoted	Invest in training for managerial positions	undertake more responsibilities	Apply for higher positions
Mann-Whitney U	1996.000	2028.500	1942.500	1768.500	2062.000	2049.500
Wilcoxon W	2074.000	62059.500	61973.500	61453.500	61402.000	2127.500
Z	-.185	-.142	-.403	-.903	-.006	-.080
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.853	.887	.687	.366	.995	.936

Grouping Variable: Have you received any promotion over the last three years

The Mann-Whitney test revealed significant results of .004 on bonus pay and applying for higher positions, .021 between receiving bonus pay and investment in education, and .032 on bonus pay and investing in training for managerial positions. The findings show

that those women employees had received a bonus pay took the initiative to apply for higher positions. Similar observation also applied to investment in education and training for managerial positions. Table 6 illustrates these findings.

Table 6: Individual Characteristics and Bonus pay (Mann-Whitney Test)

	Interest in Promotion	Perform exemplary due competencies	Invest in education to be promoted	Invest in training for managerial positions	undertake more responsibilities	Apply for higher positions
Mann-Whitney U	6583.000	6878.000	6326.000	6391.500	6879.500	5936.000
Wilcoxon W	52639.000	53849.000	53297.000	53056.500	53239.500	52907.000
Z	-1.764	-1.424	-2.302	-2.146	-1.359	-2.902
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.078	.154	.021	.032	.174	.004

Grouping Variable: Have you received bonus or merit pay over the last three years

Discussions and Implications

The findings suggest that very few women received promotion to higher positions. Women are making very little progress to advance to decision making positions. This implies that the misrepresentation of women decision persists. All the same, women had made some progress on increase in earnings. The reasons they had cited included education and training. The observation concurs with what Price (2004) states that an employee can advance in career through education. Sullivan (1996) found that educational credentials form a basis for career success. The fact that the women were involved in additional activities which enabled them to earn more supports the human capital theory which suggests individuals are rewarded in their current jobs for their past investment in education and training (Dessler 2008). Women were making inroads to earn more after investing in their education and training. Their organizations could depend on them to perform tasks which required more knowledge and skills.

This is consistent with the findings of Hansen (2008) who states that the worlds is increasingly dependent on education and training provided by colleges and universities and so the knowledge is power equation is what can help women to crash the glass ceiling. Educational achievement is necessary for a managerial or professional career and making access to college and graduate school an important factor for career attainment (Wernick 1994).

The women reasoned that interest in promotion was important for career advancement because this focused them to be on the look out for promotion opportunities. Those whose earnings had increased said that they kept a keen interest on opportunities to serve in new projects in their organization this concurs with the findings of Ismael and Arokiasamy (2007).

Many women employees indicated that they had the ability to undertake managerial responsibilities. It is reasonable to conclude that they had self esteem. They were able to perform well due to competencies but one can also add that due to the self esteem. This resonates the findings of Mossholder,

Bedeian, and Armenakis 1981 that high self-esteem gives persons mental abilities that help them deal successfully with job-related issues and improve their work performance.

Applying for higher positions was shown as important for career advancement. Contrary to the findings McStarvog (2006) and Fernandez (1993) many women admitted showing interest and applying for managerial positions or higher positions. Indeed, most of those who had been promoted reported that they had applied for the positions. The women said that those who did not apply may appear not to be interested and so they made their applications to state their interest in the hope that could also mean that they be considered for promotion in future. From the findings, it is therefore reasonable to conclude that investment in education and training, performance were the most important individual characteristics which could lead to increased earnings and probably promotions for women employees in Kenya.

The findings clearly showed that women employees are prepared and interested to advance in their careers in Kenya. However the women employees were not getting equal treatment as the male employees when it came to promotions. Women were sidelined when it came to promotions and this explains the small number of women employees promoted. Women were making little progress and therefore needed more support from the government and institutions in order to progress. For the situation to be improved and women to be included in all levels of the organization, there is need to implement affirmative action. Also, women need to continue investing

in education and training in readiness for promotions and increased earnings.

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