

PROJECT BRIEF

ARC Linkage Project

Top to Bottom Talent Management

Women's representation in 2010 was a mere 8% at executive level and 8.4% at board level of the 200 largest publicly listed companies. This under representation prevails despite more than 25 years of Equal Employment Opportunity legislation in Australia, a shrinking labour market, and accumulating empirical evidence that women's participation in the workforce is positively associated with economic growth.

The ASX has renewed pressure on listed organisations to address gender imbalances at all levels by expanding diversity reporting requirements. But will the ASX requirements make a lasting impact on gender diversity in Australia? Regulatory pressure might motivate ASX-listed organisations to launch strategic changes to address gender disparities – or to engage in 'window dressing' compliance efforts. Regulatory pressure might inspire smaller organisations not listed on the ASX to more fully utilise the female workforce – or to dismiss gender disparities as a 'big company' problem.

Many Australian organisations have been investing for years in policies and practices aimed at removing systemic barriers to increased gender diversity, but with variable success. In order to improve gender representation, organisations need to understand the combination of human resource practices that are most effective in retaining and promoting women. Academic and industry partners have now joined forces in a project designed to identify what works and what doesn't in the management of gender diversity.

The three-year project is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. The research is led by Professor Carol Kulik (University of South Australia) and Professor Isabel Metz (Melbourne Business School, University of Melbourne), in partnership with Aegis and the Australian Senior Human Resources Roundtable (ASHRR). Professor Kulik and Professor Metz are internationally recognised academic researchers in the field of diversity management. Aegis is one of the world's largest providers of customer contact solutions; able to assist businesses, large and small, with meeting the challenges and enjoying the benefits of workforce diversity. ASHRR is a forum of senior HR executives from a range of public and private sector organisations in Australia. The partners contribute an ideal blend of synergistic missions and resources to the project.

The project benefits employers and employees alike by identifying what gender diversity practices matter and which outcomes they might impact across organisational settings. The project is designed to produce three key deliverables for participating organisations:

- (1) assessment of the organisation's gender diversity practices benchmarked against a large nationally representative sample;
- (2) evidence of the impact organisational practices have on gender representation and the local workplace 'climate' for gender diversity; and
- (3) 'best practice' recommendations for managing gender diversity.

To achieve these three deliverables, the project is designed to collect information from employers and employees. Specifically, employers will be invited to participate in an annual employer survey reporting on gender diversity practices and effectiveness indicators (e.g., number of men and women hires, turnover among men and women, financial performance). Employers will also be invited to engage their employees in a single employee survey reporting on their work experience and job engagement. Organisations will receive customised feedback at each stage of data collection benchmarking their practices and effectiveness in comparison to the full sample.

For more information about the project, please contact Professor Carol Kulik (carol.kulik@unisa.edu.au) or Professor Isabel Metz (i.metz@mbs.edu). The researchers welcome all inquiries and encourage participation of both publicly listed and not-listed organisations with 100 or more employees across all industries.

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