

# ADVANCING WOMEN IN BUSINESS EVENTS

Part I: Report of Findings

January 2024



Global survey conducted in collaboration with:



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*To be released later in Q1 2024:*

## *Part II*

- Recommendations for Improvement*
- Leadership Skills on the Rise*
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## Background

PCMA Foundation and Business Events Sydney (BESydney) conducted a research project to engage the business events community on the specific and meaningful actions that can be taken to advance women into senior leadership roles, specifically C-suite and Board roles, within the Business Events (BE) industry. As an industry dominated by women, an imbalance exists for females in the top ranks of leadership.

This research project focused on the following areas:

- Understanding the disparity of women in leadership positions
- Barriers that exist for women
- Recommendations for overcoming barriers
- Implications for broader DEI efforts
- Why women are ideally suited for leadership roles
- Leadership attributes and skills critical for the future of the industry

## Vision

*"The business events industry is the ideal platform to demonstrate the value that women make every day, and we need to lead by example. Inclusivity and equity are not just the right thing to do, it leads to greater profitability, successful organizations, and a just society." Sherrif Karamat, PCMA and CEMA President & CEO*

*"The World Economic Forum last year predicted it would be 131 years until gender parity could be achieved globally. This is unacceptable, and as leaders of an industry with a strong female talent pool, we need to take collective and bold action to accelerate progress towards equitable leadership for all. Diversity in Board and CEO leadership ranks isn't just the right thing to do, it makes good economic sense for our sector's resilience globally." Lyn Lewis-Smith, CEO, Business Events Sydney*

As advocates for furthering the Business Events industry, PCMA and BESydney believe progress toward inclusivity is paramount to ensuring its sustainability. A diverse and inclusive leadership team is not just a strategic advantage but a fundamental necessity for the industry's continued success. By fostering an environment that values and promotes the unique perspectives and talents of women, we aim to set a standard for excellence and innovation. Guidelines and recommendations for bringing more women into the C-Suite fold will be a meaningful contributor to industry progress and momentum.

Recognizing the tremendous value of diversity in global corporate leadership overall, our organizations stand united to achieve an ambitious goal based on the feedback gleaned from our research, summarized below. Our objective is to raise awareness of the issue within the Business Events community such that we begin to realize measurable gains in:

1. Increasing the representation of women in leadership roles
2. Closing the gender pay gap
3. Promoting flexible working styles, work-life balance, and family support
4. Increasing diversity and inclusion of all marginalized groups
5. Empowering women (removing limiting beliefs)
6. Fostering cultural and societal change that challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes

## Project Methodology

This project included research from a variety of primary and secondary sources including:

- Two in-person global Think Tanks held with male and female senior executives in Washington D.C. and San Francisco, and one online group in Asia-Pacific. (Approximately 10 participants per group, with 60% representation among women)
- Six one-hour 1:1 interviews with female senior executives held in Montreal, Canada
- A global DEI survey conducted in conjunction with PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP published in November, 2023, *Advancing Women in Business Events DEI Survey (PwC Survey)*
  - PwC Survey was completed by 438 respondents in 30+ countries, 96% female, 4% male. (PCMA members were invited to take part in the survey. See the last page of this report for a detailed breakdown of respondents.)
  - Regions were segmented into Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, and North America
  - Data was collected between August 7 and October 6, 2023
  - PwC created the global DEI survey of 41 questions with input and feedback from PCMA and BESydney
  - Respondents shared their insights into key topics such as DEI, talent, career trajectories, leadership, mentorship, barriers, challenges, and the work environment
- Secondary research as footnoted and included in the bibliography in this report's Appendix

A summary of the findings from this research along with recommended actions to accelerate the advancement of women in the Business Events industry is presented in this report.

Notes:

- References to the Business Events industry will be abbreviated as BE industry.
- References to the PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP publication, *Advancing Women in Business Events DEI Survey*, will be abbreviated as PwC Survey.

## Introduction

Relative to global workforce findings across industries, the Business Events (BE) industry has seen disproportionately fewer women in leadership positions compared to the number of women represented in the field.

PCMA set out to understand the reasons why this gender gap is so pronounced in the BE industry in an effort to recommend a set of actions the community can take to make significant strides to address this inequity.

Our research has identified consistent challenges in advancing women into leadership roles within the BE industry across regions globally. These include:

1. Achieving pay equity
2. Flexibility in work hours as women typically bear the double burden of work and family care
3. Lack of opportunities for career progression
4. Shortage of diverse talent represented in the industry, particularly on leadership teams
5. Lack of support for learning and growth, skill development, and mentoring
6. Gender biases inhibiting women from advancing into leadership positions
7. Different forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination carried out by management, colleagues, and customers/members

It should be noted that the burden to help women advance into leadership roles within the BE industry cannot fall solely to women. It is critical that male and female colleagues alike develop a mindset to offer support and development for women in an effort to lessen the barriers they currently face. Attempting to lessen the inequities of the gender gap in BE leadership means understanding that these barriers are threefold: personal, organizational, and societal.

Personal barriers include ideas such as *it's hard to fit in the C-Suite as a woman, the female lifestyle won't be respected, not having what it takes to make it*, and other limiting beliefs that can keep women stuck in the status quo.

Organizational barriers include inflexible work arrangements, unconscious bias in recruitments and management practices, microaggressions against women, penalties for not conforming, and unequal access to sponsors and mentors.

Societal barriers are much harder to overcome and include pay inequity, decades of marginalization, and unspoken biases that reinforce stereotypical roles of women as being inferior employees due to the double burden of work and family care that fall to many of them. Even in these days of heightened DEI efforts and attention to gender equality,

women still tend to serve as the primary caregivers for children as well as aging parents or family members with special needs.

The BE industry has an opportunity to be bold, challenge the status quo and set forth a vision that addresses these barriers at three levels: personal, organizational, and societal.

The insights shared in this report have resounding implications for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts as well. By focusing on one traditionally marginalized group in the BE industry, we can glean insights and recommendations that will help to inform the larger initiative to promote an inclusive industry that recognizes the benefits to be achieved when we fully leverage the skills, talents, and insights of a diverse workforce. By doing so, not only will we further the goals of the industry and better serve our constituents, but we set a standard of excellence for other industries to model.

## Findings

This section presents and discusses the discoveries and observations made during the research phase conducted for this report.

As we delve into these findings, the need to advocate for positive change within the BE industry becomes apparent. The goal is to not only recognize existing gender disparities but to also implement targeted strategies that promote equal opportunities for all individuals within the industry, regardless of gender, race, age, disability, or sexual orientation or identification.

Each finding is supported with relevant data, examples, and quotes from the Think Tanks, PwC survey, and additional thought leadership from within and outside of the industry.

### I. The Gap in Representation of Women in Leadership Roles is Disproportionately Greater for the BE Industry

Not surprisingly, the representation of women in leadership roles can vary across different regions, companies, and sectors.

#### *The Gap Between Women in the Workforce vs. Senior Leadership Roles*

According to data from LinkedIn as reported by the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report for 2023<sup>1</sup>, **women accounted for nearly 42% of the global workforce, yet the share of women in senior leadership positions (Director, Vice-President-VP, or C-Suite) is 32%, 10 percentage points lower.**

#### *The Gap Between Women in the Workforce vs. Senior Leadership Roles for the BE Industry*

Comparing the information above with statistics for the BE industry yields some noteworthy findings. (See Figure 1) When you consider the proportion of women in the BE industry overall compared to workforce trends in general, the absence of women in leadership positions becomes more stark.

A survey conducted by IBTM<sup>2</sup> found out that 77% of people in the event management

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>

<sup>2</sup> IBTM, Event Management Gender Equality Report, 2022  
<https://ibtmevents.com/blog/ibtm-event-management-gender-equality-report/>

industry globally are women. Another study by Zippia<sup>3</sup> found the percentage of women in the events industry in the US rises to 86%.

**Compared to 42% of women in the global workforce, more than double that of “meeting/event planners” in the US are women, and over 80% more are considered “event managers” globally.** Therefore, the disparity of women in the BE industry vs. women in leadership positions within BE becomes particularly striking, as summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 1: Disparity of Women in Workforce vs. Leadership Roles**

	% women in workforce	% women in leadership roles	Disparity (Percentage Points)	Source	Scope
<b>Overall</b>	42	32	-10	WEF/LinkedIn	Global
<b>Events Management</b>	77	16	-61	IBTM	Global

**Figure 2: Disparity of Women in Workforce vs. Events Roles**

	% women in workforce	Source	Scope
<b>Overall</b>	42	WEF/LinkedIn	Global
<b>Event Managers</b>	77	IBTM	Global
<b>Disparity (Percent)</b>	83%		
<b>Overall</b>	42	WEF/LinkedIn	Global
<b>Meeting/Event Planners</b>	86	Zippia	US
<b>Disparity (Percentage)</b>	204%		

In BE management, it initially appears that there is no gender inequality since women constitute much of the workforce. One only need look around at an event to see who is in charge to confirm this statistic.

However, a closer look reveals a significant shift in gender distribution as one ascends the ranks of seniority, as indicated in Figure 3. As you move across the chart from left to right, the levels increase in terms of role seniority but decrease in terms of representation among women. The trajectory is more inversely proportional for Accommodation and Food services compared to the Global findings overall. (Note: Since there was no Events or

<sup>3</sup> Zippia, Event Planner Demographics and Statistics in the US, <https://www.zippia.com/event-planner-jobs/demographics/>, accessed 1/5/2023

Hospitality category in the WEF study, we used Accommodation and Food Services as a proxy, since much of this industry includes hospitality, hotel, and catering workers.)

**Figure 3: Industry representation of women, by seniority level**



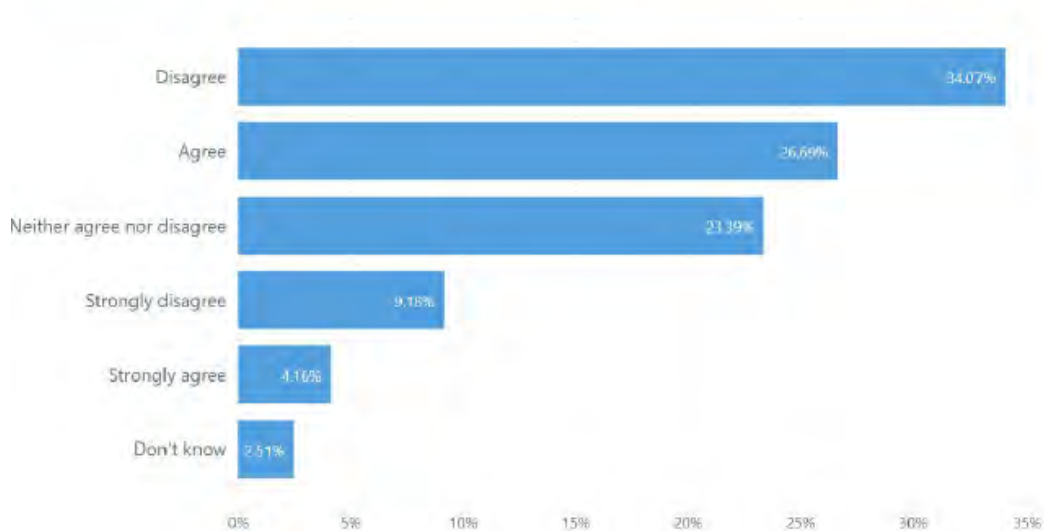
Source: WEF Global Gender Gap Report, 2023

The underrepresentation of women in top-tier positions is a persistent challenge, mirroring broader trends in workplace diversity within the BE industry.

According to the PwC Survey, less than one-third of respondents agreed that diverse identities are represented at the leadership level. (See Figure 4)

**Figure 4 - Views on Diversity in the BE Sector**

*Q. Diverse identities are represented at the leaderships level across the business events industry*



Source: PwC Survey conducted for PCMA: Advancing Women in Business Events

## II. Career Support and Development Opportunities for Women in BE are Limited

In the PwC Survey, when respondents were asked if they feel supported by their organizations to advance their careers, the feedback was mixed. Some respondents felt that while opportunities existed, it wasn't clear how they could pursue them, while others expressed that opportunities within their organization were limited.

- 30% of respondents feel that they have the support of their organization to fulfill their career paths, but are not clear as to their next steps
- 28% of the respondents feel that they are clear on their career path but are limited by opportunities within their organization
- 25% agree that they have full organizational support and are clear on their career paths going forward

**Nearly 60% of respondents felt leadership roles at their organization were not available to them, or if they were, that they did not have clear steps on how to advance into them.**

Further, when asked, "What do you think about your career trajectory?" write-in comments from the PwC survey included:

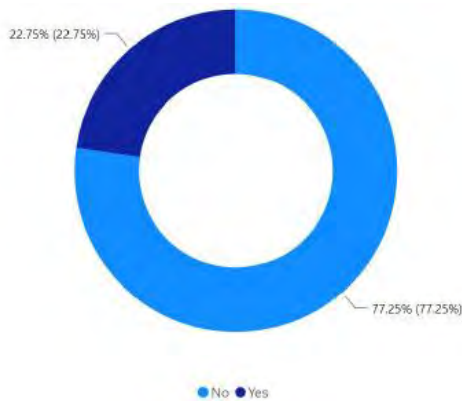
- "C-suite and Board level is white and male-dominated, and I feel there are limited opportunities to achieve any positions."
- "I founded my own business to grow and achieve my professional goals. I wasn't receiving that support from the last few organizations that I worked for."
- "I have nowhere else to go unless I head overseas. I have reached the pinnacle in my sector."

One of the biggest gaps identified in the survey is dearth of options for mentoring and sponsorship programs available to respondents.

- Less than one-third of respondents (31%) said there were opportunities for formal networking provided by their organizations.
- 16% said they have access to inclusive mentoring programs.
- Only 23% said they were actively involved in such programs if their companies provided them. (See Figure 5.)
- 6% said they have formal sponsorship programs in their organizations.

**Figure 5: Involvement in Mentorship Programs**

**If your organization offers an inclusive mentorship program, are you actively involved?**



**What types of programs (if any), does your organization offer:**

*"CEO invites employees to roundtables for ideas and questions."*

*"Mentoring from team leads. Ability to attend a conference for events and sometimes the ability to take a certification, and of course, networking through our own events."*

*"Buddy system for all, tuition, reimbursement and professional development budget for all."*

Source: PwC Survey conducted for PCMA: Advancing Women in Business Events

Certainly, providing robust career support and development opportunities present significant opportunities for the global BE sector, not just in addressing the gender imbalance within leadership teams, but in increasing the success of DEI efforts.

### III. Identifying Additional Barriers to Advancement

In addition to limited career support and development opportunities, many other barriers to advancement exist for women across the BE industry. It's crucial to identify and address these barriers in order to foster diversity and reap the benefits of gender-balanced leadership teams. Recognizing these barriers allows organizations and business sectors to implement targeted strategies and initiatives to promote equal opportunities.

Here are some common barriers identified in this research project:

#### Personal

**Limiting beliefs:** Strongly tied to societal barriers, these are ideas often reinforced that it's just not worth it to attempt to overcome the barriers that exist. They could manifest as feelings of not being worthy or qualified, or even fear of success.

**Feeling unsupported:** The reality of the lack of support in many organizations indicated in our research, coupled with the fact that some women may not have the support of the spouses or family to pursue advanced careers could lead to a reinforcement of limiting beliefs and a desire to maintain the status quo.

**Lack of confidence:** An article in Psychology Today<sup>4</sup> posited that “women do not lack of confidence in their abilities as much as they lack confidence in whether they will actually succeed in their current environment.” The latter is more a factor of societal barriers, still other well-known research as referenced by the Harvard Business Review confirms that men apply for a job when they meet only 60% of the qualifications, but women apply only if they meet 100% of them.<sup>5</sup>

## Organizational

**Gender Bias and Stereotypes:** Persistent gender biases and stereotypes may shape perceptions of leadership suitability, leading to unconscious biases in hiring, promotion, and task assignments.

**Lack of Role Models:** The scarcity of female role models in senior leadership positions can make it challenging for women to envision and aspire to top-tier roles.

**Implicit Bias in Recruitment Processes:** Unconscious biases in recruitment processes may result in the favoring of certain characteristics or traits traditionally associated with male leaders, disadvantaging qualified female candidates.

**Inadequate Mentorship and Sponsorship:** A lack of mentors and sponsors can hinder career development and opportunities. Women may have limited access to guidance and advocacy from senior leaders who can help advance their careers.

**Lack of Learning and Development Opportunities:** Some organizations within the BE industry may be too small to offer access to education or training events, or they are not able to provide the breadth of experience and exposure that medium-to-large organizations can. This has an impact on growth for women in the BE industry wanting to achieve more senior roles.

**Lack of Flexible Work Arrangements:** The absence of flexible work options can impact women’s ability to balance work and personal life, limiting their chances of reaching senior leadership positions.

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<sup>4</sup> Mira Brancu, PhD., Psychology Today, “7 Myths About Why Women Don’t Seek Leadership Roles,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/new-look-womens-leadership/202104/7-myths-about-why-women-don-t-look-for-leadership-roles>, accessed 1/4/2024

<sup>5</sup> Tara Sophia Mohr, Harvard Business Review, “Why Women Don’t Apply for Jobs Unless They’re 100% Qualified,” <https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified>, accessed 1/4/2024

**Discriminatory Practices:** One-quarter of respondents in the PwC Survey indicated that they have either directly experienced or witnessed discrimination in their work environment either from management, colleagues, or customers/members. Any type of environment in which someone is made to feel uncomfortable does not lead to a strong sense of loyalty or passion for the organization, much less a desire to serve in its highest ranks.

## **Societal**

**Work-Life Balance Challenges:** The demanding nature of the BE industry which involves extensive travel and long working hours, can pose challenges for women, particularly those juggling family responsibilities.

**Limited Networking Opportunities:** Access to informal and formal networks is crucial for career advancement. Women may face challenges in building the same level of professional networks as their male counterparts.

**The Business Events Industry is Not Well Known:** The level of recognition for the BE industry as a profession outside of the sector itself can vary. In general, the business events industry, which includes event planning, management, and coordination, is well known within certain circles, but its visibility may not be as high compared to more mainstream professions, especially at the high school and college level where career options are being discussed.

**Salary Inequities:** Unequal compensation or lack of transparency of pay practices discourages women from pursuing leadership roles, knowing that their efforts may not be duly recognized or rewarded.

*Part II of this report will examine a set of recommendations for companies and individuals in the BE industry to implement in order to address the challenges and barriers described here. It will also uncover data pointing to why women are ideally suited for leadership roles and the leadership attributes and skills critical to success in the BE industry of the future.*

Background of Respondents



96% of respondents identify as female and 4% identify as male.



The majority of respondents are based in the USA (63%) followed by Australia (6%) and Canada (6%). Respondents are based across North America, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and Africa.



We found that 24% of respondents are directors, followed by managers (19%) and senior managers (18%). 92% of respondents are in permanent positions and 94% work full-time.



74% of respondents have worked in the business events industry for more than 11 years, 12% of respondents have worked in the industry for 6-10 years and 11% have worked in the industry for 2-5 years.



Over half of respondents (51%) work in an hybrid office/home environment followed by 31% who work entirely from home and 16% being fully office based.



10% of respondents identify as differently-abled.



17% of respondents are aged between 26-34 years old.  
17% are aged between 50-54.  
16% are aged between 40-44.



29% of respondents work in organisations that have between 50-249 employees.  
22% work in organisations of between 10-49 people.  
14% work for organisations sized between 250-1000 employees.

## **About PCMA**

PCMA, PCMA Foundation and CEMA educate, inspire, and listen, creating meaningful experiences where passion, purpose and commerce come together. We are the world's largest community for Business Events Strategists, providing senior-level education, networking, and market intelligence for the global business events industry. Our mission is to drive social and economic progress through business events. Headquartered in Chicago, IL PCMA has 17 North American Chapters, regional communities in APAC, EMEA and LATAM, and members in 59 countries. The Corporate Event Marketing Association (CEMA), a PCMA subsidiary, advances strategic event marketing and marketing communications for senior-level event marketers and industry professionals. Visit us at [pcma.org](http://pcma.org).

**[www.pcma.org](http://www.pcma.org)**

## **About PCMA Foundation**

The role of the Foundation of PCMA is to support the mission of PCMA through fundraising and grant-giving focused on scholarships, education and research that will advance the business events industry. Annually the Foundation funds over \$700K in impact, and since 1985 has funded over 2,500 scholarships, 100 research studies and education programs, and \$2.7M in charitable giving.

**[www.foundation.pcma.org](http://www.foundation.pcma.org)**

## **About Business Events Sydney**

BE Sydney is a trusted, independent, not-for-profit company that targets and bids for hosting rights for global meetings to be held in Sydney, Australia.

**[www.besydney.com.au](http://www.besydney.com.au)**

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