

Walking the Talk: LinkedIn's Best Practices to Advance Women in Sales

By Karen M. Peesker and Jonathan A. Lister

This study reveals how the professional network leader LinkedIn is providing leading-edge diversity programs across their global salesforce in order to increase the percentage of women in sales and sales leadership. LinkedIn's organizational vision is to create economic opportunity for every member of the global workplace. For LinkedIn, diversity and inclusion are key to achieving this vision. This application research study outlines best practices and approaches LinkedIn has taken to enhance support for women in the sales ecosystem. While we know diversity initiatives cut across broader gender inclusion initiatives, this article is focused on binary gender data. In this study we examine new diversity programs implemented for women in sales by LinkedIn, and the successes to date. Practical implications are explored. The key contribution of this study is the presentation of best practices for diversity and inclusion of women in sales in the Internet Technology (IT) industry which may be used by other organizations to help advance women in sales.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing female talent in sales and sales leadership has long been recognized as an important factor in sales success and productivity (Fugate, Decker and Brewer, 1988; Catalyst, 1995; Dubinsky, 1996). More recent industry data from the modern sales environment identified by Gartner report that women are achieving quota at a higher rate than men, 70 percent for women vs. 67 percent for men (Johnstone, 2017). Additionally, Gartner identified that companies with sales teams comprised of 45 percent or more women achieved a 15-times higher average in sales revenue, compared with companies with less than 20 percent of women in sales positions (Johnstone, 2017). Moreover, women are entering into professional selling in the Information Technology (IT) industry at a greater rate, rising from 22.9 percent of female new hires in 2008 to 28.5 percent in 2016 (Berger and Fritzler, 2016). Considering that "women now represent 40 percent of the global working population (The World Bank, 2017), it is reasonable to expect a comparable gender ratio in leadership roles" (Player et al., 2019, p.1), especially in the sales sector. However, despite the understood

importance and positive performance impact of women on sales teams, women are still underrepresented on these teams. Women represent only 30% of commercial sales professionals in Canada according to the Canadian Professional Sales Association (CPSA, 2019, p.21). Furthermore, while some organizations promote their workplaces as gender diverse, only one in five organizations has strategies in place to further diversify their sales team with women specifically (CPSA, 2019, p. 19). Moreover, industry data show that only 25 percent of salespeople in technology companies are women, and the Enterprise Sales Forum found that only 12 percent of the women it surveyed held senior sales executive roles (Johnston, 2017).

To thrive in the modern sales environment, sales organizations need to develop and implement strategies to ensure a diverse workforce. Recognizing this opportunity, IT organizations have started to develop a strong focus on advancing women in sales, providing additional support to attract and retain female talent. It has long been identified that "companies are finding that they need women in sales to compete effectively for an increasing customer/client base" (Mattis, 1995, p. 9). However, the continued underrepresentation of female sales leaders suggests that new approaches and strategies to support and retain women in sales are required.

In this article, we present new practitioner-based ideas and insights to help increase diversity and

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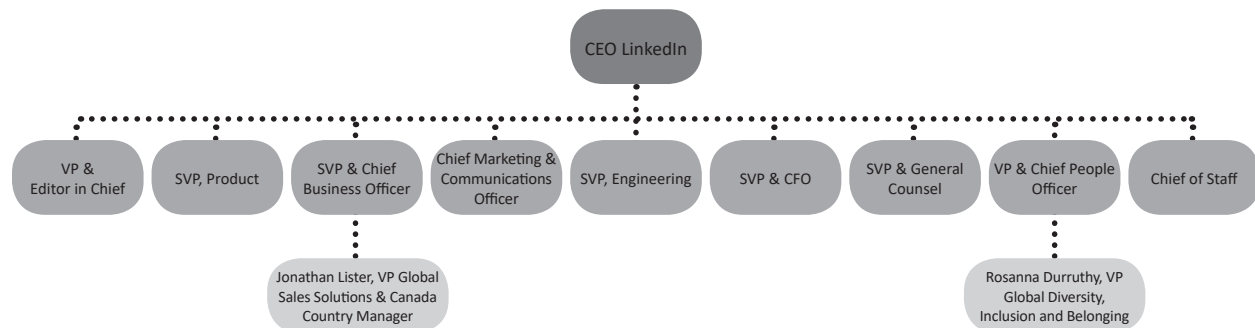
promote inclusivity of women in the technology sales environment. While diversity initiatives cut across many underrepresented groups beyond gender, this paper will focus primarily on the issue of binary gender. We outline key actions and implications for sales leaders who want to help women advance in sales. This article brings together academic contributions to the field and relevant insights from this professional network organization. Additionally, it contributes to the sales literature by providing a summary of leading-edge best practices that sales leaders can use to encourage women to both enter into sales and sales leadership roles, helping to foster diversity, and achieve inclusivity within their organizations. While this paper focuses on women in sales, it also aims to highlight the important transformative role that male leaders can play in their organizations as diversity champions. Eight key elements are identified in a specific case of inclusive leadership and culture change at LinkedIn, against a backdrop of larger initiatives at the company. The case offers the reader an opportunity to consider the presence or absence of barriers to these key elements being implemented in other organizations in the sector, or in other sectors, and therefore being used to attract and retain women in sales through an inclusive leadership approach.

LINKEDIN – CREATING A CORPORATE CULTURE TO SUPPORT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

In 2003 LinkedIn became the world's largest professional network. LinkedIn was acquired by Microsoft in 2016, and now has over 675 million users in more than 200 countries and territories worldwide in 2020. In 2015, LinkedIn publicly established gender diversity as a key organizational priority through three key initiatives: (1) Women in Technology (WIT) spearheaded in 2014 by Erica Lockheimer, Director of Growth and one of the most senior engineer engineers at LinkedIn at the time, with executive sponsor Kevin Scott, Senior Vice President of engineering and operations (Lockheimer, 2015), (2) a Global Inclusion team led by Sandy Hoffman as Director (Hoffman, 2015), and (3) LinkedIn's Women's Initiative (WiN), "a program geared towards increasing gender diversity in

senior leadership roles in our global sales organization" led by Karen Chi, then Head of Acquisition and Engagement (Chi, 2015). With this momentum from senior leadership, LinkedIn began to create front-line initiatives to support the advancement of women in sales, internally across their organization.

To enable successful adoption of these initiatives, strong and inclusive-minded leadership engaging the sales team and building organizational buy-in for changes in policy and practice was, and continues to be, required. Jonathan Lister, who became Vice President of Global Sales Solutions and Country Manager Canada in 2017 (see Figure 1), placed a clear priority on the diversity and inclusion goals that LinkedIn's top leadership had set out prior to him taking on the VP role. LinkedIn's goal was to establish and foster a corporate environment where female sales team talent would be encouraged and mentored, to bring the best out in both men and women. Together with his Global Sales Solutions team, Lister adopted an innovative approach to identify ways of developing and maintaining an organizational culture that would support women in sales and ensure that the entire talent pool was engaged. To achieve this the LinkedIn Global Sales Solutions team had to become clear about what inclusivity really meant in the sales division. The team started with an overall goal to create a corporate culture that supports diversity to enable exceptional sales performance. This approach is defined as inclusive leadership (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv 2010). A strong inclusive leader must be the centerpiece of managing diversity since this practice has been described as being key to effective change in organizational culture towards gender equity in various sectors (Jin, Lee, and Lee 2017). Now, in 2020, Rosanna Durruthy, LinkedIn's Vice President of Global Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging, is the leader of company-wide gender diversity initiatives and her work is described in the annual Workforce Diversity Report (LinkedIn 2019a). As Vice President Global Sales Solutions, Lister's focus on reinforcing this priority and his leadership in the Global Sales Solutions division has helped reinforce and enable effective change in the sales organization.

Figure 1: Simplified Organization Chart LinkedIn

In what follows, we outline the key elements to realizing this culture change: 1) the change process: data review, 2) cultural adaptation strategy: walk the talk, 3) role model initiative, 4) managing time scarcity, 5) changing the status quo: parental leave, 6) candidate recruiting and retention: gender and language, 7) flexible work locations, and 8) changing the conversation: LinkedIn's professional network.

1. The Change Process: Data Review

The LinkedIn Global Sales Solutions team assessed the gender split, considered data on diversity, and then set achievable goals at both the sales representative and sales leader levels. This provided a strong data-driven, evidence-informed platform to make achievable changes that would support the diversity goals and help track progress. The team applied their own Talent Insights software internally to assess the breakdown of their sales organization, as well as various internal measures. Results were benchmarked to industry averages and this information was used to set reasonable targets. This analysis revealed that while the women to men sales representatives' ratio was becoming more balanced, the ratio of women to men in the Global Sales Solutions division was not balanced and needed to be addressed. With these results, LinkedIn introduced an advanced diversity program to attract and retain women talent in sales leadership.

2. Cultural Adaptation Strategy: Walk the Talk

LinkedIn manifested this new focus of increasing diversity through achieving consistency between their brand identity and their cultural adaptation strategy. The Global Sales Solutions division at LinkedIn began by making small changes in their corporate culture to support diversity. This sales division made it a priority to 'walk the talk', taking action to support the new company direction, and to promote this work ethic under the LinkedIn brand. This meant clear decisions in specific areas where small changes send a clear signal and lead to culture change. An example of such a pattern is the decision of the Global Sales Solutions leadership team only to participate in both boards and panels that met transparent criteria around gender balance. The effect of this decision supports the priority at LinkedIn that any board or panel that leaders participate in supports gender diversity. For example, when a sales leader is asked to be on a panel or board, the leader makes sure that both women and men are participating, rather than having only men taking part. If the board or panel is not gender diverse, the sales leaders will not participate, as that would be inconsistent with the message LinkedIn is trying to deliver. By keeping their actions consistent with the vision through these simple criteria applied at key decision points, LinkedIn ensures their commitment to diversity, and the promotion of an inclusive culture.

3. The Role Model Initiative: Women Changing Gender Role Expectations

LinkedIn supports gender diversity by internally recruiting women sales leaders to act as role models for other women within the organization. As there are fewer women sales leaders in the industry in general, raising the visibility of exemplary role models within LinkedIn is an important part of talent development. Women sales leaders at LinkedIn support the development of other women as they move into leadership roles and provide encouragement and coaching. They help demonstrate to women sales representatives that there is a path to success as a woman in LinkedIn. The effect of the Role Model Initiative is clear in the example of one female executive who recently shared her career story as a role model with the Toronto sales team.

When this executive was asked to move from her current leadership position into a higher-level senior leadership role, she was very reluctant and expressed a doubt about her ability to do the job. Although she did have exceptional experience, she did not think she had all the necessary skills. In this case, her supervisor insisted that she take on the role. He believed in her and strongly encouraged her to take this next step in her career. After discussing the situation with her family, it was decided that to make this happen, her husband would quit his job to stay at home and raise their children. While it is unlikely that she would have taken on this senior leadership role without this strong support from her husband, it is clear that she would not have considered this role without the strong encouragement she received from a supervisor who had identified her leadership abilities.

By sharing her journey, this executive is acting as an example to show other women at LinkedIn that it is possible to work and be successful in a leadership role while raising a family. In her story, the sales leader prioritized her career and negotiated key relationships in ways that challenge expectations associated with traditional gender roles for women. Additionally, to show how a working mother can also be an engaged parent, she brought her child into the office on a business trip. Acting as a role model, she demonstrated that it is possible to be a parent and an organizational sales leader.

4. Managing Time Famine

In sales, the final revenue numbers are paramount. Consequently, people often need to work longer hours in this division of the business to make targets and satisfy customer needs. Such long working hours result in time scarcity, also called time famine. To help their employees manage this time challenge, LinkedIn is working to help individuals find a way to both deliver the numbers and lead a more balanced, full life. In addition to supporting families, LinkedIn offers strong parental leave programs and encourages their employees to take these leaves. Even though it is documented that both parents have time famine when children are born, it is critical for women as they continue to be the ones to do the vast majority of the household duties (Guppy, Sakumoto and Wilkes, 2019), putting them at a disadvantage in high-level sales occupations. The time a female parent spends on household chores can increase by approximately six hours a week per child (Krantz-Kent, 2009). Time scarcity is also important for men, although the pressures on men can be different. Men are not encouraged to take paternity leaves suggesting that there is still a social stigma, and often men are not vocal about the help they do in the household. Leaders at LinkedIn encourage men to play an important role in helping in the home to support the advancement of women. These leaders, following an inclusive leadership approach as outlined above, are fostering a culture in which men are encouraged to talk about how they are involved in child-raising and helping at home.

In this way strong male leaders are also acting as role models for parents and challenging traditional gender roles, therefore supporting workplace diversity. For instance, one of the top male sales executives at LinkedIn voiced the importance of his parenting priorities. This executive put a priority on participating in his children's morning routine. No meetings were to be scheduled with him during that time and this was made visible in his calendar, reinforcing the priority of work-life balance to other employees. Consequently, his routine became an example to other sales professionals. This behavior is known as allyship, because it enables people to act as allies for each other (Coe, Wiley and Bekker, 2019). A similar example of allyship is when Bill Gates of Microsoft drove his kids to school, encouraging the

other fathers at his children's school to also start driving their children (Shontell and Akhtar, 2019). When incorporated as part of organizational change, allyship training is at its most effective (Coe, Wiley and Bekker, 2019). The use of allyship to help support diversity has been key to adapting the corporate culture at LinkedIn.

5. Challenging the Status Quo: Parental Leave

Research has shown that women in sales who choose to become parents have a harder time keeping their careers on track due to the nature of the results-driven sales culture (Nsiah, DeBeaumont and Ryerson, 2013). Revenue numbers must be achieved and the person who is in the office receives the recognition and commission for deals.

During the data review stage of the LinkedIn initiative, it was found that female employees often started working on significant sales transactions, but were unable to participate in the final stages of the deal following the birth of a child, due to the nature of the long deal cycle at LinkedIn. Moreover, it was identified at LinkedIn that women employees who have taken maternity leave made significantly less money as they did not receive commission or recognition from longer term deals which might close while they were away.

Upon review of their corporate sales data, it was discovered that LinkedIn was losing many of their top female sales producers due to maternity leave policies and challenges associated with reentry into the workforce. Women who held high earning positions in sales occupations had the highest wage penalty when they entered parenthood (Nsiah, DeBeaumont and Ryerson, 2013). This is consistent with findings from another global IT company who had lost female producers and leaders as a result of their own maternity leave policies (Bock, 2015). In addition, female employees often have a more difficult time reentering the work cycle and they will again be penalized when they take a second or third maternity leave to have additional children. As a result, LinkedIn decided to treat employees on maternity and paternity leave differently.

LinkedIn's innovative initiative was designed to tackle systemic issues faced by women in sales that create career penalties for them when they become

parents. Based on the data, LinkedIn decision-makers understand that these penalties also put the corporation at a disadvantage due to lost talent. Lister's observation and response as a leader is that "It is after parental leave that women fall behind, and eventually they are making less money than men and we lose this talent ... we have to start thinking of this as our problem not their problem" (J. Lister, 2019, pers. comm.). This inclusive leadership stance set the stage for evidence-based change in organizational culture, considered by some in the industry to be counterintuitive. Some features of the new approach are described in the next two paragraphs.

Individuals on parental leave are now included in email updates and are given opportunities to join company events. One recent study focusing on the impacts of similar policies put in place by other companies more recently found that this strategy of "creating a corporate program that enables women to stay in touch with the workplace while on maternity leave" may lessen some of the negative effects of long leaves, particularly the assessment of ability and commitment to the job (Hideg et al., 2018). Beyond staying in touch with the LinkedIn workplace, senior leaders now give accolades and recognition to employees even while these employees are on parental leave. However, the largest negative effects on women who take extended parental leave described above go beyond connection or recognition, to long-term financial and career impacts. LinkedIn's program now provides opportunities for managers to provide promotions and raises to individuals (women and men) while on parental leave. The employees continue to show up on sales leader boards and be recognized for work in their sales territory.

As the sales cycle at LinkedIn can range from one to two years, the Global Sales Solutions team decided that women sales employees who are part of the deal, but are on maternity leave when the deal is closed, still have the ability to get credit both in compensation and acknowledgement. As a leader, Lister's position is that it is especially important for a female sales leader who is having an excellent year to be recognized for her success, even if she is on parental leave. LinkedIn also changed its policy to enable women to receive commission while on maternity leave. To manage the challenges associated with delivering sales results,

the LinkedIn Global Sales Solutions team decided that they would over-hire sales professionals and take some pressure off the individuals on parental leave. The Global Sales Solutions team knew that statistically, a certain number of female sales producers would go on maternity leave at any given time. They decided that it was worth the investment to retain this female talent and hire enough people to cover for these individuals. The development of this innovative initiative was an iterative process which occurred over a number of years after Jonathan started as VP Global Sales Solutions on September 2017.

Context for understanding this initiative

A challenge in international human resource management is how to implement consistent policies within a global company in light of differences in government policy and regulation across all the countries in which that company operates (e.g., Briscoe, Schuler, and Tarique, 2012). An example of this difference is that between Canada and the US regarding parental leave policy and regulation. This difference presented an interesting challenge for Lister as Canada Country Manager for LinkedIn in the years leading up to legislative changes by the Canadian government on parental leave in 2017, required at the country level to ensure compliance with this policy change, and also the LinkedIn Global Sales Solutions team. This is because issues of sales performance and parental leave support for women in sales are connected, given the differently distributed impacts of parental roles on women in sales, as documented in both industry and academic literature outlined above. This challenge was reframed an opportunity rather than a disruption, in the context of the larger shifts initiated by senior decision-makers at LinkedIn, for example, Vice President of Global Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging. The contrast case with US policy on parental leave that follows demonstrates the groundbreaking nature of LinkedIn's organizational supports for women in sales, going beyond both US and Canadian policy, in terms of inclusion and recognition for women in sales, during parenthood.

In 2015, United States policy did not support nationwide paid maternity leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) (Nationwide Partnership for Women

& Families, 2016). In Canada, gender equity policy changes resulted in a new 18-month parental leave program introduced in December 2017 (Government of Canada, 2019). The recent legislative reform introduced Employment Insurance (EI) Parental Sharing Benefits which enables eligible two-parent families to take an additional 5 weeks of parental benefits when choosing the standard option (parents can share up to 40 weeks of parental benefits) and 8 weeks when choosing the extended option (parents can share up to 69 weeks of parental benefits) (Government of Canada, 2019).

“This type of benefit has been proven to encourage a more balanced sharing of child care responsibilities. This new measure will help us break down barriers to gender equality by making it easier for mothers to return to work sooner if they wish, reducing the wage gap between women and men, and helping Canadians spend more time with their families.” – The Honorable Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development (CISION, 2019)

The reform aimed to provide parents with greater flexibility and the opportunity for women to return to work sooner. The Canada Labour Code was recently amended in September, 2019 “to ensure that federally regulated private-sector employees have the right to take leave while receiving the new parental sharing benefits without fear of losing their job” (CISION, 2019). In Canada, corporate organizations are now considering how to implement this new regulation which adds to the complexity of increasing gender diversity when operating in the quarterly-driven IT sales culture.

In the Canada/US context, the adoption of LinkedIn's program prior to legislation requirements, and the offering of additional profession-specific equity programs acknowledging the unique context of sales demonstrate LinkedIn's leadership in diversity for women in sales. Prior to legislation coming into effect, the groundbreaking program created in 2015 by LinkedIn was already structured around maternity and paternity leave in an effort to retain women in sales. No study, to our knowledge, has compared the implementation of parental leave policies exceeding these regulatory requirements, in a corporate sales environment.

There is a need in the sales profession to lead differently, taking into account jurisdictional (or national) differences, to ensure we do not lose sales talent and top producers and that means ensuring that we recruit, retain and promote women. The way LinkedIn has implemented this program with the steps outlined in the article demonstrates diversity leadership for women in sales that goes above and beyond the minimum requirements of the Canadian government. Organization change towards gender equity requires cultural change at many levels. It is likely to be most successful within a framework of legislative structures that are aimed at promoting gender equity. LinkedIn's program currently aligns philosophically and structurally with the Canadian federal government, in contrast to the US where LinkedIn could try this type of program but may be less successful because there isn't the same framework with which to align. While it appears that Canadian policies are more generous than the US policies (Buck, 2017) with the 18-month parental leave, these policies alone are still insufficient to ensure that women talent in sales are retained. All jurisdictions need to do better, and organizations need to prioritize diversity programs to support women in sales.

6. Candidate Recruiting and Retention: Gender and Language

LinkedIn is focused on improving their approaches to candidate recruitment and retention, based on research. The Global Diversity Language Report (2019b) prepared by LinkedIn has been used extensively to drive change internally to develop a more inclusive workplace. This report details why language matters in the workplace and provides a comprehensive understanding of how different genders respond to and utilize language concerning their job search and employment experience. The report outlines that men and women react differently to language used both in the workplace and during the hiring process. It revealed that 44 percent of female respondents would be discouraged from applying for a role if the word 'aggressive' was mentioned in the job description, compared to just over three in ten (31 percent) male respondents who stated the same (LinkedIn, 2019b, p. 5). The use of words like 'powerful' and 'confident', what the report calls open language, was found more

likely to attract gender-diverse candidates (LinkedIn, 2019b, p. 5). It identified that different benefits appeal to different genders, for instance women often consider jobs associated with 'adaptable workplace culture' characterized as flexible working conditions and added medical benefits (LinkedIn, 2019b, p.14). Similar findings to the LinkedIn Global Language Diversity Report has been outlined in academic research which demonstrated that the use of 'masculine' language lowers the likelihood of women applying for that particular position (Gaucher, Friesen and Kay, 2011).). The LinkedIn Global Language Diversity Report also revealed that over a third of respondents (36 percent) believed talent leaders in their organization were not getting specific training on inclusive language or unconscious bias. Another academic study found that 78 percent of women had reasons for not applying for a job related to their misplaced beliefs in how the hiring process works (Mohr, 2014) demonstrating the importance of transparency.

Responding to this research the LinkedIn organization took specific actions to drive change. The organization provide job posts that are fully inclusive by removing gender-coded language to encourage women to apply, and they even use LinkedIn Jobs tool to monitor conversion rate by gender so they can adapt the post if required. LinkedIn also has added a salary range line to their job posts and details that demonstrate the flexibility and transparency of their policies. Furthermore, they now provide details on benefits. Based on findings in the report LinkedIn is even providing additional training to their own leaders on inclusivity to reduce bias (LinkedIn, 2019b, p 17) and improve the hiring process. Moreover, LinkedIn continues to provide incentives to their employees to bring in diverse sales talent. All of these actions have been taken to demonstrate to women that the organization is committed to transparency, equity, and fair pay.

7. Flexible Work Locations

Another step on the journey to increase diversity in sales was to build new processes that enable employees to work from home. In the past, LinkedIn was very focused on having employees work in the office. The Global Sales Solutions team has realized that this does not always work for women and there is now a

general recognition that the organization needs to be more flexible in this expectation. The importance of this can be demonstrated in a recent story by a female sales executive at the organization. During the weekly leadership roundtable session when the key accomplishments of the business are discussed, she stated that her key achievement that week was taking her child to the doctor and getting to work on time. With the traffic in major cities, many parents can understand that this can be considered a win. However, this should be considered a norm, not a major achievement. This type of discussion has encouraged key leaders to create new policies around time scarcity issues that both working women and men face. The experience of working at home in the COVID19 pandemic is also causing a rethinking of these ideas. Currently LinkedIn is moving towards providing more flexibility to work hours and creating opportunities for their employees to work from their desired locations.

Shapiro, Ingols and O'Neill (2009) suggest that women managers positively reciprocate to their organizations for providing them with flexibility. A new career model is emerging; organizations are now offering flexibility to better engage their employees instead of offering life-long employment with excessive working hour expectations (Shapiro et al., 2009, p. 497). Therefore, organizations that are able to provide more flexible hours will be attractive to female parents (Nsiah, DeBeaumont and Ryerson, 2013). Lister stated that "if we say that we are supportive of diversity and inclusion but then we say you have to be in the office all the time we are not being consistent" (J. Lister, 2019, pers. comm.). To be more consistent, LinkedIn is working on changing the old company culture in sales to create an environment that will help support advancing women and men with childcare, elder, or other care responsibilities to provide for the full humanity of the individual in the LinkedIn community.

8. Changing the Conversation: LinkedIn's Professional Network

As mentioned previously LinkedIn is actively used by more than 675 million professionals in over 200 countries and territories around the world. These users represent over 30 million companies and LinkedIn's

vision incorporates diversity, equality and balance as crucial values to create opportunities for the members of the global workforce (Chen, 2019). To support the advancement of women in sales and to change the conversation with these professionals, LinkedIn employees are encouraged to use its professional network platform to promote diversity. For instance, the usage of sponsored content on LinkedIn is an excellent way to promote diversity within different audiences (LinkedIn, 2019b). This is important as in 2015, LinkedIn reported to have 1 million article publishers (Roth, 2015). The same study noted that approximately 45 percent of LinkedIn article readers hold upper rank positions which makes the publication of articles a strong tool to promote change, support diversity and advancement of women in sales. The statistical evidence shows that "in 2018 almost 230,000 posts around diversity in the workforce from over 70,000 companies across a large range of industries" (Chen, 2019) were shared on LinkedIn showing 52 percent increase from 2017. This indicates that public discussion of diversity in the workforce is increasing, making it an important topic for all companies. Taking action to write articles and LinkedIn posts about the importance of diversity is a practice that LinkedIn employees are using to help support the advancement of women in sales.

DISCUSSION: IMPACT OF THE DIVERSITY INITIATIVE

The clear, targeted focus on increasing diversity and inclusiveness for women has had impressive results. In 2018, women now represent 39.1 percent of LinkedIn's leadership, an increase of 12 percent in the last 2 years, and 49 percent in the last 4 years (Durruthy, 2018). From 2014-2018, LinkedIn had an increase of 66 percent in female representatives within leadership in the Global Sales Organization and an increase of 193 percent (almost 3x) in female leadership within technical roles (Hall, 2018). While executing this strategy, LinkedIn's annual revenue grew to almost 6.8 billion USD, up from 5.26 billion USD in the previous year (Statista, 2019). The commitment level of executives like Lister and Durruthy is creating important changes in the environment, supporting the growth of women talent in the sales field along with executing significant revenue growth.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Implementing additional measures to support the advancement of women in sales is essential. It has been found that the number of women entering the workforce is not the source of the lack of organizational diversity (Kang and Kaplan, 2019). Rather, it is that women are pushed out of specific industries, and this is a key cause of the ‘motherhood penalty’ (Kang and Kaplan, 2019). It is possible that this effect may be occurring for women in the IT sales industry. LinkedIn provided an example of an organization in the IT industry that is making the necessary cultural and policy changes to support diversity and inclusivity for women. The LinkedIn Global Sales Solutions team has found that the development of programs that support women in sales enables them to retain their sales talent and ultimately this has proven to result in stronger sales performance.

Specifically, the leaders in the IT industry must strive to make the working conditions more inclusive for both females and males with families and other priorities outside of work. The long hours in the sales industry in IT have made it challenging for employees with families. Unfortunately, women are given a tough choice: focus on rising in the ranks of sales or focus on raising a family. The LinkedIn case demonstrates that it is possible to create viable solutions that balance priorities on all sides. There is a need in the sales profession to lead differently to ensure we do not lose sales talent and top producers, and that means ensuring that we recruit, retain, and promote women. Businesses heavily invest in the training and development of women in sales only to lose them when they have families. Employers should commit to return-to-work plans for parents returning from parental leave. For instance, they can provide the individual with a summarized update or with a “reintegration buddy/coach” (Hodkinson, 2019). Flexible working hours are the next evolutionary step for organizations. The stereotypes such as judging those who leave work early to spend time with family are no longer accurate as they do not define the final results produced by those employees. The current time scarcity within sales positions in the IT industry is not always healthy for families. This “time famine” culture and mentality needs to change if organizations want to keep talented women sales professionals in the IT sales workforce.

CONCLUSION

It takes courage to initiate innovative steps to support the advancement of women in the extremely competitive environment of sales. LinkedIn’s VP of Global Sales Solutions and his team are creating a solid culture to support working parents and, especially, to retain and advance women in the organization. This is a unique example for other organizations to learn about as it is working and demonstrates tangible results. Future research projects should investigate these ideas through both qualitative and quantitative studies to understand how these groundbreaking programs enable sales performance and increase the attraction and retention of women in sales.

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