



Has The COVID-19 Crisis Set Back Gender Equality?

Because greater diversity leads to upticks in innovation, productivity and lasting value, it is now business-critical to foster an inclusive culture

The coronavirus pandemic transformed the world of work for everyone, but global data indicate it has mostly impacted women. While the COVID-19 crisis accelerated a number of trends, it hindered the progress of workplace diversity and gender equality, as decision-makers adopted outdated ways of working and old stereotypes were revived.

Women were almost twice as likely as men to lose their jobs during the pandemic, a report by the University of Exeter in the UK found. The findings were similar to research conclusions from the US and Canada that show women were more likely to have their working hours reduced in 2020. Data indicates this was either because the types of jobs and sectors in which they operate suffered the most and/or female workers were expected to perform more child care, home-schooling and housework responsibilities – all unpaid.

UK-based Janine Chamberlin, Senior Director at LinkedIn, reveals that her insights from countries around the world tell “a worryingly consistent story”: hiring of women falls when lockdown measures are brought in.

These developments should be a big concern for business leaders. Why? Greater diversity has been shown to improve productivity, innovation and company culture, which is especially important now as organizations seek to reduce the costs of job churn and new-staff training, and while attracting and retaining top talent is paramount to long-term success.

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Sarah Ronan
Head of Operations
Pregnant Then Screwed



Crowe Global’s Art of Smart research from 2019 identified the benefits of diversity, and found that organizations that were the most diverse and bold in their policies achieved explosive growth in terms of revenue per employee – 3,680 percent on average, over five years.

If the COVID-19 crisis has set societies back on gender equality and diversity in the workplace, as various studies suggest, how will it shape the future of work? And what could – and should – business leaders do about it?

Experts warn that 50 years of progress could be put into reverse if businesses and governments don’t take action now. “We’re talking about a generational rollback,” says Sarah Ronan, Head of Operations at UK pregnancy and maternity discrimination charity Pregnant Then Screwed. “It took 23 years to see a 14 percent increase in maternal employment rates in the UK.”

She urges those in positions of power to make smart decisions and keep diversity goals in mind when hiring staff or making redundancies. If a rollback in gender diversity is allowed to go unchecked, then individuals, businesses, and society will all suffer. “Leaders should think about the long-term impact of reducing equality and diversity in the workplace by how they restructure now,” Ms Ronan says.

Duty of care in the workplace

This regression creates a “tricky situation” for businesses, suggests Hayley Sudbury, a vocal advocate of women and LGBT inclusion and Chief Executive Officer of Werkin, a multinational organization based in the US that connects mentors with mentees. Now more than ever, leaders have a “duty of care” to all employees, she argues. They must be more compassionate: ask questions, listen and find out what’s going on in employees’ lives, away from work.

There are no simple solutions, but the first thing business leaders must do is recognize the issue. Practical tips include being sensitive to staff needs and focusing on what work is achieved, rather than being rigid about working hours. Organizations need to look at their policies and structures and ensure they are as flexible, open, and inclusive as possible.

Businesses that are diverse and inclusive will emerge from the pandemic in the strongest position. Loubna Bouarfa, Chief Executive Officer and founder of Okra Technologies, a UK-based company that provides AI solutions for life sciences, and which was named the best female-led start-up at the Startup Europe Awards, says having a diverse team prevents your workplace from having “tunnel vision.”

“Every one of us is in a little bubble, we’re stuck in our own area,” she says. “Sometimes we can’t see the whole picture. [Having a diverse team] helps us not to get blinded by our own vision and overconfidence.”

Doubling down on diversity agenda

There are many benefits to nurturing a diverse workforce and leadership team – many studies, including The Art of Smart's aforementioned 2019 report, prove that the more diverse an organization is, the more innovation is generated and the healthier the bottom line. Increasingly, those businesses that drive a diversity agenda are being recognized and rewarded, through greater custom and a higher reputation for fairness and progression inside and outside of their industry and region.

For example, in July 2020, two months after the killing of George Floyd in America that triggered anti-racism riots around the world, Lloyds Banking Group's efforts to promote more Black employees to senior roles was classed as "credit positive" by Moody's Investors Service. It marked the first time that the rating agency has explicitly linked a company's stability to diversity measures. Lloyds, the UK's leading bank by current accounts, had announced a race action plan after promising to "do more" to promote equality in response to global protests that erupted following Mr. Floyd's death. Moody's said that the measures were "credit positive because they will improve staff diversity at all levels and reduce Lloyds' exposure to social risk."

A growing list of organizations and authorities are doubling down on their diversity agenda and earning worldwide plaudits for hitting their goals. In September, the Brazilian Football Confederation announced it would pay men and women the same amount for representing the national team. The South American nation remains one of the few countries to make such a pledge – but it's likely that the number will have grown significantly by the end of 2021.

Marcelo Claure, the Bolivian-American Chief Executive Officer of SoftBank Group and founder of Brightstar Corporation, the largest Hispanic-owned organization in US history, earned global praise in late 2020 when he made a move to improve diversity through disruptive investing. He launched the US\$100 million SB Opportunity Fund, dedicated to "supporting and building a community of outstanding Black, Latinx and Native American founders."

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Organizations now have the opportunity to rebuild fairer and more inclusive workplaces.

Janine Chamberlin
Senior Director
LinkedIn



Telecommunications leader Vodafone is one of a number of progressive businesses that in 2020 realized the urgent need to boost its diversity agenda. The company plans to increase flexibility with a greater emphasis on remote working, meaning that they can open up opportunities to new employees who might have missed out in the past because of their location or other barriers. This builds on Vodafone's longstanding commitment to create an inclusive and diverse workforce.

"We're proud of the progress we're making through our policies that support diversity and inclusion," says Vodafone's Group Chief HR Officer, Leanne Wood. "The COVID-19 crisis has further highlighted the importance of inclusion, engagement and flexibility for our people, and we have offered additional support for well-being and balancing caretaking responsibilities during this challenging time."

Offering a final word of expert advice, LinkedIn's Ms. Chamberlin acknowledges that if business leaders address the issue of diversity now, it could transform the workplace for the better. Ignore it, and the future of work will be less diverse, interesting, and successful – and we will all pay the price. "Businesses and the global economy are going through their biggest revolution in recent history. Organizations now have the opportunity to rebuild fairer and more inclusive workplaces," she adds.

Jason Lenz, a tax specialist who worked at Crowe MacKay LLP in Canada from September 2016 to January 2021, revealed his transition to Crowe colleagues in 2020 and his confidence has been boosted by the positive reaction



Inclusivity Encourages Authenticity And Productivity' – Transgender Man Explains Why Workplace Diversity Matters

«I'm a transgender man and I chose to come out last year. Partly because of the coronavirus pandemic, because we've all been stuck at home more with our own thoughts – and mine were rather loud – and partly because my career is very important to me and I want to be able to be authentic at work.

I went to HR and they asked me what I needed. We had that conversation and they said they would order me a name plate and have IT update my name, inform my coworkers, and support my transition. The Canadian government has a good guide on how to transition in the workplace so we started there and built from that. It was seamless; they really planned it out and tried hard to get it right. Coming out in the workplace as a transgender person is terrifying – there's no guarantee it will go well. But I felt supported and appreciated. It feels great to work for an inclusive company. We've always had great diversity, with

female partners and people of color, for example. It's strong, diverse, and I enjoy being part of that diversity and being able to be authentic. You can bring your whole self to work. Being able to be "me" is extremely rewarding and, honestly, I feel like I'm a better worker. I feel like I'm more efficient and less distracted. Pretending to be something you're not takes energy – it takes you away from getting the job done efficiently and effectively. Inclusivity can change that.

Employers need to educate themselves about diversity. It could be trans rights, racial inclusivity, working parents. You have to break down the barriers before you can let people in. You have to create a safe space. If you create these barriers – or don't realize they exist – there's talent you will never have that will go somewhere else. You're eliminating some aspect of growth.»

Viewpoints from Crowe

Christopher Mitchell, Chief Diversity Officer (Partner), Crowe LLP (USA)



"Research has proven that diversity, equality and inclusion adds value for any organization. The benefits of inclusivity are diversity in complex problem-solving, decision-making, governance, risk management, attracting talent, employee engagement and more. Advancing diversity and fostering inclusion matters more than ever. Unfortunately, the emergence of COVID-19 has interrupted progress towards inclusivity within many organizations. People impacted include women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, and others from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The movement of so many employees to a remote working environment poses a challenge to their inclusion in ideation and decision-making. Organizations need new and creative ideas as they adapt to the new normal and they should be looking to address inclusion as challenges in the new normal are revealed. Diversity in itself is not enough. It must be supported by an inclusive culture that optimizes the value that difference can bring.

Inclusion can be a difficult concept to define. It is about creating a workplace that allows people to 'bring their whole selves to work every day' and be successful."

Susan Hodkinson, Chief Operating Officer at Crowe Soberman (Canada)



“It is certainly clear that the pandemic and all of the fallout has the potential to erase some of the gains that women have made in the workplace over the last generation. Employers need to look very individually at each of their people and figure out what they need to do to support those people to be successful. Putting the tools and tactics in place is relatively easy. The thing that’s more challenging and more important [for business leaders] is flipping the mindset.”

Herschel Frierson, Strategic Client Solutions Leader (Director), Crowe LLP (USA)



“The COVID-19 crisis has taken an unprecedented toll on our global economy and the impact on minority communities has been very concerning. In a time where minorities and women are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, the need for greater diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and programs is business-critical. With the worldwide reaction to social injustice we see that employees are demanding more of their employers, as it relates to diversity, equity and inclusion. As we have seen, what happens in one part of the world has an impact on the other side of the world. We are truly in a time and place where we must embrace the differences that make us unique. Tolerance, acceptance and support of each other

are key foundations of a successful global organization. To be a global leader you must promote and grow your diversity, equity and inclusion programs and initiatives.”

Rebecca Durrant, Partner and National Head of Private Clients, Crowe UK



“The coronavirus pandemic has turned workplaces upside down and we are all having to get used to the new normal, which has typically meant adjusting to remote working. While this agility is something that women have always aspired to, the current reality of dealing with this is very different. Work boundaries are blurred, and for women this is exacerbated as they are often doing their day job on top of caregiving for children and other relatives. The lack of role models at senior level is already an issue and this will only make matters worse, which will be a disaster for business. This, along with the fact that proportionately more women have been furloughed or lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 crisis, has pushed back gender equality by a generation. The gap is further widened for women of color. Organizations need to recognize that this situation is not sustainable, they need to support their women by redefining boundaries between work and home, moving performance measures away from presenteeism, and encouraging flexibility so women, and men, are better able to work around their other responsibilities. If organizations can create a more balanced and empathetic working environment they will reap the benefits, as they will retain their people to better work towards future business success.”

Rafeet Maniar, Practice Manager, Crowe UAE



“According to a 2019 Pearl Initiative study, 62 per cent of respondents believed a work-life balance and work flexibility would help retain women in the workforce. World leaders Kamala Harris, Jacinda Ardern, Raja Al Gurg are all driving the change in corporate economies, and enabling opportunities to be offered to women as the right and relevant candidate. As mentioned recently in Forbes Middle East, women-led brands continue gaining momentum. We need to fuel our curiosity and step up. Internal audits in the Gulf Region, have shown an increasing number of environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) committees. I regard this as the first step towards prioritizing non-financial matters, and it won’t be

long before we can add a ‘D’ (diversity) to this, and foster better diversity and justice in the workplace. To achieve the right balance, we need to keep evolving our mindsets. In the United Arab Emirates 2019 was announced as the year of tolerance, the construction of a multi-faith complex saw efforts for instilling the values of acceptance and cohesion in society. I know I say this on behalf of many women, we need to champion each other, if we want to move the needle.”

Mark Baer, CEO-Elect, Crowe LLP (USA)



«It's important for leaders to take diversity and inclusion seriously and to listen to employees. It falls squarely on the shoulders of our leaders to drive meaningful change.»

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