Grow Like a Girl

Women & Career Development Today

Research Summary Report

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Introduction and Background

The challenges facing women in the workplace have been well-chronicled and continue to be a topic of interest among authors, executives and leaders worldwide. Compensation differentials, slower and limited promotional pathways, mommy-tracking and more have been written and discussed for some time.

And yet, recent events, advances, and societal shifts may be conspiring to create a new landscape – one that's more hospitable and supportive of career development and success for women today.

- The outcome of the recent U.S. elections with so many women being voted into office may telegraph shifting sensibilities.

- The #MeToo movement has challenged traditional power dynamics.

- Multiple studies confirm a positive correlation between strong female leadership and higher return on equity and other finance performance measures. Evolving requirements for female board representation highlight the importance of, and create the space for, more women to lead.

- Growing egalitarian approaches to parenting in some demographic segments have men sharing more of the child-rearing responsibilities that formerly fell predominately to women (and perhaps introducing stumbling blocks for men climbing the ladder).

- Today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous workplace demands agility, moving multiple activity streams forward concurrently, emotional intelligence, connecting and collaborating with others – qualities that come naturally to many women.

As a result, the time is right to expand and refresh our understanding of how women view career development – how it's challenging but also how it's changing. So, we commissioned our study with the professional research firm, The Insight Advantage, to offer a data-informed update on this important topic.

Executive Highlights

Women continue to find career development challenging for a range of reasons explored in detail in subsequent sections of this report. Seven key points deserve special consideration (and in some cases, additional exploration) by those concerned with offering women more meaningful and productive opportunities to grow.

1. **Viva little difference.** Given the dramatic differences that are reported across the generational spectrum, we would have assumed that its lever of importance and the factors perceived to either help or hinder a woman's career development might differ based upon her age. But this proved not to be the case. Instead, tremendous similarities were reported. Whether a woman is 23 years of age or 50+, the importance placed upon career development is nearly the same. Notably, the four age ranges studied shared four of the same five top obstacles and factors working to support their development.

2. **Evolving definitions.** Historically, career development has been synonymous with promotions. People advanced by climbing the corporate ladder. Yet, over the past several decades of downsizing, delayering of middle levels of management, baby boomers working longer, and work being structured more organically, promotions have been in short supply. As a result, workers have expressed a high degree of dissatisfaction with career development. This study may represent the tip of the arrow, pointing toward acceptance of an expanded definition of career development beyond mere promotions and moves.

3. **Individual ownership on the rise.** Survey respondents also suggest that organizations may be making strides in their communication about and management of careers. The traditionally identified obstacles such as no budget, no training, limited opportunities, lack of management and organizational support appear considerably less important. Results would suggest that employees are internalizing the need to own and assume greater levels of responsibility for their development.

4. **Shifting skills for success.** Soft skills (including communication, interpersonal capacity, emotional intelligence, leadership, collaboration, teamwork and resilience) are perceived as more supportive of career development than traditional hard skills (including business and financial acumen, project/process management and role-specific capabilities).

5. **Say what?** A significant portion of this study addresses the role of negative self-talk as an obstacle to development. Interestingly, the self-limiting messages women tell themselves are largely the same regardless of age.

6. **The role of authenticity.** In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to authenticity – what it is, how to achieve it, and its role in the workplace. This study surfaces an authenticity disconnect (experienced by both men and women). Employees yearn to bring their authentic selves to work, but they're not sure that it's encouraged nor completely safe to do so. Interestingly, women are more inclined than men to believe that those who behave authentically get ahead.

7. **With age comes a distinctive perspective.** Throughout the analysis, it's rare to see a tidy, predictable upward or downward trend line among the age ranges. Where there are outliers, it tends to be the oldest age group. 50+ year-old women tend to demonstrate the greatest difference of opinions and are most distinctive in their points of view from all other age groups.

Survey Methodology

With the support of The Insight Advantage, we conducted a web-based survey that was distributed via personal and professional connections, as well as through a variety of social media channels between July 15, 2019 and August 23, 2019. To supplement specific demographic needs, we drew upon research subjects through M-Turk. We offered an incentive drawing for one of five $50 USD Amazon gift certificates to encourage participation.

Participants responded to a variety of topics via multiple-choice and open-ended questions to provide their insights about a range of workplace and career issues. Appendix A contains the entire content of the web survey.

We received more than 400 responses, sorted to four age ranges:

- 23-30-year-olds
- 31-38-year-olds
- 39-49-year-olds
- 50+ year-olds

The distribution of respondents by gender and age follows.

Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Distribution of Respondents by Gender and Age
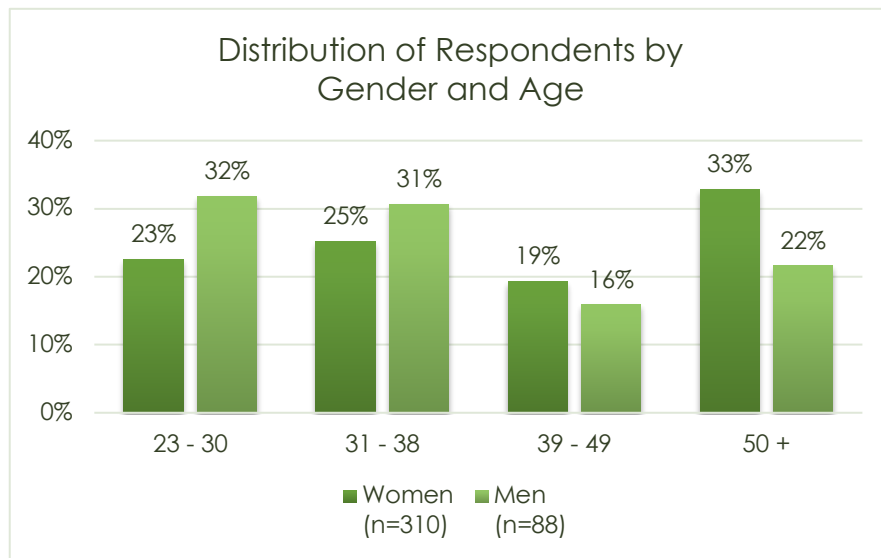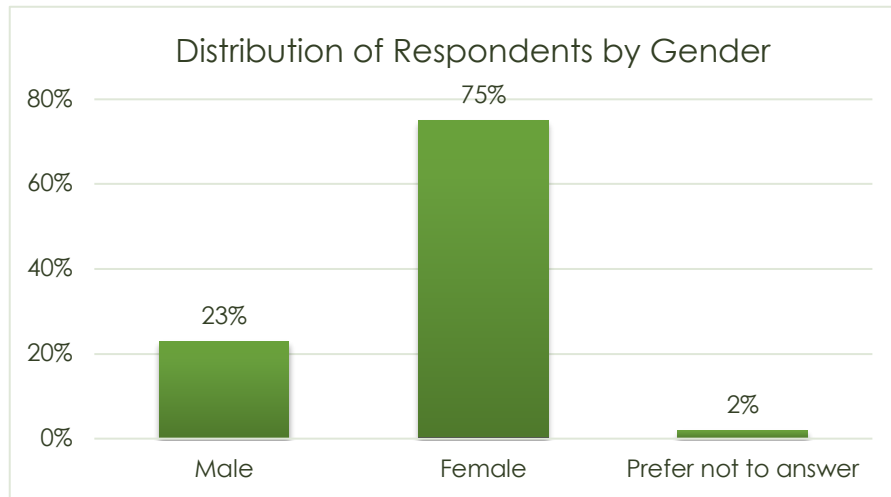
While the focus of our analysis was on women participants who are over 23 years old, we also analyzed and commented on several differences of particular interest between all women and men over 23 years old.

Statistical significance testing[1] was conducted on all differences. Throughout this report, we use the term 'significant' only when statistically significant differences exist. Additionally, some elements are identified as 'notable' because they challenge assumptions and conventional wisdom.

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[1] Takes into account the tabulation of results given by each group, combined with sample size. The larger the sample size, the less of a difference is required to be 'statistically significant'. Based on the small sample sizes we have for each age segment in this study, a gap of less than ~14 points between segments will not be statistically significant.

Detail and Analysis

The following analysis highlights the similarities and differences found among women of four age groups when looking at the Top 2 Box scores for all answer choices[2] and/or verbatim comments.

What Career Development Means

When asked, 'What does career development mean to you?', 107 women shared in their own words their unique and personal definitions. Their wide-ranging responses map to 10 primary categories:
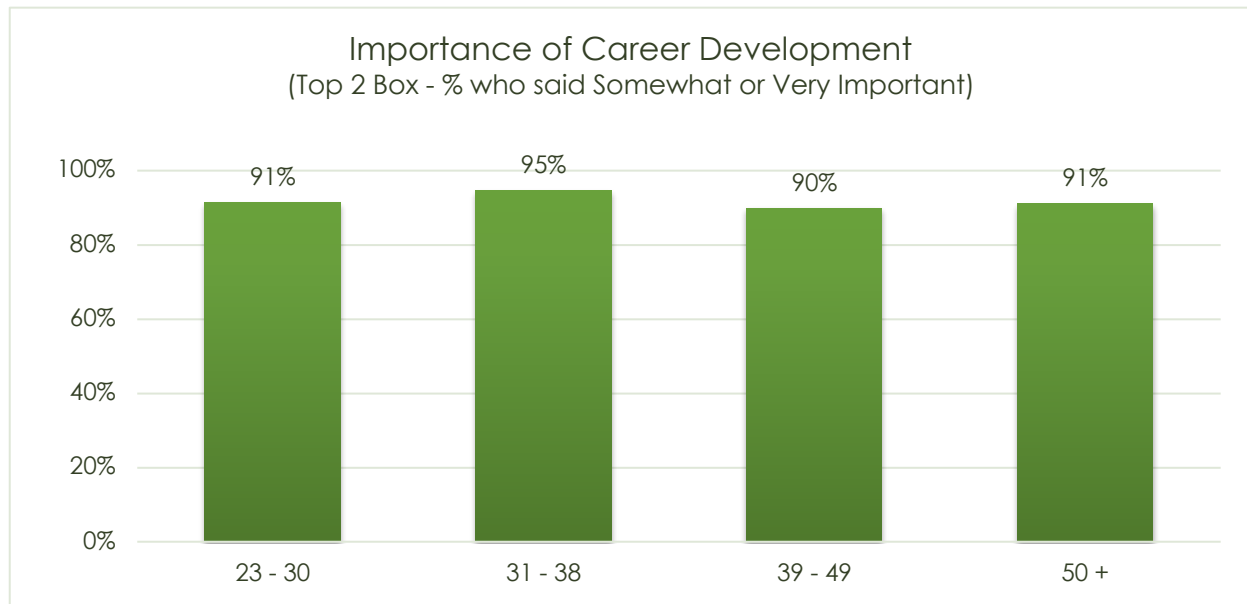
- Autonomy and control – feeling a sense of volition and ownership over one's work
- Challenge – raising the bar, taking on more, and pushing current limits
- Contribution to the greater good – being part of something greater than themselves
- Financial stability – making a good living that covers life's needs
- Goal achievement – enabling a sense of accomplishment and competence
- Positive relationships – facilitating a supportive network of colleagues with whom to collaborate and learn
- Professional growth – learning, developing, and growing in ways that enhance effectiveness
- Self-fulfillment – being offered the opportunity to meet one's goals, hopes, and ambitions
- Use of unique strengths – putting one's talents and superpowers to good use
- Work-life balance – having the opportunity to engage in the important parts of life both inside and outside of work

It's notable that early and late career women (23-30 years and 50+ years) wrote most about self-fulfillment, while 31-38-year-old women prioritized financial stability and 39-49-year-old women prioritized professional growth.

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[2] Top 2 Box refers to the sum of the percentage of responses that gave the two 'highest' responses on an importance or agreement scale.

Level of Importance

One of the clearest messages from the study is that career development is profoundly important. At least 90% of each age group rated career development to be important or very important. Surprisingly, no statistically significant difference exists based upon age.

Importance of Career Development
(Top 2 Box - % who said Somewhat or Very Important)

Age Group	Percentage
23 - 30	91%
31 - 38	95%
39 - 49	90%
50 +	91%

Achieving Career Success – Critical Factors

Women – regardless of age – hold a fairly common view of what's required to achieve career success. The four age ranges share four of the five top factors:

- Knowing yourself, your strengths, interests, values and opportunities for improvement
- Working in a culture that honors learning and development
- Receiving candid, helpful feedback and coaching
- Building a strong network
- Having a boss who's genuinely interested in you and your growth

The color-coded chart that follows offers a visual representation of how the similarities and differences play out.

23 – 30-year-old women	31 – 38-year-old women	39 - 49-year-old women	50+ year-old women
Knowing yourself (94)	Knowing yourself (95) / Feedback (95)	Knowing yourself (95)	Work Culture (100) / Satisfying work (100) / Knowing yourself (100)
Work Culture (93) / Feedback (93)	Pushing boundaries (94)	Network (93) / Feedback (93) / Work Culture (93)	Feedback (98)
Boss (91)	Authenticity (92)	Satisfying work (92) / Boss (92)	Pushing boundaries (96) / Network (96) / Help (96) / Boss (96)
Help (90) / Network (90)	Boss (91) / Network (91)		

Women of all ages strongly agree with the importance of two key factors to career success:

- Knowing yourself, your strengths, interests, values, and opportunities for improvement; and
- Receiving candid, helpful feedback and coaching

50+ year-olds see a stronger connection between the nature of the work and opportunities to grow and career success. They are significantly more likely than all others to believe that engaging in work that is satisfying, challenging and energizing (100% of them vs. 87-92% of others) and working in a culture that honors learning and development (100% of them vs. 90-93% of others) is important to achieving career success.

50+ year-olds are significantly more likely than 39-49-year-olds to recognize the link between career success and asking for help and becoming comfortable sharing successes and accomplishments with others.

50+ year-olds are significantly more likely than 23-30-year-olds to feel that having a mentor or champion in the organization is important to achieving career success. This topic represents one of the rare cases reflecting a natural progression with age. Having a mentor or champion in the organization was least likely to be mentioned by 23-30-year-olds; it was most likely to be mentioned by 50+ year-olds. The awareness of the criticality of mentorship appears to grow with age.

The two older age groups are significantly more likely than the two younger groups to think that pushing the boundaries of your comfort zone is important to achieving career success.

Newer entrants to the workforce (23-30-year-olds) place significantly less importance than the two older groups on behaving authentically with others in the workplace as a key to achieving career success.

The two factors that all age groups agree have the least influence on career success include holding a particular role or title (which was a full 10% lower than the next lowest factor) and pushing against the status quo and existing ways of doing things.

Achieving Career Success – Critical Skills

When it comes to the skills required for achieving career success, women across the generational spectrum have a very similar outlook. While the sequencing is slightly different, they identified the same top skills as most important:

- Communication
- Interpersonal skills/emotional intelligence
- Problem solving/decision making
- Leadership/management/supervision
- Collaboration/teamwork
- Learning agility/resilience
- Ability to manage complexity and ambiguity

23-30-year-old women	31-38-year-old women	39-49-year-old women	50+ year-old women
Communication (18%)	Communication (14%)	Interpersonal skills (14%)	Interpersonal skills (19%)
Problem solving (14%)	Problem solving (14%)	Communication (13%)	Communication (13%)
Interpersonal skills (11%)	Interpersonal skills (12%)	Leadership (13%)	Problem solving (12%)
Teamwork (10%)	Learning agility (11%)	Problem solving (12%)	Learning agility (11%)
Leadership (10%)	Leadership (10%)	Teamwork (11%)	Teamwork (11%)
		Ability to manage complexity (11%)	

The skills identified to have the least impact on career success tend to be those traditionally thought of as 'hard' or 'technical' skills:

- Business and financial acumen
- Project/process management
- Role-specific skills

Obstacles to Career Development

Women share four of the top five obstacles to career development regardless of age, again in differing orders of importance:

- I'm already swamped with my day-to-day responsibilities.
- There are no promotions available in my organization.
- Tough competition exists for roles and/or opportunities.
- I have competing outside priorities.
- Self-limiting beliefs are holding me back.
- I don't know where to start.

23-30-year-old women	31-38-year-old women	39-49-year-old women	50+ year-old women
Day-to-day responsibilities (15%)	Day-to-day responsibilities (18%)	No promotions available (18%)	Day-to-day responsibilities (18%)
Tough competition (13%)	Outside priorities (12%)	Day-to-day responsibilities (14%)	Self-limiting beliefs (16%)
Unsure where to start (12%)	Tough competition (11%)	Unsure where to start (13%)	Outside priorities (15%)
No promotions available (11%)	Unsure where to start (11%)	Outside priorities (11%)	No promotions available (9%)
Outside priorities (10%)	No promotions available (10%)	Tough competition (11%)	Tough competition (7%)

The most common obstacles that are perceived to compromise career development across the generational spectrum fall into two broad categories.

- Finding the time to focus on career development
- Lack of available promotions and/or tough competition for those opportunities

Interestingly, a difference does exist among the age groups. Younger women are more inclined to identify 'not knowing where to start' than the 50+ group. And the 50+ group was the only one for which 'self-limiting beliefs' appeared as a top five obstacle.

Obstacles that are perceived as not getting in the way tend to be those that have traditionally been blamed on organizations for undermining career development and include:

- Lack of clarity about how to find a mentor
- Bosses' lack of interest in development
- No budget to do training
- Lack of development opportunities
- Unwillingness of organizations to invest in career development

Self-Limiting Beliefs

There is remarkable similarity in the nature of the negative, self-limiting messages that women say or think to themselves. The top five items appear in all four thematic groupings – again in a different order based upon age.

- Bragging is not becoming.
- I am too far along to change my career path now.
- Be nice…nobody wants to work with a b%@*h.
- I am not good enough/smart enough/experienced enough.
- Taking risks never works out well for me.

23-30-year-old women	31-38-year-old women	39-49-year-old women	50+ year-old women
Bragging (59%)	Bragging (63%)	Bragging (58%)	Too late (61%)
Be nice (53%)	Be nice (53%)	Be nice (57%)	Be nice (53%)
Not enough (49%)	Not enough (51%)	Too late (53%)	Bragging (51%)
Too late (46%)	Risk aversion (46%)	Not enough (43%)	Not enough (43%)
Risk aversion (29%)	Too late (44%)	Risk aversion (38%)	Risk aversion ((26%)

Not surprisingly, 50+ year-olds are significantly <u>more</u> likely than 31-38-year-olds to think that they are too far along to change their career paths now. However, it's stunning that as early as 23-30 years of age, many women hold the belief that they are too far along to change career paths now.

50+ year-olds are significantly <u>less</u> likely than 31-38-year-olds to think that taking risks never works out well for them.

Women were asked to share additional self-limiting beliefs in their own words. Eighty-nine women shared their beliefs, and their responses map to nine primary themes:

- Generalized self-doubt
- Concern about biases in the workplace (against gender, race, body type)
- Perception that others are more qualified
- Age-related issues
- Lack of education/skills/references
- Fear of failure
- Contentedness with current situation/position
- Fear of other's judgement
- Family-related implications

It's notable that self-doubt seems to have a major impact on 23-49-year-olds, but the effect appears to diminish with age: 45% of 23-30-year-olds mentioned self-doubt as a self-limiting belief compared to 33% of 31-38-year-olds, 17% of 39-49-year-olds, and 10% of 50+ year-olds. Another noteworthy finding is that even as early as age 39, women believe that age holds them back.

Ease or Difficulty of Developing One's Career

We were interested in exploring the perceptions associated with whether career development becomes easier or more challenging by age group.

	23-30-year-old women (n=70)	31-38-year-old women (n=78)	39-49-year-old women (n=60)	50+ year-old women (n=102)
Harder than in the past	33%	43%	59%	45%
Easier than in the past	31%	27%	20%	23%

No difference between today and the past	36%	30%	20%	32%

39-49-year-olds are significantly <u>more</u> likely than 23-30-year-olds to think that career development is harder today than in the past (59% vs. 33%). They are more likely than all respondents, but the sample sizes aren't large enough to make those differences statistically significant.

23-30-year-olds are significantly <u>more</u> likely than 39-49-year-olds to think that there is no difference in the ease of career development today versus in the past (36% vs. 20%). They are more likely than all respondents, but the sample sizes aren't large enough to make those differences statistically significant.

Additional Hindrances

Women had the option to explain in their own words what makes career development easier or harder today versus in the past. A total of 130 women provided a response for why career development is harder today. These responses can be grouped round 12 primary themes:

- Outside priorities – including a growing family, mortgages, and personal health issues
- More competition
- Age
- Lack of education/experience
- Lack of opportunities
- Biases in the workplace
- Unsure of how or where to start
- Boss/company not supportive of career development
- Finances – not having enough money to invest in career development
- Technology – difficulty keeping up with technology and possible job obsolescence
- Risk might not equal reward
- Changes in workplace environment – more restrictions, faster pace of work

23-30-year-olds express the most concern about having more competition in the workplace, while 31-38-year-olds are concerned about outside priorities. Women aged 39 and up perceive that age is making it harder to achieve career success.

Additional Helpers

A total of 74 women provided a response for why career development is easier today, and these responses can be grouped around 10 primary themes:

- Expanded network
- Working for a supportive boss/organization
- Technology
- More opportunities/resources
- More experience/knowledge
- More level playing field
- Age
- More freedom at work
- Fewer competing outside priorities
- More self-confidence

It's notable that all age groups offered responses related to the advantage of having more experience and knowledge today versus in the past.

Authenticity and Career Development

As authenticity becomes a topic of increasing importance within the workplace, we wanted to explore the role it plays in career development for the different age ranges. These same three statements appear in each group's top three agreement items.

23-30-year-old women	31-38-year-old women	39-49-year-old women	50+ year-old women
Bringing my authentic self to work is important to me (86%)	Bringing my authentic self to work is important to me (88%)	Bringing my authentic self to work is important to me (78%)	Bringing my authentic self to work is important to me (96%)
It's safe to be authentic in my workplace (69%)	Being authentic is encouraged in my place of business (67%)	Being authentic is encouraged in my place of business (55%)	It's safe to be authentic in my workplace (74%)
Being authentic is encouraged in my place of business (64%)	It's safe to be authentic in my workplace (65%)	It's safe to be authentic in my workplace (55%)	Being authentic is encouraged in my place of business (68%)

The most senior women in the workplace appear to have the greatest appreciation for and sense of comfort with authenticity. 50+ year-olds are significantly <u>more</u> likely than all others to agree that bringing their authentic selves to work is important. They are also significantly <u>more</u> likely than 39-49-year-olds to agree that it's safe for them to be authentic in their workplaces. By contrast, 39-49-year-olds are significantly less likely than all others to agree that those who are authentic get ahead in their place of business.

About the Authors

Julie Winkle Giulioni is an author, speaker, and consultant who helps organizations: demystify what it takes to become a great 'people leader'; fire up the passion and commitment of employees; and keep great talent by activating and developing it.

Named one of Inc. Magazines top 100 leadership speakers, Julie is also the co-author of the international bestseller, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go: Career Conversations Organizations Need and Employees Want*. She works with clients domestically and internationally, offering keynote addresses, facilitated workshops, custom webinars, elearning and microlearning solutions that deliver measurable results. She is a regular contributor to a variety of publications including The Economist, SmartBrief, Saba's TalentSpace, the Conference Board's Human Capital Exchange, and offers thoughts on leadership, career development, and more via her blog.

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Samantha Hupp is a psychology graduate student who is devoted to helping others increase their quality of life and make positive changes. While her philosophy is holistic, she is committed to the study and evaluation of cutting-edge technologies that can be employed to improve diagnosis and treatment.

Samantha's most recent projects focus on exploring the functions of psychological principles in the workplace and a study to reduce healthcare costs. Previously, Samantha worked with at-risk youth struggling with various mental health and substance use disorders. Her keen interest in the use of technology led to the creation of a mobile health application for teens with trauma related mental illness for use in outpatient therapy settings.

Upon achieving her doctorate in psychology, Samantha plans to pursue a career in Industrial-Organizational Psychology to help organizations increase workplace productivity and employee satisfaction.

Appendix A: Web Survey

Thank you for taking this short survey to help us learn more about the unique career development challenges faced in today's workplace.

To which gender identity do you most identify?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Prefer not to answer
4. Prefer to self-describe: _____

In 20 words or less, what does 'career success' mean to you?

How important is career development to you?

Not at all Important	Not very important	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Extremely Important
❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

What are the top 3 obstacles that may get in the way of you achieving career success? (check up to 3)

1. I'm already swamped with my day-to-day responsibilities.
2. My boss doesn't care about my development.
3. There is no budget for me to do training.
4. There are no promotions available in my organization.
5. I don't know how to find a mentor.
6. Tough competition exists for roles and/or opportunities.
7. My organization isn't willing to invest.
8. There are no development opportunities for me.
9. I have competing outside priorities.
10. I don't know where to start.
11. Self-limiting beliefs are holding me back.
12. Other (please specify): _____

For some people, internal messages and negative self-talk sabotage career success. Rate each of the following potentially limiting beliefs in terms of how frequently you think or say it to yourself.

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
Be nice…nobody wants to work with a b%@*h.	❑	❑	❑	❑
It's not ladylike to be aggressive.	❑	❑	❑	❑
Lightning strikes the tallest tree, so I'll just keep my head down.	❑	❑	❑	❑
Bragging is not becoming.	❑	❑	❑	❑
I am not good enough/smart enough/experienced enough.	❑	❑	❑	❑
I am too far along to change my career path now.	❑	❑	❑	❑
Taking risks never works out well for me.	❑	❑	❑	❑

Are there other potentially limiting beliefs that you'd add to this list?

Part 1: Achieving Career Success

How important is each of the following factors to achieving career success?

	Not at all Important	Not very important	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Extremely Important
Having a boss who's genuinely interested in you and your growth	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Receiving candid, helpful feedback and coaching	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Asking for and accepting help	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Having a mentor or champion in the organization	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Building a strong network	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

Part 2: Achieving Career Success

How important is each of the following factors to achieving career success?

	Not at all Important	Not very important	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Extremely Important
Holding a particular role or title	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Taking on high-profile challenges	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Pushing back against the status quo and existing rules/ways of doing things	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Becoming comfortable sharing successes and accomplishments with others	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Creating and revisiting development plans	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

Part 3: Achieving Career Success

How important is each of the following factors to achieving career success?

	Not at all Important	Not very important	Neutral	Somewhat Important	Extremely Important
Knowing yourself, your strengths, interests, values and opportunities for improvement	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Behaving authentically with others in the workplace	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Engaging in work that is satisfying, challenging and energizing	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Pushing the boundaries of your comfort zone	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Working in a culture that honors learning and development	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

Which of the following statements is most true for you? (check one)

1. Developing my career is harder today than in the past.
2. Developing my career is easier today than in the past.
3. I experience no difference between today and the past when it comes to developing my career.

What makes it harder to achieve career success today than in the past?

What makes it easier to achieve career success today than in the past?

Which of the following skills have the most impact on achieving career success? (check up to 3)

1. Problem solving/decision making
2. Innovation
3. Interpersonal skills/emotional intelligence
4. Collaboration/teamwork
5. Communication
6. Leadership/management/supervision
7. Learning agility/resilience
8. Technology skills
9. Business and financial acumen
10. Role-specific skills
11. Ability to manage complexity and ambiguity
12. Project/process management
13. Other (please specify): _____

Authenticity is frequently mentioned as an important factor in the workplace. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Totally Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Neutral	Agree Somewhat	Strongly Agree
Bringing my authentic self to work is important to me.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Being authentic is encouraged in my place of business.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
It's safe to be authentic in my workplace.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Those who are authentic get ahead in my place of business.	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

Your age group:

1. Under 23
2. 23-30
3. 31-38
4. 39-49
5. 50 +

Which of the following best describes your most recent role/title?

1. Executive
2. Vice president or director
3. Manager
4. Supervisor or lead
5. Individual contributor

What industry do you currently work in?

1. Biomedical
2. Biotech (Pharmaceutical)
3. Clean/Green Technology
4. Consumer Products
5. Education
6. Energy
7. Financial Services
8. Healthcare
9. Technology/Software
10. Leisure/Travel
11. Media/Entertainment
12. Nonprofit
13. Professional Services
14. Retail
15. Other (please specify): _____

Please provide us with your email address if you would like to receive a summary of the results of this study and be entered in the drawing for one of five $50 Amazon gift certificates.

Did you learn about this survey via MTurk?
1. Yes

2. No
3. Don't know

Please provide us with your email address if you would like to receive a summary of the results of this study and be entered in the drawing for one of five $50 Amazon gift certificates.

Appendix B: Respondent Demographics

Most Recent Role/Title
(Female respondents by age)

Current Industry
(Female respondents by age)