FORGING NEW PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN’S CAREERS

A PINK PANDEMIC RECOVERY PLAN

by

Elisa Vincent
Vice President, Global Talent Enablement

Michelle Boockoff-Bajdek
Chief Marketing Officer

Rashim Mogha
Customer Market Leader, Leadership & Business

Rosie Cairnes
Vice President Regional Sales, APAC
INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all. Virtually every person on Earth has had to manage rapid change, disruption, and loss during 2020 and into 2021. We’ve heard rhetoric that this pandemic has offered us a moment of communion with each other. While reflecting on this moment as one of human unity, we must also accept another truth — that this pandemic has disproportionally impacted marginalized populations around the world, among them Black, Indigenous, People of Color, geriatric, economically disadvantaged communities, and women.

Coined the “pink pandemic,” this moment in our collective history has taxed women in all spheres of their lives, both personal and professional. Women around the world have been affected by the financial and social fallout of the pandemic more than their male counterparts.

Female dominated industries like hospitality, retail, travel, education, and tourism have been hit hard with job losses, reducing women’s capital power in the global economy. Women who are predominantly on the frontlines as nurses and caregivers, are experiencing the bulk of mental and emotional trauma that COVID 19 had wrought.

Since women still statistically play the role of primary caregiver in most households, the responsibility of virtual schooling, and caring for the health and safety of family members (young and old), has exponentially stressed a generation of already overworked and now fully burned-out women.

When you add in the fact that, in most traditional two-income households, women earn less than their partners, it’s little wonder that if a choice must be made, it is she who takes a break from her career.

An August 2020 study done by Qualtrics and The Boardlist found that in the U.S.:

• 34% of men working remotely with children at home received a promotion, versus 9% of women in the same situation.

• 26% of men with children at home said they received a pay raise while working remotely, compared to 13% of women with children at home.

• One in four women are considering downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce altogether.
We’ve lost ground on the gender inequality issues that we’ve been working so hard to address. The impact of COVID will be felt for decades.”

— MICHHEL BOOCKOFF-BAJDEK CMO, SKILLSOFT

When we consider the slow progress we’re making in closing the gender pay gap, in ensuring the advancement of women in executive leadership positions, in improving women’s health, and in reducing domestic abuse and violence, these numbers are particularly staggering and disheartening. Many economists tell us that the impact of COVID-19 on the lives and work of the world’s women will reverberate for years to come.

Now is the time to act. We can wait no longer. With the increased visibility into the “pink pandemic,” we must seize the moment to address these disparities, in advocacy for justice and equity.

In this report, we’ll take an in-depth look at the impact that COVID-19 has had on the world’s working women. And, we’ll look at some of the ways that learning can play a pivotal role in addressing gender-based inequities through three distinct but interrelated lenses:

- Empowering women to advocate for themselves and forge new career pathways.
- Enabling allies to sponsor and support women throughout their lives and careers.
- Providing organizations with tools to promote and sustain gender parity.
Women have gained slow but hard-fought ground in the workplace. In fact, in December 2019, shortly before the pandemic, women held slightly more jobs in the United States than men for the first time in ten years. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 109,000 more women employed. But even as women gained in employment numbers, they averaged only 81 cents to every dollar of their male counterparts’ salary.

Then, when the pandemic was recognized as a global crisis at the end of Q1 2020, resulting economic uncertainties forced many organizations to downsize, layoff, or furlough employees. Women were affected at greater numbers than men — whether they lost their jobs, chose to leave voluntarily, or chose to take extended leaves of absence.

Although vaccines have been approved and are slowly being administered, and the new year was met with relief by many, early 2021 employment numbers are not faring much better. In January 2021, 275,000 women left the workforce, adding to the total number of more than 2.3 million women not working and not looking for work, according to the National Women’s Law Center. In fact, in Q1 2021, only 57% of U.S. women are working. This is the lowest number since 1988. Many women fortunate enough to still have jobs have cut back their hours — at a rate of five to one over men.

— Elisa Vincent
VP, Global Talent Enablement, Skillsoft
The immediate negative impact of these numbers is considerable:

• Out of work women have less or no income.
• They lose critical employment benefits, like health insurance.
• They accrue exponentially less retirement savings.
• Organizations lose the myriad benefits of an equitable workforce.

Of even more concern are the long-term effects:

• Women will likely lose the ground they’ve gained in corporate hierarchies.
• They will have less opportunity for leadership development.
• They will fall even farther behind men in terms of wealth accumulation, and the power and freedom it affords.

All of these consequences are even more pronounced for those who are women of color or immigrants. These women hold many of the jobs that have been threatened or eliminated, such as retail, food service, health aides, and caregiving. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the 2020 unemployment rate for Black women was highest among all working women. In December 2020, the unemployment rate for women overall was 6.3%, twice as high as it was before the pandemic started. However, the unemployment rate was 8.45% for Black women; that’s 33 percent higher. And Black workers are less likely to receive subsidized unemployment benefits.

“It’s the unique nature of this crisis that it’s hitting female sectors first.”
— ELISA VINCENT
Similarly, immigrant women often do not qualify for (or are afraid to request) aid. And, many are or were employed in nursing homes, where they are underpaid and on the frontline that has threatened their own health.

Just as the pandemic is not confined by borders, the economic fallout for women is by no means unique to the U.S.

According to a report by McKinsey & Company, globally, women’s jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to the pandemic than men’s jobs. Women, who make up 39 percent of global employment, accounted for 54 percent of overall job losses.

Let’s take a look at some other regions.
AUSTRALIA

As in the U.S., Australian women have lost jobs and/or hours at a greater percentage than men, as more women are responsible for child and elder care and at-home learning.

In the pandemic’s wake, 100,000 women have left the workforce. If you include women who are working fewer hours (whether voluntarily or not), the number of women affected is approximately two million. And, the ratio of working women to working men is only slightly better than that in the U.S.; only 60% of women were working in December 2020, compared to 70% of men.

Monash, Australia’s largest university, reports that women are at higher risk of mental health issues. In addition, they are more vulnerable to contracting the virus (and bringing it home) because they represent close to 80% of the healthcare and social services employees. And, migrant workers, many of whom were employed in hospitality, are also disproportionately affected.

In terms of future financial stability, Australian women have been hard hit. Of the $720 million taken out of retirement and pension accounts, almost 80 percent of the withdrawals were made by women. And, three and a half times more women have dropped out of professional education programs than men. The two pieces of data combined point to future and long-term financial gender inequality. As does the government’s subsidy of male-dominated industries, such as construction, while decreasing needed support for childcare, which provides jobs for women as well as enabling mothers employed in other sectors to more easily work outside the home.

“Australian women lost jobs at a greater rate early in the pandemic. In April alone, about 55% of jobs lost were held by women, even though they accounted for only 47% of the workforce.”

— ROSIE CAIRNES VP, ASIA PACIFIC, SKILLSOFT
Overall, Asian women are on average 70% less likely than Asian men to be in the workforce. The number of female-owned and run businesses is less than half the number for men. And, there is only one woman in a leadership position for every four men.

Women carry out most of the unpaid labor, providing care to children, elderly, and sick or disabled family members, as well as other household work, amounting to about three hours per day. Women in the Asia-Pacific region are more likely to experience poverty and deprivation.

This inequity doesn’t hurt women alone; it’s a great disadvantage to each country’s overall financial health. According to McKinsey, the countries of Asia-Pacific could add $4.5 trillion to their collective annual GDP by 2025, a 12 percent increase over the business-as-usual trajectory, simply by advancing women’s equality.

Of course, this has proven to be a challenge in the past year. In Japan, for example, 870,000 jobs were lost in just the first seven months of the pandemic. These were mainly in retail and hospitality, which account for a greater percentage of female employees than other industries.

However, COVID-19 may have given Asian businesses the shake-up they need to really address gender equality and workplace diversity. Recent research from Skillsoft examined employee expectations in a post-COVID workplace and found the top two issues that the Asia-Pacific workforce wants their employers to support are offering flexible work for parents of both genders (38%) and hiring and supporting more older workers (33%). Other top-line issues include ensuring equal gender representation on the leadership team, supporting equal maternity and paternity leave, and monitoring, reporting and working to close the gender pay gap (25%).

“These are disappointing numbers from a personal standpoint, but they’re also disappointing from a business and economic one.” — ROSIE CAIRNES
The United Nations has articulated a goal for achieving gender work equality by 2030. Several EU countries, including Germany, its largest member, have enacted laws with this goal in mind. Prior to the pandemic, the organization European Women on Boards, had seen a near-double growth in European companies represented in its Gender Diversity Index. In 2020, companies from Norway, France, Britain, Finland, and Sweden led the rankings, and three new companies were added to the list.

There is economic pressure to continue this progress. According to the Eurofound Foundation, the gender employment gap accounted for a loss of €320 billion to the EU GDP in 2018.

In the 2020 report studying the effects of COVID-19 on working women, some of Eurofound’s findings with regard to the EU are similar to, although not as drastic as, in other regions.

As they have elsewhere in the world, retail, hospitality, tourism, and aviation have been most affected by COVID-related restrictions. European women account for 61% of workers in these industries. Young women were more likely to lose their jobs than young men (11%, compared to 9%). Overall, women lost jobs four times more often than men. And in terms of work/life balance, nearly two times the number of working-from-home women than working-from-home men reported being challenged to find the time they needed to their job.

“The realization of equality remains elusive but is key to building progressive societies where people have the same opportunity to succeed in their chosen career based on merit.”

— AGATA NOWAKOWSKA
AREA VICE PRESIDENT, EMEA, SKILLSOFT
As we reflect on the current state of women in the workplace, we cannot stay stagnant. We must forge forward with a fresh perspective, energy, and dedication to ensure women rebound and regain influence, power, and capital.

We believe the power for change and progress rests with women, with allies, and with organizations to reverse our current trajectory. Each has roles and responsibilities in advancing women in the workplace and healing the fractures and regression caused by this pandemic. At the core of these solutions and strategies is learning and development as a vehicle of advancement and empowerment.
For all women who left the workforce, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and for all women who are currently in the workforce, we must keep our skills and our mindsets agile, transferable, relevant, and irreplaceable through connection, competency, and community.

**CONNECTION**

We all benefit from a support system; from a network of mentors, sponsors, friends, and family who help us seek out, create, and enable our careers. The power of human connection is never more important than it is in a disrupted world. When women leave the workforce, they’re in ever greater need of maintaining a close network that provides them with exposure, visibility, and sponsorship. Women need to create their own networks — and not just early in their careers. In fact, women at all levels should actively seek out mentoring and sponsorship opportunities, whether that’s guidance from someone in a higher position or coaching of someone looking to grow.

One benefit of the “new normal” is that global workplaces are more connected than ever before. In the digital world, networking isn’t limited by geography or time zone. Women can leverage global virtual live access to leaders and new industries, creative thinkers and thought leaders, entrepreneurs, and social learning opportunities.

Women, no matter where you are in your journey:

- Seek mentoring and sponsorship and career advocates.
- Leverage global virtual live access to leaders and new industries.
- Build your entrepreneurial network and design think a career map that reflects your goals.
Acquiring and nurturing in-demand skills is important, specifically new digital skills. And equally important is the exercise of identifying your transferable strengths, skills, and mindsets that will suit you in all career moves and in any job.

In the second half of 2020, we saw exponential growth in learning content centered around power skills: resilience, agility, communication, change leadership, digital dexterity, and many more.

As more organizations embrace digital transformation, there’s a great demand for technology skills. This is a significant opportunity for women to expand into that area, where they have been historically underrepresented.

Use each and every opportunity to learn — and not just through traditional training, but also through new experiences, new networks, through storytelling and just-in-time, expert insights and micro-learning. Seeking learning opportunities in the flow of life and work can stave off burnout and help refocus energy productively.

Women, seek opportunities to learn and grow always:

- Hone transferable skills in growing areas — like tech — and develop power mindsets and skills.
- Build resilience and wellness: driving your goals, vision, and needs.
- Seek diverse learning journeys and leadership development opportunities.
In addition to building a network of like-minded professionals, it’s empowering to engage in non-work leadership. Volunteering to head a school or faith-based organization, or other affinity group is a great way to build leadership skills that can be transferred to the work environment. Women have historically led not-for-profit and community efforts, and the benefits are especially powerful in times of hardship and disruption — for your community and for your own growth.

In addition to a professional network, it’s important to build a village of emotional support. Whether a woman has voluntarily or involuntarily considered a career transition, the feeling of being back in the talent market can be lonely and isolating. Friends, family, or neighbors can play an important role in safeguarding a woman’s emotional well-being.

Women, you are leaders in more domains than just work:

- Engage in non-work leadership and philanthropy.
- Build a network, a village of support.
- Seek out opportunities to utilize your strengths in both low and high risk settings.
AWARENESS

Raising awareness is an important part of encouraging any change. Allies should seek opportunities and assessments to build personal awareness of implicit and unconscious bias. With an open and critical eye, they should assess the diversity of their own network, workplace team, hiring, promotion, or succession plans, and allow space and time to hear people’s stories.

As much as an ally may want to express their sympathy and support, it’s important to recognize that this isn’t their story to tell.

Allies, start your journey toward intentional allyship:

• Seek opportunities and assessments to build awareness of unconscious bias.

• Assess the diversity of your network and succession plans, and embrace storytelling.

• Practice requesting feedback more than providing feedback.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ADVOCACY
STRATEGIES FOR ALLIES

Women cannot meet these challenges without allies. Allies may be male peers or anyone in positions of power who can advocate for women. As Skillsoft partner and certified diversity coach La’Wana Harris explains it, they must journey from performative allyship to intentional allyship.
Advocacy is using your voice to influence others. Experienced allies can effect change by sponsoring and mentoring women’s careers, and by addressing and speaking up against misconceptions and negative microbehaviors, especially against women who have had to take career breaks. We can combat negative micro-behaviors with positive ones such as championing a women’s success on social media, or using whatever platform we have to uplift and amplify the voices of others.

By focusing on intentional enablement, allies help women of all identities break down barriers, shatter those proverbial glass ceilings, and design the career journeys they desire.

Advocacy is bold, and allies can help women revert the effects of this pandemic in meaningful ways:

- **Sponsor and mentor women’s careers; avoid hierarchical thinking.**
- **Practice Stephen Covey’s “seek first to understand before seeking to be understood” approach.**
- **Avoid the bystander syndrome and perform intentional (not performative) enablement.**
There’s a familiar colloquialism: “talk is cheap.” It’s especially true when it comes to promoting genuine change. The real power is taking action — in whatever capacity is available or can be created. Options will vary based on whether an ally is a peer, a manager, or a senior-level leader. But, in order for us to influence real change and progress, we must act first.

Allies can take action in many forms — by gathering women together, by volunteering in support of women and girls, by being relentless in the pursuit of justice and equality. And along this journey, allies must also leave time for reflection. Every single human has potential to be an ally, but it is hard work. To lead this movement, we must embrace our humanity first.

Action can take many forms. What is most important is that it is happening.

- Gather a group of diverse women in your network and have career conversations.
- Volunteer for advocacy groups that support the development of women and girls.
- Leave time to reflect and reset. Allies need to build their resilience in response to this global crisis.
EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is equal parts individual and structural. Although the events of the past year have shone a harsh light on gender inequities in the work world, gender disparity is nothing new — especially in the C-suite and other levels of power. In order to ensure the advancement of women in the workplace, organizational leaders need to apply conscious empowerment — looking at who has access to growth, to promotions, and leadership development — and ensure that existing power structures enable rather than diminish diversity.

There are various routes to take, from establishing and supporting growth paths for women (and other marginalized groups) to making a more concerted effort to hire, promote, train, and recognize diverse women in the workplace.

Listening has always been an underrated leadership attribute — it’s difficult to measure, but it can enable more action-oriented leadership competencies such as communication and coaching. We know it’s important, and yet we box it in as just another form of communication. In Simon Sinek’s August 2020 interview with Deeyah Khan, they bring to light the concept of “extreme listening” through Deeyah’s research.
From there, a new movement has been born among organizations that value truly understanding and listening to their employees. Listening is empowerment. In order to enable women in the workplace and to build diverse pipelines of talent, many organizations are now launching extreme listening forums and surveys.

The goal is to better understand the challenges that women are facing now, in spaces devoid of judgement — looking for and listening to the human on the other side.

Organizational leaders, seize this opportunity to empower women.

• Design and enable listening campaigns.
• Provide opportunities for visibility at senior levels.
• Examine power structures and commit to renewed gender diversity policies.

“Leadership is a journey. There was an awakening for me, and in that moment I recognized that leadership doesn’t need to look and sound and feel like every other leader. That real leadership for me was stepping into my own voice. And once I had that epiphany and really went forward and leaned into it, it became a turning point for me.”

— MAISHA COBB
ENABLEMENT

Investing in the upskilling, reskilling, and development of women in the workplace is a proactive endeavor. To both recruit women and enable them for future success, organizations must invest in development programs at all career stages. For example, many organizations are creating re-boarding programs — updated versions of on-boarding — for women who have gone on leave and who need to reengage with work. Many other organizations are providing adult internship opportunities that serve as both training and recruitment vehicles.

As the 2016 McKinsey Women Matter study showed, as women move up their organizations’ hierarchies, they increasingly shift from line to staff jobs — roles requiring focused expertise or assistance rather than responsibility for major cross-functional projects. By the time women reach the upper middle management levels, only about 20 percent are in jobs with profit and loss responsibility, and with visibility and responsibility considered vital to C-suite advancement.

Now, as we watch the pandemic limit opportunities for women around the world, organizations hold a crucial responsibility in enabling their career development. Through strategic leadership development programming and sponsorship programs, organizations can provide access, exposure, coaching, mentorship, and active career enablement. Learning and development programs must be designed to provide women at all levels of an organization with access to the resources and visibility necessary to use their skills and build new ones. These types of learning opportunities also empower women to take ownership of their careers and build organizational cultures of equity, inclusion, and belonging.

Investing in strategic talent enablement yields significant ROI.

- Redefine and invest in strategic talent acquisition, internships, and re-entry onboarding.
- Provide, support, enable, and safeguard sponsorships.
- Provide access and exposure to leadership development experiences and learning.
Human Resources and Learning organizations can be an important epicenter for activities designed to raise up women (or any diverse group). Many organizations are using this time to review employee benefits and invest in areas that strengthen the network of resources for women such as healthcare benefits, wellness programs, maternity leave policies, flexible schedules, and support for childcare and eldercare. Equal attention must also go to engagement programs that recognize the contributions of employees equitably, and to systemic diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies that hold leaders accountable for enabling and driving DEI goals and objectives.

When we safeguard our at-risk populations from the stress of a disrupted world, we limit distractions and increase productivity and engagement.

Organizations have an opportunity to create inclusive cultures and engagement efforts for women at all stages of their careers.

- Review employee benefits and enhance areas most important to women.
- Invest in the development and nourishment of a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy.
- Deploy strengths-based recognition programs.
Around the world, the effects of the “pink pandemic” are all too real. Women have been disproportionately disenfranchised, and have lost decades of ground in terms of leadership development and financial security.

We know this because we have the data, but, unfortunately, data alone can’t solve it.

Women, allies, and organizations must come together both to recognize the current challenge and drive meaningful change. The power rests in our alignment with each other in:

- Providing the tools for women to grow competencies for the most in-demand opportunities.
- Building the power skills of resilience, agility, and empathy.
- Acquiring the insight and emotional intelligence to actively listen, and become an effective change agent, internally and externally.
- Investing resources in acquiring, developing, and advancing women in the workplace.

At Skillsoft, we believe that every person has the potential to be amazing. Our mission is to democratize learning, to provide the workforce with access to the skills, knowledge, and attributes they need to thrive. And, to help organizations create a future-fit workforce, skilled and ready for the jobs of tomorrow.

The widening workforce gender gap resulting from COVID-19 is not going to fix itself. It’s up to us all to act now and provide targeted leadership development designed to help women overcome new or legacy gender biases.

The good news is that women are not the only ones who will benefit. Organizations — and entire nations — are measurably stronger, more healthy, secure, and successful when women have equal opportunity and equal gain.

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— ROSIE CAIRNES
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Elisa Vincent is the Vice President of Global Talent Enablement at Skillsoft, where she leads strategic initiatives that foster the individual and collective success of the organization. She started her career in international education and study abroad where she designed, developed, and led international leadership development experiences for students and faculty — experiences that enabled research and study of gender equality and equity around the world. She was a founding member of the Bentley University Center for Women in Business leadership team, where she served as both consultant and leadership coach for organizational and emerging leaders in various industries. After moving into corporate human capital management, her goal has been to enable cultures of inclusion, equity, and belonging. She has designed and implemented leadership models and learning content, curricula, and experiences with proven success and rapid adoption in diverse markets, and she has loved every moment.

Michelle Boockoff-Bajdek

As Chief Marketing Officer, Michelle Boockoff-Bajdek (BB) leads a global marketing organization focused on helping companies unlock the hidden value inside their greatest asset — their people. In her role, Michelle is responsible for the company’s marketing strategy to drive growth, generate awareness, and drive demand for Skillsoft solutions among learners, customers, and partners. She oversees all key marketing functions. Most importantly, she serves as the company’s brand evangelist, helping to build a vibrant community of passionate learners. Prior to Skillsoft, Michelle held several executive roles in the high tech sector, most notably as the CMO of IBM Watson. Michelle also served as the global head of marketing for The Weather Company, an IBM Business, where she helped companies understand how to anticipate, plan for and ultimately make better decisions — with greater confidence — in the face of weather.
RASHIM MOGHA

Rashim Mogha is Skillsoft’s new Customer Market Leader, Leadership and Business Solutions. Her role concentrates on leading the content, platform, customer success, sales, and marketing teams to deliver compelling experiences to our customers. Prior to Skillsoft, Rashim held leadership roles at companies like VMware, Amazon Web Services, Oracle, and Automation Anywhere, where she built high-performing education teams and launched innovative solutions to support businesses over $2 billion. Recognized by Business Chief USA as a woman to watch, Rashim is an industry influencer, a thought leader, and a best-selling author. She is also a recipient of Women Empowerment: Game Changer, Woman of the Year, Women Tech, and Silicon Valley Woman of Influence awards and was inducted into the Alameda County Hall of Fame in 2020.

ROSIE CAIRNES

Rosie Cairnes is Skillsoft’s Asia Pacific Vice President, working to solve organizational challenges through technology-deployed learning and performance solutions. Rosie has more than 25 years’ experience working with both regional and global organizations across a wide variety of industry sectors and Government agencies. Rosie specializes in cloud-based learning and performance support solutions, helping organizations align learning to strategic business goals to deliver quantifiable results that benefit organizations and their employees. Rosie has a passion for the importance of measuring learning impact on the organization and the value of a quality, contemporary learning experience for the learner. Today, modern learning solutions need to have the learner, the way we work, and the needs of the organization in mind to be effective and impactful. To meet today’s demands it is not just what we’re learning but how we’re learning that matters. Prior to Skillsoft, Rosie worked with SAI Global, SmartForce, CBT Systems, Sony Computer Products, BBC Training & Catalyst Consulting.
ABOUT SKILLSOFT

Skillsoft delivers digital learning, training, and talent solutions to help organizations unleash their edge. Leveraging immersive, engaging content, Skillsoft enables organizations to unlock the potential in their best assets — their people — and build teams with the skills they need for success. Empowering 45 million learners and counting, Skillsoft democratizes learning through an intelligent learning experience and a customized, learner-centric approach to skills development with resources for Leadership Development, Business Skills, Technology and Developer, Digital Transformation, and Compliance.

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