

Summary

You snooze, you lose ...

Attrition of woman and men in management positions

Ans Merens

Original title:

Opgestaan, plaats vergaan ...

978 90 377 0907 0

Summary and conclusions

S.1 Summary

In this study we investigated whether there are any differences in the attrition rates of women and men in senior management roles, and whether the explanations for this attrition differ. International and (older) Dutch research has highlighted a higher attrition rate among women than men in management and senior positions. Drawing on theories on tokenism (by Kanter), organisational cultures and status discrimination, we expect to find that women in management roles are less satisfied and are therefore more likely to leave than their male counterparts; we describe this here as ‘negative attrition’, by which we mean a deterioration in position due to a transition to a lower rank or loss of work. We also expect that, given equal job satisfaction, the attrition rate among women is likely to be higher because of differing social norms for women and men. However, these expectations were not confirmed in this study. The data used did not show any difference in satisfaction between female and male managers, even after controlling for other factors such as sector and experience. In addition, neither the descriptive nor the explanatory analyses revealed any difference in the risk of negative attrition of female and male managers. Although job dissatisfaction was a predictor for negative attrition, it played no greater role for women than for men. This means that, for an equal degree of dissatisfaction, we did not find a higher attrition rate for women than for men. Nor did we find any correlation between dissatisfaction with career opportunities and attrition of managers, either overall or for women and men separately. It may be that this is a select group who have succeeded in progressing to a management position; there may conceivably be more dissatisfaction with career opportunities among employees who have ambitions to progress to management level but who have not (yet) achieved this. Beyond job satisfaction, we found few other factors which explained negative attrition. The only correlation we found with attrition was the sector concerned: both female and male managers in the commercial sector were more likely to leave their roles than their counterparts in the non-profit sector. To the extent that this involved non-voluntary attrition from the public sector – the non-profit sector is broader than the public sector alone – it is possible that this finding could be due to the relatively favourable dismissal protection hitherto enjoyed by civil servants.¹

This study also showed that, among women, (negative) attrition more often results in transition to a non-management role than for their male counterparts. Two years after leaving their management role, the same proportion of these women and men were once again working at management level, but because more women than men had previously left management for non-management roles, the net effect is that more women than men were no longer in management roles after six years. Due to the number of respondents in our study, we are unable to draw any conclusions on whether these women return to management roles at a later time (i.e. after more than six years) more often than men in a

comparable position. All we can do is observe that, after six years, fewer women than men are still in management roles and fewer women are therefore available to progress to the most senior positions in the future. This suggests that the 'pipeline' of women with the potential to become top executives may still be leaking. This could offer an explanation for the underrepresentation of women in the most senior positions, especially in the private sector.

S.2 Concluding discussion

This study broadens our knowledge concerning the attrition of women from management and top executive roles in the Netherlands. Earlier Dutch research found no difference in the attrition rates of women and men from the most senior roles (Merens 2012). Our study of those in management roles similarly found no difference in overall negative attrition rates between women and men. We did however find a relatively higher attrition rate for women from management to non-management roles.

The findings of this study differ from international research in terms of the total attrition rates found (Deschacht 2011; Gayle et al. 2011). In the USA, women were found to leave executive management roles more often than men, except for those in the most senior positions. In Belgium, this higher female attrition rate was found for *all* management roles (Deschacht 2011). One possible explanation for the differences is that these studies were based on data from the 1990s and 2000s, and may therefore be out of date. In other words, the fact that our study found no difference between total male and female negative attrition rates could indicate that this difference no longer exists. Another explanation could be that the database used in our study does not observe the attrition accurately; the database used by Gayle et al. (2011) may for example have contained more detailed (company) figures on exit from the organisation and on the hierarchical rank in which women and men were employed.

The finding that women leave management positions for non-management roles more often than men is difficult to explain. It is unclear what the background to this finding is, due to a lack of data in this study on factors such as the organisational culture, minority position and support for managers from the organisation. Slightly older Dutch research did find some reasons for the departure of women from management and senior executive roles, such as lack of recognition of ambitions and of appreciation and dissatisfaction with the culture of a long working week. However, that research was focused on departure from organisations, a rather more specific form of negative attrition than that addressed in this study, which investigated all kinds of voluntary and involuntary negative attrition, including changes of role within the organisation, departure from the organisation and loss of work. Although the research findings cited above are somewhat older and could therefore be out of date, it is quite possible that these reasons for departure still play a role. Managers who experience problems with the long working week which are the norm in some organisations will probably not benefit from a transfer to a smaller department with

fewer staff; the working hours will not be substantially shorter, and transiting to a non-management role will then be a more logical step.

The relatively high attrition of female managers to non-management roles can result in loss of female potential for future management and senior executive positions; optimum use would then not be being made of the steadily rising education level of women.

Employer organisations therefore have much to gain from ascertaining what causes female (and male) managers and executives to (seek to) change roles or leave for a different employer. Exit interviews can be a useful means of gaining an insight into the reasons for departure. Holding such interviews does not appear to be the norm at many companies, and – more generally – not many companies seem to have a policy to prevent unwanted attrition. Where companies have a diversity policy in place, it tends to be focused on increasing the intake of women into management and senior executive roles (Merens et al. 2015; Pouwels & Henderikse 2018b). However, diversity policy could also be aimed at preventing the so-called ‘regretted losses’ or, couched in more positive terms, at retaining employees for the organisation. Such a policy has the best chance of succeeding if senior management commits to it and if it is embedded in the organisational culture (Henderikse et al. 2007; Merens et al. 2015). Regular attention would then have to be devoted within the organisation to the ambitions and development of employees. One way of doing this would be through performance reviews or other staff interviews, though that is not essential. More important is that there should be regular communication between the employer and employee on the latter’s ambitions, career prospects and job satisfaction (or the lack of it). This would enable valuable information to be gathered before it reaches the stage of an exit interview, as a basis for policy aimed at retaining employees for the organisation.

Note

- 1 This is set to change in the future. The Public Servants (Standardisation of Legal Status) Act (WNRA) is expected to come into force in the Netherlands on 1 January 2020 (Rijksoverheid 2017).