

Closing the Gender Gap: How Companies Can Retain Women Engineers



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Introduction

Why Are Women Leaving the Engineering Field?

Engineering-focused industries are notoriously unsuccessful at recruiting and retaining women. According to the National Science Foundation, women comprise more than 20 percent of engineering school graduates but only 11 percent of practicing engineers.

Many studies have shown that this discrepancy is linked to an exodus of women from science-related fields. In other words, though the number of female students pursuing STEM degrees may be increasing, many women are leaving the field once they secure a position. The Center for Talent Innovation found that 52 percent of female scientists, engineers, and technologists abandon their chosen professions.

How can companies reverse this trend and improve retention of women engineers? To answer this question, we surveyed 160 women in engineering roles across the nation.

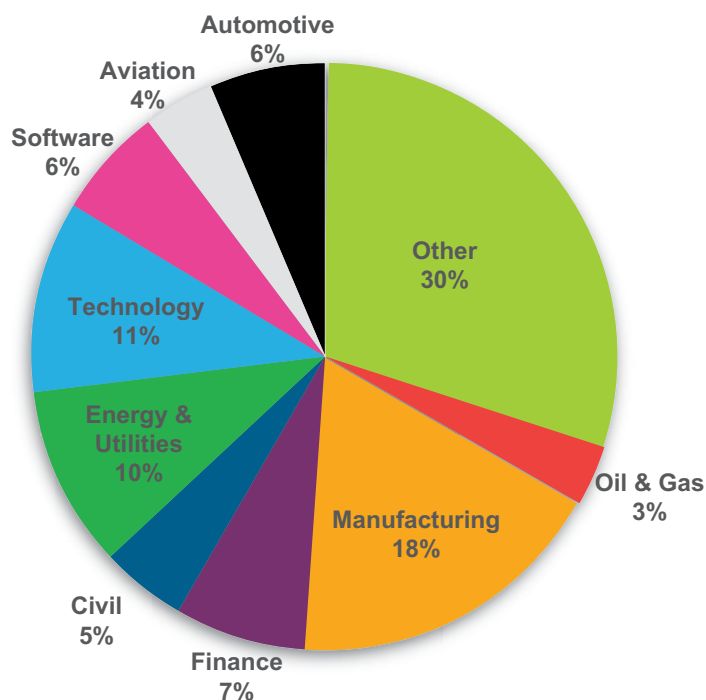


Study Participants

The survey consisted of a sample size of 160 women in engineering roles.

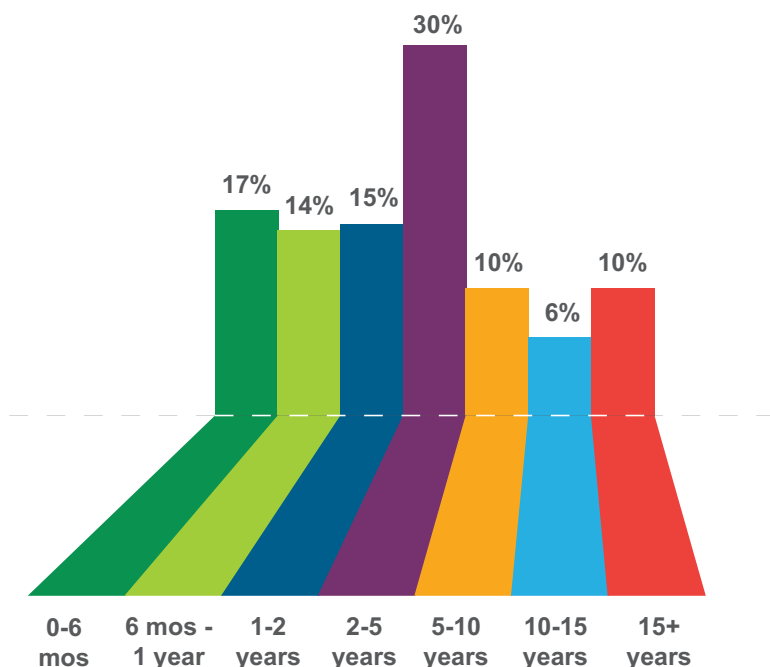
Industry

The respondents came from a variety of different industries. The largest portion (18 percent) of respondents worked in manufacturing. The technology industry (11 percent) and energy/utilities industry (11 percent) were also well represented. Just over 6 percent of the respondents were from the finance field, while another 6 percent worked in automotive. The remaining respondents were evenly distributed in a number of different fields, including education, defense, consumer products, architecture and construction, and healthcare.



Tenure with Current Employer

Since our study focuses on retention, we asked each respondent how long she has been with her existing employer. Nearly a third of the engineers have been with their current company for 2 to 5 years, while only 10 percent are in the 5 to 10 year category, and only 6 percent have been with the company for more than 10 years. On the other end of the spectrum, nearly 17 percent have been with their employer for less than 6 months, 14 percent for less than 1 year, and 15 percent for 1 to 2 years.



Key Finding

Women Engineers Prioritize Work-life Balance, Company Culture & Compensation

When asked about which factors contribute to their decision to stay with an employer, most respondents indicated that work-life balance (78 percent), company culture (77 percent), and compensation (75 percent) are important. Respondents also overwhelmingly agreed that challenging roles (73 percent), leadership development (66 percent) and flexible schedules (66 percent) are critical factors.

If we examine these results by tenure, we see a few interesting differences. Engineers who have been with their current company for 2-5 years are slightly more likely to value company culture (79 percent). Those who have been with the company for 5-10 years are slightly more likely to value a flexible schedule (81 percent), while those who have been with the company for 10-15 years are more likely to prioritize compensation (89 percent) and work-life balance (89 percent). When we asked respondents to rank these factors, work-life balance received the highest percentage of votes for “most important,” followed closely by compensation and company culture. Leadership development was the fourth most important.



“Although compensation is a big factor, it's not my main concern. I turned down a job [offering] significantly more than I make now, but I stayed with my current company because their corporate values align with my personal values.”

~Software QA Engineer

Key Finding

When Female Engineers Leave a Position, Company Culture & Leadership Development are Major Factors

Just over 44 percent of respondents indicated that they had left a role in engineering in the last 5 years. When we asked which factors contributed to their decision to leave that position, more than half (55 percent) reported that company culture was a significant factor.

What about the company culture caused the respondents to look elsewhere? Many women reported that their companies' cultures excluded or undermined women engineers. One respondent explained, "It was a very hierarchal company that seemed to exclude women from [an] all boys club." Another respondent referred to a "strong 'brogrammer' culture," while another described the culture as "a toxic environment that awarded only a small clique of white men." Others described their environments as "a male dominated culture" and "patronizing."



Leadership development and, more generally, a lack of a clear career path, also play a role in many engineers' decision to leave (33 percent). One respondent commented, "There was no real path I could see for promotion or advancement." Another echoed this sentiment: "I was not being mentored or given appropriate responsibilities, or the opportunity for growth." Others cited similar reasons: "no professional growth," "felt that I stopped learning," and "limited opportunity for advancement."

"My employers consistently treated women outside of the company disrespectfully. They made me feel guilty if I wanted to take time off, and credit for my work was often assumed by my boss."

~Process Engineer

Recommendations

Our survey echoes the findings of several earlier large-scale studies. A 2014 study conducted by the American Psychological Association, for example, found that nearly 40 percent of women left engineering due to hostile work climates, unsupportive supervisors, or limited opportunities for advancement. A 2012 report conducted by the National Science Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, found that one-in-five women leave engineering because they did not like their workplace climate, their boss, or the culture.

If companies truly want to increase their female workforce, they need to make deliberate, systemic changes that address culture issues, work-life balance, compensation, and professional development.

#1 Strengthen & Formalize Policies that Promote Work-Life Balance

Organizations must do more than add work-life balance to their list of corporate values. A commitment to work-life balance must be translated into real-world policies: flexible schedules, support and accommodations for employees with children and aging parents, competitive maternity leave, benefits and sick leave, etc. Women should be actively involved in the development of these policies. Furthermore, the policies must be available to all employees “guilt-free.” If women are tacitly discouraged from actually taking advantage of flexibility, the policies may as well not exist.

One respondent’s comments, in particular, demonstrated how work-life balance has a powerful retention effect: “What matters is knowing I can have a life outside of work[...] What matters is seeing firsthand women in leadership [who] have families and still get promoted, even on maternity leave, even down the road after they’ve reduced hours to help take care of kids and now have come back to working full-time and earned the promotion. I’ve seen these things at my company, and the respect for my company keeps me when others come calling.”

#2 Create a Culture with Zero Tolerance for Sexism

Documented policies about sexual harassment and discrimination are not enough. There must be clear, accessible avenues for women to report and address unequal treatment and hostile behaviors. Additionally, companies should train all employees, both male and female, on the type of behavior that is considered unacceptable.

Many companies, following Google’s lead, are now training their employees on the effects of unconscious bias. Overall, there must be accountability for excising sexism at all levels of the organization: leadership, mid-level management, and human resources should come together (again, with plenty of female participants in the discussion) to create a strategic plan for creating an inclusive culture.

“I am new in engineering; I have been in the field for less than two years. I have been fortunate in that I’ve encountered a ton of support from women and men who recognize there is a problem and want to help.”

~Software Engineer

#3 Create Clear Paths for Growth & Invest in Professional Development

All employees, male or female, are more likely to leave a position if they don't see an opportunity for advancement. A 2014 study by Bamboo HR found that a lack of advancement opportunities was actually the most common reason employees left jobs. It's critical that companies create clear career paths, define what's expected from employees who wish to advance, and proactively build a pipeline of leadership talent within the organization.

If a company is explicitly trying to retain female employees, it should also ensure that managers and HR staff—those people who are responsible for promotions—are, again, trained on unconscious bias. Furthermore, companies should make a concerted effort to add women to their leadership team. If female employees do not see women in leadership positions, they are less likely to see advancement as a worthwhile endeavor. Internal mentorship programs, in which more senior employees mentor high-potential, mid-level or junior talent, can also be very effective. These programs ensure that women have the opportunity for internal networking and relationship building.

“Overall I've been with this group for almost 11 years. The primary reason is the individuals and the culture. The environment and interaction of the right group of people is irreplaceable.”

~Senior Project Manager

About Battalia Winston

- Specializing in 8 industry verticals: Life Sciences, Healthcare Services, Industrial and Manufacturing, Financial Services, Consumer/Retail, Legal, Risk, Compliance, Family Business, and Nonprofit/Associations/Foundations.
- Consistently ranked nationally as one of the top twenty executive search firms by Hunt Scanlon Media.
- U.S. headquarters in New York, NY and offices in Boston, MA; Chicago IL; Woodbridge, NJ; and Washington, D.C. Through our well established relationships in Europe, South America and Asia, we offer clients the advantages of both global presence and local knowledge.

Founded in 1963, Battalia Winston is one of the world's largest woman-owned executive search firms.



Susan Medina

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As Partner and Diversity Practice Leader at Battalia Winston, Susan brings more than 15 years of experience in the Diversity and Inclusion space. Her work spans across all industries and functional groups and is focused on creating inclusive recruiting and retention solutions for clients.

As a nationally recognized consultant, she has extensive experience in advancing Diversity and Inclusion within Fortune 500 organizations.

Susan believes that a company is only as great as those who lead it. Serving as a direct extension of your management team, Susan identifies and delivers diverse executives who will make an immediate impact. Susan has co-authored several thought leadership pieces including: “Why You Should do More Than Just Talk about Workplace Diversity” featured in Fast Company Magazine, “Make your Company

a Magnet for Diversity” featured in ForefrontMagazine and “Relationship Recruiting” featured in Hispanic Executive Magazine.

She currently serves on the Board of Trustees for Cristo Rey Jesuit High School and is passionate member of YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, Hispanic Association of Corporate Responsibility (HACR), as well as the National Council of La Raza. In 2009, she helped co-found LatinoExecs, Inc., an organization focused on connecting clients with Latino executives within the Fortune 1000.

“Susan has been a great partner with Whirlpool through our relationship to acquire talent through retained search. Battalia Winston has helped us source several Senior level positions and has been spot on with identifying diverse talent for our organization. A great partner who understands diversity.”

D'anthony Tillery
Sr. Director, Global Talent Acquisition, Diversity & Inclusion
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Peter M. Gomez is a Partner and Diversity Practice Leader at Battalia Winston. Peter’s unique approach to search stems from his strong roots in the industry; he has worn all hats including Research Associate, Senior Associate, Principal, Executive Vice President, and now Partner.

His consultative methodology centers around developing a comprehensive understanding of the strategies, operations, management and culture of his clients. His extensive search experience provides insight in identifying the precise match for each assignment.

Peter is passionate about helping organizations design inclusive search strategies. To this end, he co-founded LatinoExecs, Inc. in 2009, an organization focused on connecting clients with Latino executives within the Fortune 1000. In addition to LatinoExecs, Mr. Gomez has co-authored the following two thought leadership pieces: “Latinos in and “Retention Strategies At The Top.”

Prior to joining BW, Peter served as Executive Vice President at a leading executive search firm; he was also the N.A. Diversity Practice Group Leader. His work spans across all industries and functional groups and is focused on creating inclusive recruiting and retention solutions for clients.

Peter serves on the Board of Directors for Chicago Scholars Foundation, which assists talented but under-resourced high school students overcome barriers to collegiate access and success. He received his B.A. in Business from Lake Forest College and his M.B.A. and J.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



“Peter has been a great search partner. Through our relationship, we have been able to acquire talent through retained search on a global scale. Specifically, Battalia Winston has helped us source several Senior level positions in NA, EMEA, and the Asia Pacific regions. Peter genuinely takes pride in his work product and has been exactly on point in identifying diverse talent for our company.”

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