



# THE FORGOTTEN DIVERSITY GROUP: AMBITIOUS WOMEN WHO WANT TO LEAN "IN-BETWEEN"

Kathryn Sollmann

# Diversity and inclusion are hot topics on corporate agendas these days, but a large group of women are feeling left out.

The primary focus is on diversity of race and gender, and employers do well celebrating the fact that we are all both equal and unique. But when it comes to leadership training, employers are still pressuring women to conform to one profile of an ambitious and successful woman.

In the last decade I've coached thousands of women who feel like they're letting down the power sisterhood if they don't do their part to break the glass ceiling. These women in the everyday sisterhood are still smart, capable and ambitious—but they want alternate routes to “grow in place” while family pressures are high. When I speak to women's groups my message is that “Up is Not the Only Way Forward.” To prevent women from taking costly caregiving breaks, and to retain great talent, employers need to make room for many brands of ambition and success.

Why diversity of ambition needs to be addressed is illustrated in the story of my own brush with traditional corporate fame.

A few years ago, I was offered a CEO position. It was not a Fortune 100 company and I would not have been at the helm of thousands of employees. It was a globally recognized company, though, and a move to a bigger stage. For a very career-minded woman who has worked non-stop since age 16 it was a coup that promised a powerful capstone to my career.

Despite the fact that it would be expected for me to say yes, I ultimately said no.

At the time I had a daughter just starting high school and I was concerned about a long commute, lots of evening events and the need to travel around the globe. My caregiving responsibilities were continually expanding with oversight for an elderly father who had medical issues, an elderly father-in-law who was declining rapidly and an elderly mother-in-law who needed more and more help managing her home.

Despite the fact that it's assumed that "ambitious" women are all aiming for the C-Suite, an all-encompassing CEO position just didn't fit my life.

Though I still considered myself an ambitious woman, what I now refer to as my "Near-CEO Experience" showed me that many women in the power elite would have begged to differ.

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Several conversations I had while considering the CEO job shed light on four frequent judgments in the upper-echelon business world that very narrowly define ambition and success:

1. Three minutes into our very first conversation about the CEO job, the company owner, a very high-profile woman, told me emphatically, “I am very, very ambitious.” At the time I thought, “Okay, so am I.” But the more conversations we had, the more I realized that her comment aligned with the objectives of the highest-level professionals—those aiming for top jobs or huge entrepreneurial ventures; overseeing the largest, most visible initiatives; and driving exponential product, service, or company growth.

*I realized that I have a different brand of ambition—pursuing important work in a more low-key, life and family-friendly way.*

2. During conversations with my references, the company owner asked, “Why hasn’t she had a big hit?” In other words, why hadn’t one of my accomplishments or business ventures led to a multimillion-dollar sale or front-page news? Clearly, many of the highest-level professionals believe that “big hit,” big impact, big compensation work is the only work that is truly ambitious.

*I realized that I don’t need headlines to validate what I perceive as my own personal success.*

3. When the prominent woman who introduced me to the company owner (who could possibly have profited financially if I took the job) found out that things weren’t playing out as she hoped, she said vehemently, “You’re a nobody, and you had the chance to be a somebody.”

*I realized that top professionals often marginalize accomplishments unless you are the “somebody” at the top of a big-name organization—and success can be measured shortsightedly only in terms of title and visibility. It was never my burning desire to*

*be celebrated on the cover of a magazine—just to always have a strong professional persona and do challenging, interesting work.*

4. Many months after I declined the job, the company owner and I met to see if there were other ways we could collaborate. The CEO slot was still open and she first asked if perhaps I had changed my mind and I was ready to “go back to work.” I was confused until I realized she was suggesting my independent coaching, speaking, consulting, and writing lacked a level of intensity or complexity found in real work—at the helm of companies very visible to the public eye.

*I realized that what had always made my work “real” is my ability to consistently earn, save, and invest toward long-term financial security.*

I thought long and hard about these judgments and expectations imposed on me and masses of smart, capable women not aiming for the C-Suite and trying to find professional, challenging, lucrative ways to fit work into their everyday lives. I asked myself these questions and formed these conclusions:

1. Could anyone who turned down a CEO job be really, truly ambitious? **Yes.**
2. Was work that I found fulfilling (and that was called “life-changing” by the individual women I coached) actually significantly less important—or less ambitious—because it was never front-page news? **No.**
3. Do you have to be a household name—or at least a widely recognized name in your field—to be “somebody” and achieve true career success? **No.**

At that point, 15+ years of coaching current and returning professional women came full circle. I realized that judgments about what constitutes ambition or “real work” cause current professional women to fear that if they choose to B-Sane in middle management instead of “leaning in” to the life-encompassing C-Suite quest, they will be letting down the power sisterhood. These judgments also make women on a family hiatus from the workforce think that returning to a less stratospheric level is simply for naught.

Women, as an entire gender group, are not killing themselves to get top jobs. One woman, a Wharton MBA, summed up what I hear every day very well: “My ideal is earning a good income in a flexible job, working with bright people, and having the chance to do something interesting. I’ve never been shooting for the top jobs ... just responsibility that has strategic core importance. I’ve never needed to run the company.”

Ironically, women are holding other women to monolithic standards of ambition and success. Many women’s organizations pride themselves in their programs designed to hoist more women to the top. Few of these organizations give women substantial guidance on anything other than the traditional corporate path—or help women find the flexwork they really need to stay in the workforce during heavy caregiving periods. There are also few senior-level women who are visible role models for alternative choices—showing women who want to forego the responsibilities of top corporate jobs that there are other measures of success.

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Interesting, too, is the fact that more than a few women who take very senior-level jobs have partners who have reversed roles and stayed home with children (more evidence for the fact that two traditional, demanding, very senior-level jobs and families are a difficult mix).

Corporations spend more than \$30 billion on leadership training overall, but my observation is that they spend only a tiny percentage of that money on helping women deal with real-life family issues that impact productive and sustainable work. Only half of employers even have training specifically directed to women. Funding for internal corporate women's networking groups (often a forum for work and life discussions) is not a priority budget item. (I was asked to speak at one major corporation and was told that their internal women's group did not even have the budget to provide refreshments at the meeting.) The internet leads to little guidance, too—women will primarily find endless career resources predominately for traditional full-time work, and countless books and articles extol the virtues of the high-flying career. From all vantage points women receive few assurances that ambition and success can play out in many different ways.

Women who feel “less than” are the first to leave the workforce. Yes, they leave because they feel overwhelmed and unable to fit work into big family responsibilities. But they also leave because they're not part of the “in crowd”—the women who are very visibly pushing for more and more responsibility, vocal about the responsibility women have to get their kin to the top and willing to work long hours and travel the globe.

The fact is, even many of the women who do drive toward and reach the pinnacles of success eventually reach a breaking point. Here's a story I hear versions of over and over again: one of my coaching clients, age 41, has two degrees from an Ivy League school and she's a managing director at a huge financial services firm. She's also the mother of two young children. On a frequent business trip abroad she said to herself, “I don't want this anymore. I never see my kids. I don't need this job to validate my self-worth or prove to others I'm ambitious and successful.”

Knowing that her employer offers only very low-voltage flexible roles, she's now thinking about creating her own consulting practice. But here's the kicker: despite what she said to herself on the plane, she still fears leaving the fast track and becoming a "lightweight" in the eyes of her peers.

That lightweight judgment feels like a Scarlet "L" many women can't shake. Sometimes it's just easier to leave the workforce and say you're taking a couple of years to catch up with your kids. Check out the credentials of the women at your local PTA—it reads like a who's who of women who got prestigious degrees from all the top colleges and have resumes with former top jobs among the corporate and Wall Street elite. These women say they'll only leave the workforce for a couple of years but stay out an average of 12. They don't want to return to the inflexible grind they left behind—and they don't want to have their ambition questioned by the hard-driving women who never left.

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Creating more respected flexible work opportunities and acknowledging that there are many forms of ambition and success prevents more women from leaving and encourages those who left to get back in. There's a huge cost when employers lose great talent, and women forfeit up to four times their salaries every year they're out.

Employers need to convey the message that all women are not expected to aim for the C-Suite, and give them guidance on alternate paths to success. Most of all, women need the message that it's not just huge six-figure salaries that make working "worth it." Consistent moderate earnings that are invested and saved can make vital contributions to retirement nest eggs and soften the blow of many of life's negative surprises. You can be a respected professional who contributes to a team's success, enjoys a competitive salary, receives good benefits, and has a reasonable schedule that blends with family. The fact is that any professional path that leads to financial security can be a good, worthy, and fulfilling journey for both employers and employees.

Embracing diversity of ambition calls for personalized coaching as women move through care-giving stages. The relatively few women who want to rise to the highest levels should absolutely have the support and path to do so, but there should also be guidance for the many more women who want to work in a more flexible way—for certain periods or forever—and grow and prosper in place. Employers will lose far fewer women as valuable contributors when they make simple, but powerful changes and give them opportunities to, for example:

1. Define leadership beyond big titles and recognize that leaders at any level lead project teams, set high standards for work quality, mentor others, challenge the status quo and find more efficient ways to solve problems.
2. Broaden rigid and confining job descriptions and focus instead on an expanding portfolio of skills and expertise—especially key "future of work" skills like quality control, management of financial resources, and negotiation.

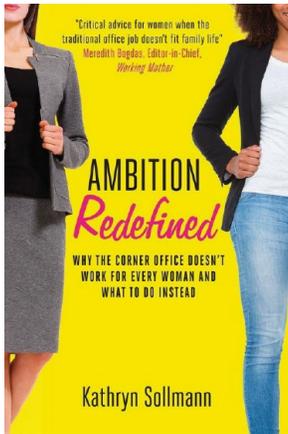
3. Collaborate with various departments through multi-disciplinary project shares that cultivate new skills.
4. Take the lead on training and mentoring to help younger colleagues navigate both work and life.
5. Get greater exposure through networking or industry associations, speaking at conferences, writing articles or papers, and more.
6. Solidify global or community citizenship through participation in organizations that align with the company's mission.

**When ambition and success are measured not just in seniority of title, workplaces will be more welcoming and inclusive for women who are nurturing two huge jobs—caring for family and career. 📍**





# Info



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### About the author

Kathryn Sollmann is a recognized leader in helping women navigate the many stages of work and life. Through her blog and coaching firm, 9 Lives for Women, she is one of few voices strongly encouraging women to always work—at every age and life stage—to achieve long-term financial security. Her emphasis on women’s financial independence has generated event-sponsorship funding from corporate wealth-management giants including AXA Advisors, Fidelity, Raymond James, Cigna and Wells Fargo. With good humor, no-nonsense delivery and the ability to educate and motivate, Kathryn is a frequent speaker, and an inspirational voice for women in college to retirement years. A frequent media resource, her expertise has been called upon by *The Today Show*, NPR, *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Money* magazine, CNBC & more.



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