GRIST

Stopping the Exodus of Women in Science
by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Carolyn Buck Luce, and Lisa J. Servon

Business leaders in the U.S. wring their hands over the country’s shortage of scientists, engineers, and technologists, often citing it as the biggest constraint on growth. As they’ve sought to improve the situation, much of their focus has been on lobbying for a relaxation of H1-B visa norms so that foreign nationals can fill the gap. Employers seem not to realize that the talent they need is already here – if only they can retain it.

Female scientists, engineers, and technologists exist in large numbers (contrary to popular belief) but are abandoning their chosen professions in droves. With the support of a vanguard of concerned firms, the Center for Work-Life Policy recently examined this brain drain. (The complete findings of our study “The Athena Factor: Reversing the Brain Drain in Science, Engineering, and Technology” are contained in a Harvard Business Review special report, accessible at BrainDrain.hbr.org.) First, we confirmed the scale of the problem, which echoes but far exceeds the overall tendency among women to “opt out” of full-time work at a higher rate than men do. Our research findings show that on the lower rungs of corporate career ladders, fully 41% of highly qualified scientists, engineers, and technologists are women. But the dropout rates are
huge: Over time 52% of these talented women quit their jobs. Most strikingly, this female exodus is not a steady trickle. Rather, there seems to be a key moment in women’s lives—in their mid to late thirties—when most head for the door. (See the exhibit “Intervening at the ‘Fight or Flight’ Moment.”)

Stop for a moment and let these statistics sink in. Can you imagine the dustup in the boardroom if 50% of a company’s most promising products were abandoned midstream? And yet companies routinely invest large sums of money in developing female talent, only to see half of that talent walk out. The scale of the loss is enormous. And of course the pain of lost potential is particularly acute for the individuals themselves.

So why do women leave science, engineering, and technology careers? The answer comes in five parts. First and foremost, the hostility of the workplace culture drives them out. If machismo is on the run in most U.S. corporate settings, then this is its Alamo—a last holdout of redoubled intensity. Second is the dispiriting sense of isolation that comes when a woman is the only female on her team or at her rank—a problem exacerbated for others when she in turn leaves. Third, there is a strong disconnect between women’s preferred work rhythms and the risky “diving catch” and “firefighting” behavior that is recognized and rewarded in these male-dominated fields.

Two more factors round out the set. “Extreme jobs,” with their long workweeks and punishing travel schedules, are particularly prevalent in science, engineering, and technology companies. (See “Extreme Jobs: The Dangerous Allure of the 70-Hour Workweek,” HBR December 2006.) Because women in two-income families still bear the brunt of household management, few are able to sustain those pressures. Finally, many women we surveyed bemoaned the “mystery” around career advancement. Isolated and lacking sponsors, they cannot discern the pathway that will allow them to make steady progress upward. The result is that women tend to find themselves shunted into roles as executors or helpers—without ever understanding why—while men occupy the more illustrious creator and producer roles.

**Intervening at the “Fight or Flight” Moment**

Cutting female attrition yields huge gains.

None of this is good news, but the fact that we have surfaced these problems certainly is. Because we can map the point of highest attrition, for example, firms can be more targeted in their interventions. And because we know the worst pressures women face, organizations can begin to relieve them. Indeed, the companies that are part of our research consortium have already launched 14 initiatives to do so.

Cisco decided to develop a “game changer.” Designed to ensure that within 18 months, women will come to represent 25% of the senior management team, this program will create a critical mass of senior women in one fell swoop.

Johnson & Johnson and Microsoft have focused on the “fight or flight” moment. In a new program called Crossing the Finish Line, J&J is providing leadership development to young, high-potential multicultural women and strengthening their connections with senior managers who can act as their sponsors down the road. In a similar vein, Microsoft has created a group of interlocking “mentoring rings” with an eye to giving female talent better access to and mentoring from senior managers—especially at career stages when support is most needed.

Alcoa has targeted the issue of attracting more women into operating management roles. Through its Women in Line Roles initiative, the company is offering high-potential women who might be interested in production or technical roles the chance to try them out through temporary assignments and help staying on track through carefully crafted career development plans. Finally, Pfizer has a creative approach to mentoring female scientists. Working with Yale University, Pfizer’s Women’s Leadership Network launched a student mentoring program, which both stems losses among highly qualified female graduate students and increases their awareness of the private sector.

It will be a long time before initiatives like these, dispersed and targeted as they are, add up to systemwide change. But this is the only form in which that change will come: real work by leading companies to selfishly address their own...
talent requirements. Based on today’s data, our research finds that if we could, as a nation, cut female attrition in science, engineering, and technology by 25%, we would add 220,000 highly qualified workers to the labor market. In a global economy where such talent drives the competitiveness of nations, that’s a goal worth rallying around.

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STAKEHOLDERS

Getting Sound Advice on Social Initiatives
by Steven Grover

Companies today face a common challenge: how to develop workable programs that will help them move forward strategically on corporate social responsibility initiatives that matter to customers and employees.

One of the CSR issues I’m deeply involved with at Burger King is animal welfare. Obviously, a corporation like ours could do many things on that front. So we need help choosing the right initiatives. But where can we get it? Should we tap activists as advisers, as McDonald’s did with environmentalists on the issue of packaging? Should we seat activists at the decision-making table, as the new owners of TXU have done?

Burger King has chosen a different path. It’s a deliberative, low-key approach, but it has given us confidence that we’re going about our animal-welfare initiatives in the right way. And lately it has given us unexpected benefits.

We set out on this path a decade or so ago, when animal-rights activists began to generate concerns among consumers. (Admittedly, we had a rather bad relationship with some activist groups at the time.) We chose to establish an advisory panel to generate, filter, and analyze ideas for how the company could promote animal welfare. (We aren’t the only food company with such a panel – Safeway, for instance, also relies on an animal-welfare advisory committee, and McDonald’s has a panel, too.)

Our advisory panel helps us sort through the sometimes conflicting suggestions we receive and provides a stringent academic review so that we know our policies are based upon sound science and make sense. The panel also weighs costs against benefits and takes into account our supply-chain issues – the Burger King system is so large that we could virtually cause the country to run out of a particular product if we decided to fill our pipeline with it.

The advisory panel members are volunteers, and most are academic experts; the well-known author and researcher Temple Grandin of Colorado State University is a member. Sometimes we have disagreements, but after we put all the facts and science on the table, in every case we have been able to come up with recommendations that have moved the company forward and addressed the relevant concerns.

On the panel’s advice, last year we announced a new goal for the amount of egg product from cage-free chickens that we use throughout our entire restaurant system. We now aim to have the equivalent of 5% of the egg volume of our company-owned restaurants be cage-free. (The company owns 10% of our restaurants – the rest are franchised.) We also set a goal of obtaining 10% of the pork in the entire system from sows raised without gestation crates. The panel hoped these moves would encourage the spread of humane practices within the poultry and pork industries. We were surprised by the large number of positive calls and letters we received from consumers in response to our efforts and the favorable press coverage. We’ve undertaken other animal-welfare initiatives that were considerably more expensive and comprehensive, but they’ve never generated this level of positive public response. The public approval has given us a certain external validation for a process that previously we had kept under the radar.

My experience suggests several success factors for setting up and using an outside panel on CSR initiatives:

■ Recruit top experts and leaders in their field who are willing to take the time to work through their differences and create solutions.
■ Identify a staff adviser from the company who is an expert in the field and can be the company and industry