

WOMEN

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Fewer leaders in the workplace

the highest levels of business."

The eternal challenge of balancing family and career has long been cited as a fundamental barrier to workplace gender symmetry.

While 2006 saw a decline in the number of women corporate officers, their numbers have inched up during the 12 years that Catalyst has been keeping score. Based on the long-term trend, Catalyst said it will take 47 years for women to capture half of the top corporate jobs.

Women hold 14.6 percent of all Fortune 500 board seats last year, compared with 14.7 percent in 2005. Catalyst estimates it could take women 73 years to reach parity with men in the boardroom.

The survey found women are still twice as likely as men to hold staff positions, such as human resources, while men are equally likely to be running operations with profit-and-loss responsibility — the kind of experience deemed invaluable to corporate advancement.

In one of the few rising results, the survey found the percentage of top-paying jobs held by women rose last year, to 6.7 percent from 6.4 percent.

Among this year's Catalyst Award winners is PricewaterhouseCoopers, where three of the 17 top executives, or 18 percent, are women, as are 16 percent of the 2,000 partners.

"Moving these numbers forward

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is the challenge we're all grappling with, and there are no easy answers," said Jennifer Allyn, managing director for gender, retention and advancement at the international accounting, auditing and consulting company. Her firm offers flexible-work arrangements to everyone, and mostly women take advantage of them: 96 percent of those opting for part-time schedules are women.

In July the company launched a "full circle" program that allows employees to leave for up to five years to care for dependents, usually children or parents, and so far, 14 women have gone on leave.

"If you look at all our women managers, 12 percent of them are using a flexible-work arrangement," Allyn said. "Work/life balance is a big challenge; we are the ones who have the kids, and that's not going to change. Corporate careers are complex and women have a lot of choices, and that's a good thing; if we want women to stay here, we have to signal to them that we value them and want to help them."

Allyn said both men and women are ambitious, "but for women, ambition is a collaborative experience," in which a mentor may identify talent in a woman and engage in a dialogue that encourages her to push her career ahead. "But the most ambitious young men tend to decide early that they want to run the whole thing. And they are juggling fewer things outside of work. More men have wives who don't work outside the home; most of our women partners are half of a dual-career couple."

Women are starting businesses at twice the rate of men, and often their frustration with the slow as-

cent of women into the upper corporate echelons is cited as a motivation.

Sandi Webster is co-founder of Newark-based Consultants2Go, which last year tripled its revenue to just more than \$1 million. Her company, which provides marketing consultants to big companies on a temporary or project basis, won \$50,000 in financing from the Make Mine a Million program, a nonprofit whose goal is to help women-owned businesses grow past the \$1 million mark.

Webster and her partner, Peggy McHale, used the loan to hire another salesperson, which catapulted the company's growth.

Webster had worked at American Express for 15 years, and started her company in 2002 after being downsized out of her job: "A lot of my friends in corporate America have decided to start their own business," she said. "Realizing they could be downsized at any moment, they are taking control of their careers."

She said it's no surprise that women are scarce at the top. Corporations are slashing officer positions to save money, "so maybe you have four executive vice president slots, and 100 managers vying for them; you may not even have an opportunity to grow in your job."

She said she is optimistic more women will rise to the top, "because women are gaining experience on all fronts." But business runs on relationships, "and men look out for each other. When women get into the top jobs, they need to nominate each other."

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