What Happened to the 15%: Insights from Women Leaving Corporate Jobs
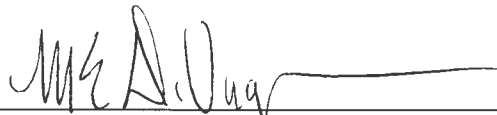
A dissertation submitted

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Abstract

Women and men enter the workforce in approximately equal numbers. However, women remain under-represented throughout the corporate pipeline at every level across the globe. It is clear that the majority of women do not opt-out of the workforce. It is unclear what happens to women after they voluntarily leave a corporate job. Based on the literature review, much is known about the 85% of women who remain in the corporate pipeline and much is known about voluntary employee turnover. However, little is known about the aftermath and career progress of the 15% of women who voluntarily leave a corporate job. The purpose of this study is to gain insight on how to achieve gender career equality from the 15% of women who voluntarily leave the corporate pipeline and are still working.

A qualitative study with a constructivist worldview using phenomenon driven research methodology is conducted to learn from the lived experiences of the unstudied 15% of women who leave corporate jobs. The study finds that women voluntarily leave either because of an organization change or an accumulation of issues. At work, women seek to use their expertise, to work with amazing people, to have fluid flexibility, and to have autonomy while being paid fairly. To achieve their career objectives, women need to focus on what matters to them individually, to be open to opportunities, and to develop a support system. Finally, women provide advice to companies to understand gender career equality as a societal issue, to

leverage women's strengths, and to genuinely offer flexibility. The study findings

contribute to the gender career equality body of literature.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

According to the *Women in the Workplace 2019* study, women and men enter the workforce in approximately equal numbers (48% and 52% respectively). However, women remain under-represented throughout the corporate pipeline at every level across the globe. It is clear that the majority of women do not opt-out of the workforce since men and women leave companies at the same 15% rate annually (Thomas et al., 2019). It is unclear what happens to women after they voluntarily leave a corporate job (Kossek, Su, & Wu, 201).

Statement of the Problem

There is a plethora of existing research both from academic organizations (Joshi, Neely, Emrich, Griffiths, & George, 2015; Scarborough, 2018) and non-academic organizations (Campopiano, De Massis, Rinaldi, & Sciascia, 2017; McKinsey & LeanIn.Org, 2015) about gender career equality. One of the critical strategies of achieving gender career equality is to minimize voluntary turnover of women (i.e., stopping the leaky pipeline) (Thomas et al., 2018).

Voluntary employee turnover has been studied by academic organizations (Lee, Hom, Eberly, & Mitchell, 2017) and non-academic organizations (Mahan, Nelms, & Bearden, 2018). Voluntary employee turnover is an immediate problem for all organizations due to positive economic growth and can be estimated to increase to

28% in the next few years (Catalyst, 2018b; Mahan et al., 2018). The turnover dilemma is complicated by the predicted decrease in the number of women in executive jobs (Network of Executive Women, 2018) due to a lack of companies taking a focused approach for advancing women throughout the corporate pipeline (Peluso, Heller Baird, & Kesterson-Townes, 2019). One additional trend complicates the situation: the changing dynamic of jobs due to automation and the need to upskill women to be ready for the shift (Madgavkar et al., 2019). These current trends in voluntary employee turnover may thwart the achievement of gender career equality.

Purpose of the Study

Based on the literature review, much is known about the 85% of women who remain in the corporate pipeline and much is known about voluntary employee turnover. However, little is known about the aftermath and career progress of the 15% of women who voluntarily leave a corporate job. The purpose of this study is to gain insight from these women on how to achieve gender career equality. By shifting the focus to the 15% of women who have left companies and are still currently working, we may add new understanding about gender career equality. The lack of insight beyond the reasons for voluntary turnover by women has triggered a call to action for research to better understand the phenomenon of what happens to women after they leave a corporate job (Lee et al., 2017; Russell, 2013).

Research Questions

The focus of the study is to understand why women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what they seek. The definition of *voluntarily leaving a corporate job* in this research study is women who choose to quit working at a corporation and find other employment. To further define *voluntarily leaving a corporate job*, this means women who choose to leave a job in the public, private, or social sectors. For the purpose of this study, we are not including women who leave the workforce for retirement, family, or other reasons.

All interviewees must be currently employed with any type of organization, such as corporations, entrepreneurial, academic, or not-for-profit. Narrowing the focus of this study to the 15% of women who leave corporate jobs and then further refining to only interview those women who continue to work in any capacity (approximately 80% of the 15% continue to work) provides insights in two ways (Thomas et al., 2019). First, to better understand if the "leaky pipeline" is because the promotable women leave (go to get promoted somewhere else). If that is the case, these women are potentially still in the pipeline and the problem is mostly due to not promoting women at all. Second, to better understand women who leave the corporate pipeline entirely and what might corporations do differently to entice women to stay (what needs are not being met). The research question for this study is "Why do women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what do they seek in their next role?" In addition, we hope to find

to what extent do these women achieve the change they seek? How does their career progress?

The remaining sections of this dissertation are organized as follows. Chapter 2 covers a review of the literature that seems most relevant to this research, including the business case for gender career equality, theories and studies on achieving gender career equality, and the current trends in voluntary employee turnover. Chapter 3 covers my role as researcher, describes the research approach, discusses potential ethical issues, and suggests a timeline for completing this research. Chapter 4 explores the findings from this research. In Chapter 5, we will discuss three insights relating to the gender career equality literature. To complete the study, suggestions for further implications for research and practice are provided in Chapter 6.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To make sense of the existing research on gender career equality and voluntary employee turnover, the literature was aligned in Figure 1. This framework was adapted from Luft and Ingham's (1955) Johari Window. This model helps people understand the relationships with others and themselves by examining what each knows and does not know. I adapted the Johari Window model because my literature review identified theories that were known and unknown to academic and non-academic organizations. This organizing framework was chosen based on the concept of revealing information to self (academic organizations) and others (non-academic organizations).
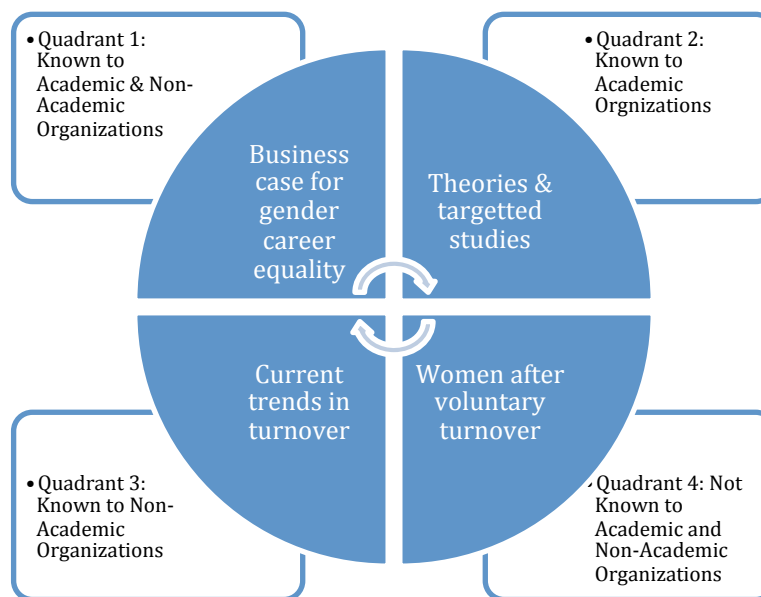
Source: Adapted from Luft & Ingham (1955)

Figure 1. Literature Review Organizing Framework

The first quadrant in Figure 1Figure 1. Literature Review Organizing Framework represents what academic and non-academic organizations know about the business case for gender career equality, including the pace of change towards gender career equality, obstacles to achieving gender career equality, and avenues for women to overcome the obstacles. The definition of non-academic organizations, for the purpose of this literature review, is all for-profit and not-for-profit organizations that are not in pursuit of education, such as businesses and consulting firms that conduct research. The second quadrant covers the focus of academic organizations on theories and any targeted studies, which come close to answering how to achieve gender career equality and understanding voluntary employee turnover. The third quadrant centers on what non-academic organizations know about voluntary employee turnover in general and, more specifically, about women. The fourth quadrant represents what is not known to academic and non-academic organizations, which establishes the purpose of this study.

Quadrant 1: Known to Academic and Non-Academic Organizations

Much has been studied and confirmed about gender career equality (Hoobler, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018; Joshi, Neely et al., 2015; Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015; Scarborough, 2018) by both academic and non-academic organizations. The areas of focus on gender career equality include the business case, pace of change, and obstacles faced by women, along with suggestions on what women can do to overcome the obstacles. Each of these topics are covered in the following paragraphs.

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Business case

The business case for women in executive leadership positions has been developed

and can be summed up from two perspectives. One, it is good for business based on

positive impacts to firm performance (Hoobler et al., 2018; Jeong & Harrison, 2017;

Joshi, Neely et al., 2015; Noland, Moran, & Kotschwar, 2016; Post & Byron, 2015).

In particular, according to Hoobler et al. (2018), the presence of women in leadership

positions results in improvement of sales. Two, achieving gender career equality is

the right thing to do morally (Catalyst, 2018b; Shook & Sweet, 2018). In the

Accenture report *When She Rises, We All Rise* (Shook & Sweet, 2018), the research

shows that "creating a culture of equality unlocks human potential and uncovers the

key drivers of a workplace culture in which everyone can advance and thrive" (p. 2).

Even with solid understanding in both academic and non-academic organizations, the

gap has still not closed to achieve equal representation of men and women in top

management teams (Yee et al., 2016).

Pace of change

The slow pace of change of moving women into leadership positions has been

confirmed (World Economic Forum, 2018; Yee et al., 2016) and may have stalled

(Krivkovich, Robinson, Starikova, Valentino, & Yee, 2017). One myth that is

debunked is that the pace of change has not slowed because women opt out of the

workforce (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014; Kossek et al., 2017), which challenged

the historical beliefs that women limit career plans to spend more time caring for

family as women are inherently less ambitious than men, and women do not have the

confidence that commands seats in the C-suite (Krivkovich et al., 2017). Since the

pace of change of getting women into leadership positions and the simple explanation

of women choosing to leave careers for family have been debunked, the outstanding

question, "What happens to the 15% that leave corporate jobs?" is still unanswered.

Obstacles

Although there are many obstacles documented for achieving gender career equality

(Adler & Osland, 2016; Yee et al., 2016), two themes emerge in the research on

obstacles that apply to the proposed study. The first is the gap between performance

evaluations and rewards (Catalyst, 2018b; Joshi, Son et al., 2015). According to Joshi,

Son, and Roh (2015), women in high level positions perform at the same caliber as

men, but women receive significantly lower rewards. Leslie, Manchester,

 and Dahm (2017) identified an exception to the rewards gap with high potential

women who actually receive a pay premium. This exception may be due to goals

established by organizations to achieve diversity in leadership. In answer to the

question, "What happens to the 15% that leave corporate jobs?," many women move

from one corporation to another for pay (Mahan et al., 2018). However, the pay

premium is limited to those women with the potential to achieve executive positions

(Leslie et al., 2017).

The second major obstacle to overcome is gender bias. Tokenism, defined as the

practice of making only a symbolic effort by recruiting a small number of women in

order to give the appearance of gender equity in the workforce, was introduced by

Kanter (1977) and re-confirmed as alive and well today by King, Hebl, George, and Matusik (2010). The *Women in the Workplace* study from 2018 articulates the struggles of being "the only" (Thomas et al., 2018), which can be overcome by the power of three or 30% of women on the board or leadership teams (Joecks, Pull, & Vetter, 2013). According to Joecks, Pull, and Vetter (2013), the critical mass theory means that 30% of all board positions are held by women, or, in other words, 3 out 10 board positions are given to women. Gender bias was also researched by Stroh, Brett, and Reilly (1992) and fine-tuned into role congruity issues from either attraction to or desire for roles (Diekman, Brown, Johnston, & Clark, 2010). Role congruity theory proposes that a group will be positively evaluated when its characteristics are recognized as aligning with that group's typical social roles (Diekman et al., 2010).

Other ways gender bias is presented includes perception issues (Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2014) and work family-conflict (Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). Specifically in the STEM fields, gender bias is an issue since (a) it is male-dominated, (b) isolation of being "the only" is greater, and (c) the extreme nature of these roles, all of which hinder women's progress through the corporate pipeline (Servon & Visser, 2011) and potentially cause turnover (Armstrong, Riemenschneider, Allen, & Reid, 2007).

At the organization level, gender issues are inherent in the corporate hierarchy structure and would need to be radically changed to allow for the feminine view

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(Acker, 1990). And if that is not enough, women are not always supportive of one another and may inhibit progress of other women based on Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemer's queen bee theory (2016). With all of these obstacles, it is amazing women have made any progress.

Overcoming the obstacles

Suggestions for how women can overcome these obstacles became pop culture by Sandberg (2013) in *Lean In*, which offered simple guidance encouraging women to take leadership roles with suggestions such as, "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" Jay and Morgan (2016) summarized a similar set of strategies based on a qualitative study of successful leaders, yet added suggestions such as focus on outcomes, take credit for your work, and seek feedback.

Scholars have called for research on what organizations can do to close the gender career gap (Joshi, Neely et al., 2015; Yee et al., 2016). Yet few studies have explored what happens when women leave a corporate job and find meaningful work elsewhere. How can understanding this phenomenon aid in the movement towards gender career equality? This lack of understanding beyond the reasons for voluntary turnover by women has triggered a call to action for research to better understand this phenomenon (Lee et al., 2017; Russell, 2013).

Summary of academic and non-academic organization research

The review of existing literature on gender career equality, including the business case for change, pace of change, and obstacles faced by women, including

suggestions on what women can do to overcome the obstacles, are well-documented

and accepted by both academic and non-academic organizations. The review of

literature will now turn towards what is known to academics and not widely accepted

by non-academic organizations. The review includes both theory and completed

studies.

Quadrant 2: Known to Academics

This section of the literature review focuses on both theories proposed by academics

and studies on turnover towards achieving gender career equality. The most

comprehensive theory in academic journals was written by Kossek et al. (2017). In

their review of over 1,000 published articles, Kossek et al. (2017) identified three

enabling factors for a positive organizational climate related to gender equality: (a)

fairness and nondiscrimination (for example, work practices, which ensure fairness

and anti-discrimination for women), (b) leveraging talent (for example, organizational

cultures, which enhance person-environment fit by learning from and leveraging

women's talents), and (c) workplace support (for example, cultures, values, and

initiatives, such as networks and work-family polices that support women's needs,

interests, and voices).

In addition, there are a few more targeted theories from academia on how to achieve

gender career equality. Allen, French, and Poteet (2016) theorized four key factors

that exacerbate the slow advancement of women into leadership roles, which

illuminates gender bias and provides direction on how to overcome these obstacles:

- Expected gender roles and self-concept appear first in education and then proceed to follow into the workplace.

- Women may be a threat to the status quo.

- Unfair distribution of home responsibilities include child, elder, and home care.

- A woman's innate need to be a caregiver may seem incongruous.

One other targeted area of theory points to leadership development and the need for it (Gordon & Whelan, 1998; Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003). However, the true impact of leadership development is not well-known. As Kellerman (2012) would question, can leadership truly be taught?

On the other hand, voluntary employee turnover theory has been researched thoroughly and has grown in size over the last 100 years (Lee et al., 2017). In summary, voluntary employee turnover theory began as a psychological process dealing with negative job attitudes. The world of psychology joined the research and evolved the model to include desirability or imagery to explain the forward movement of turnover and has since evolved to include embeddedness within the organization of the employee and his/her family (Harman, Lee, Mitchell, Felps, & Owens, 2007). The academic theories of voluntary turnover reinforce many of the key climate themes of Kossek et al. (2017) model, which are outlined in Figure 1.

Targeted studies provide some answers

Tharenou, Latimer, and Conroy (1994) found that women were most affected by career encouragement, including the importance of relationships ("Who provides the

career encouragement?") and the importance of career preference (job congruity). Bajdo and Dickson (2001) conducted a study to examine how organization culture affects women's advancement in organizations. The findings from the study show that the strongest predictors of women advancing in an organization are high gender equity practices, which means the organizations that focus on inclusion (Bajdo & Dickson, 2001). Over a decade later, Nishii (2013) fine-tuned the definition of an inclusive environment: "individuals of all backgrounds—not just members of historically powerful identity groups—are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in core decision making" (p. 1754). Findings from Nishii's (2013) study on inclusion align with Bajdo and Dickson's (2001) findings and extend into the reduction in conflict and turnover. These two studies combined begin to point towards organization-level fairness and discrimination practices, ones that needed to not only focus on diversity, but also inclusion.

Beierlein, Gibson, and Tibbs (2011) used archival data from *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" lists and *Working Mother* magazine's "100 Best Companies for Working Mothers" lists from 1998 to 2007. The comparative analysis revealed companies that depend on intellectual human capital are more likely to offer family-friendly benefits and foster a culture that encourages their use, which can be deemed as a retention tool (Beierlein et al., 2011). This research bridges the gap between academic and non-academic organizations. It is an academic study using business data to address a business application. However, it does not answer the

turnover questions of why women leave these companies, and do they find success elsewhere?

Butts, Casper, and Yang's (2013) meta-analysis addressed the relationship between work-family support policies and employee outcomes. Most importantly, the more positive relationship was the availability of work-family support policies (Butts et al., 2013). This is a significant piece of research to better understand at least one step in the right direction of achieving gender career equality. The implication of this study is that a company just making work-family support policies available is a necessary condition for family supportive organization perceptions.

Fitzsimmons, Callan, and Paulsen (2014) aimed to understand the origin for capital accumulation patterns of thirty female CEOs and thirty male CEOs of large companies. The critical finding on the process of achieving gender career equality is that the presence of mentoring and leadership development programs early in a woman's career can make up for the lack of some capital acquisition in childhood and may build self-efficacy (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). This study points to another piece of the puzzle on how to achieve gender career equality for a business through retention strategies, including when to offer career support as well as the importance of the mentoring relationship.

Ng and Sears (2017) studied macro level factors as predictors of an organization's representation of women in management. The presence of a female CEO and active recruitment of women were the highest predictors of representation of women in leadership (Ng & Sears, 2017). As mentioned earlier in the literature review, this conflicts with the more specific finding by Noland et al. (2016) about the how presence of female CEOs alone has no noticeable effect on firm performance. The outstanding question remains: "Is it merely the presence of a female CEO, or what else is happening?"

Elvira and Cohen (2001) also looked at organization gender composition. They found another obvious but necessary finding: Women were less likely to leave when more women were employed at their job level. However, the results were mixed when asking about the importance of women immediately above and in executive levels based on the level of the respondent (Elvira & Cohen, 2001). This study aligns to *Women in the Workplace* findings on the obstacle of a woman being the only woman on a particular team (Thomas et al., 2018) and the isolation women feel in STEM jobs (Servon & Visser, 2011). It also begins to answer the question on how an organization can sustain and build the talent pipeline over time—pay attention to the number of women at every level.

The findings from an Ernst and Young Global Limited (EY) (2017) report, *Women in Leadership: The Family Business Advantage*, suggest that family businesses create

environments that are more open and conducive to the development of women

leaders. This study represents a significant portion of employers. And similar to

publicly traded companies, as reported by Catalyst (2018b) as well as McKinsey and

LeanIn.org (2015), these companies have consistently lackluster results regarding

moving women up the leadership ladder.

Cimirotić, Duller, Feldbauer-Durstmüller, Gärtner, and Hiebl (2017) conducted a

small case study of management accountants where the women mostly highlighted

what they had to offer, such as socials skills, professional expertise, ambition, and

luck. Several women also mentioned support from life partners and superiors

(Cimirotić et al., 2017). Although this study is very small in scope, it reinforces the

business approach of leaving career advancement and development up to the

individual. This is consistent with the findings of Mahan et al. (2018)—the number

one reason for voluntary turnover is the desire for career development.

To address leadership development more broadly, Day and Antonakis (2018) defined

leadership development as the expansion of individual and organizational capacity to

effectively lead. Minimal evidence exists of the effectiveness of leadership

development programs and processes, lacking empirical evidence for effective

women-specific leadership development to encourage movement through the

corporate pipeline (Day & Antonakis, 2018; Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, &

Burke, 2017). A study by Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) used action research on

leadership development to understand adjustments for women, which is needed to overcome gender bias and to build identity. Building identity in women's leadership development programs allows women to reinterpret gender bias in order to see themselves as leaders. Ely, Ibarra et al. (2011) suggested achieving this through understanding the environment in which you work, creating psychological safety, and being purpose-driven. One additional literature review on leadership development by Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, and McKee (2014) was limited to articles primarily published in *The Leadership Quarterly* from 1988 to 2013. IT is important to note that the literature review looked at both the leader development (individual growth and identity) as well as leadership development (social system including followers). This study reinforces what businesses have continued to build on, which is the importance of feedback and relationships with special emphasis on thwarting turnover by creating a positive and productive relationship with managers (Mahan et al., 2018).

Turnover for women was also studied by Lyness and Judiesch (2001), and they were surprised by uncovering that voluntary turnover of women and men are relatively equal. More importantly is the finding that recent promotion is a high predictor of retention and the use of a leave of absence is a high predictor of turnover (Lyness & Judiesch, 2001). What if companies and managers take a more active role in easing the transition back to work after a leave of absence? In a later study about women in IT, another important retention strategy is offering flexible work schedules to balance

the relationship between managing work stress and family responsibility (Armstrong et al., 2007). Flexible schedules create job satisfaction, which is known to be a key ingredient of retention (Harman et al., 2007). Servon and Visser (2011) recommended one other strategy towards retention of women in the STEM field that is focused on professionalism, addressing the competitive culture, which is predominant in male-saturated fields, to alleviate the need for women to employ impression management. In other words, encourage a culture where women can show up authentically as themselves (Servon & Visser, 2011).

Summary of academic organization research

After reviewing several studies focused on understanding what works to achieve gender career equality, there is no confirmed process model. The closest is the Tharenou et al. (1994) study, which misses current issues of gender bias and climate. Kossek et al. (2017) proposed a theory of what the gender inclusion process might look like, which is more comprehensive. Below in Table 1 is a summary of the key elements of the Kossek et al. (2017) model and the key findings from this academic literature review supporting the elements across several studies. A confirmatory modeling study still needs to be conducted on the Kossek et al. (2017) model.

Table 1. Summary of Academic Research Supporting Kossek et al. (2017) Model

Climate for Gender Inclusion	Author	Key Finding
Organizational Level: Fairness and	Bajdo & Dickson (2001)	High gender equity practices
	Palmer & Bosch (2017)	Reputation of the company

Climate for Gender Inclusion	Author	Key Finding
nondiscrimination	Ng and Sears (2017)	Active talent recruitment
Organizational Level: Leveraging talent	Ng and Sears (2017); Palmer and Bosch (2017);	Female CEO
	Lyness & Judiesch (2001)	Promoting women
Organizational Level: Workplace support	Beierlein et al. (2011)	Offer family friendly benefits and foster a culture that encourages their use
	Harman et al. (2007)	Embeddedness enhances retention
	EY (2017);	Inclusive environment
Individual Level: Fairness and nondiscrimination	Elvira and Cohen (2001); Servon and Visser (2011)	Less turnover when more women at your level
	Harman et al. (2007)	Negative experiences lead to turnover
	EY (2017)	Role models
Individual Level: Leveraging talent	Fitzsimmons et al. (2013)	Individual participation in mentoring and leadership development programs offered early in a woman's career
	Ely et al. (2011)	Leadership development focused on women only addresses gender bias, identity work, purpose
	Cimirotić et al. (2017)	Professional expertise and ambition
Individual Level: Workplace support	Tharenou et al. (1994)	Career encouragement
	Armstrong et al. (2007); Butts et al. (2013)	Availability of work-family support policies
	Day et al. (2014)	Use of effective feedback processes

Source: Adapted from Kossek et al. (2017)

Quadrant 3: Known to Non-Academic Organizations

Through the literature review process, many references were made about using non-academic research to better understand the narrow topic of voluntary employee turnover of women and its effect on achieving gender career equality. In this section, non-academic literature is reviewed to focus on what we know about current trends in turnover and reasons for voluntary employee turnover, and then turns to what we know specifically about women and turnover.

Current trends

The global talent shortage is the highest it has been in 10 years (Catalyst, 2018a). The world is currently in an economic boom, which increases voluntary employee turnover (Mahan et al., 2018). This boom is also evident in the U.S., based on a decreasing unemployment rate as low as 3.6% since the most recent high of 9.6% during the great recession (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). According to the *2018 North America Mercer Turnover Study,* 68% of U.S. organizations indicated a total headcount increase and an increase in full-time equivalents (Mercer, 2019). Cost implications of this turnover can be significant at 30% of an annual salary for each employee replaced (Mahan et al., 2018).

Based on the current trends, it is an employee market where demand outpaces supply according to the *2018 Retention Report*, which predicts a turnover rate of 28.6% (Mahan et al., 2018). Voluntary turnover accounted for 16% of total separations in 2018 (Mercer, 2019; Thomas et al., 2018). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018)

estimated that the length of stay at a current employer to be only 4.2 years and could

be decreasing (Catalyst, 2018a; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). All current

trends point to the same thing—the war on talent continues to rage.

Voluntary employee turnover

In the U.S., the top-listed reasons for both male and female voluntary employee

turnover, according to the *2018 North America Mercer Turnover Study*, were

personal/family (57%), promotion opportunity (35%), career change (27%), base

salary (24%), and job satisfaction (24%) (Mercer, 2019). In the *2018 Retention*

Report, the reasons for leaving were similar and identified seven reasons that are

preventable, including career development, work-life balance, manager behavior,

well-being, compensation and benefits, job characteristics, and work environment

(Mahan et al., 2018). However, it is still unclear if women leave for the same reason

as men.

Women and turnover

According to the *Women in the Workplace 2018* study, women and men enter the

workforce at approximately equal numbers (48% and 52%, respectively). However,

women remain under-represented throughout the corporate pipeline at every level

across the globe. It is clear that the majority of women do not opt-out of the

workforce since men and women leave companies at the same 15% rate annually

(Thomas et al., 2018). In *The Female Leadership Crisis* study, it is predicted that

companies may actually see a 25% decrease in executive women (Network of

Executive Women, 2018). We are not making progress towards gender career

equality, according to *The 2019 Forecast for Women in The Workplace* study (Colletta, 2018).

Women experience many of the same reasons as men for voluntary turnover. Career development is cited as a top reason for female voluntary employee turnover more specifically because it is harder for women to advance than men (Network of Executive Women, 2018; Thomas et al., 2018). Work-life balance is a finding in academic research (Bajdo & Dickson, 2001; Servon & Visser, 2011), as well as non-academic research (Network of Executive Women, 2018; Thomas et al., 2018) and is specifically cited as an obstacle to how women view top jobs. Additional common reasons women voluntarily leave are poor manager behavior, such as managers clearly being less supportive of women than male counterparts or managers sexually harassing women. Finally, the work environment causes voluntary turnover due to every day discrimination and women feeling isolated by being the only woman in the room (Network of Executive Women, 2018; Thomas et al., 2018).

Other studies consider interesting aspects of the retention/turnover battle, such as Schwantes' (2018) look at the type of leaders that retain women, and find that servant leadership or transformation leadership are the winners. Madgavkar et al. (2019) looked at the changing work environment based on automation. Education is a key requirement for the U.S. mature economy. The importance of reskilling women to be

able to work alongside automation or face the threat of reduction in the number of

women in the corporate pipeline (Madgavkar et al., 2019)

Summary of non-academic organization research

In this section, non-academic organization literature pointed to current positive

economic trends that exacerbate the voluntary employee turnover rate. In addition,

reasons for voluntary employee turnover were explored. Finally, we turned to how the

reasons for voluntary employee turnover related to women. Very little research

focused on what happens to women once they leave a corporate job and begin to

work elsewhere.

Quadrant 4: Not Known to Academic and Non-Academic Organizations

The fourth and final quadrant of the literature review focuses on uncovering what is

not known to academic and non-academic organizations and is the goal of this

research study. Although we now have some understanding of voluntary turnover, we

do not know what triggers women to leave a corporate job and if women are able to

achieve the change they seek. Next, I describe the methods used in this study to

answer this question.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

The research methods section outlines the methodology of the study. The role of the researcher, an overview of the study, and potential ethical issues are discussed. Finally, the potential impact is articulated.

Role of the Researcher

There is a convergence in my world on the topic of gender career equality. I work as a Senior Manager of IT Talent and Training at Exelon Corporation, America's leading energy provider. The convergence began when I wrote a blog on Exelon Corporation's enhanced family leave policy, which was an effort to retain women. One of the articles I used in the blog was the *Women in the Workplace* 2016 study (Yee et al., 2016) on the state of women in leadership. This same study was referenced in an article by Kossek et al. (2017) that piqued my interest to extend research on organizational change for gender career equality. The authors addressed the myth of women opting out of leadership positions and presented a model to provide direction on what it may take to achieve career equality between women and men. Then came the commitment by Exelon Corporation to the United Nations' movement, *HeForShe*, in which Exelon Corporation set a goal to achieve gender retention parity by 2020. I was asked to be a member of the Exelon *HeForShe* steering committee in order to complete an organizational assessment and use my expertise in organizational change to create and implement a robust set of retention strategies for women. All these isolated incidents coalesced into a passion to better

understand how to help organizations achieve gender career equality. More specifically, there is a dearth of understanding what triggers women to leave a corporate job and if women are able to achieve the change they seek. We need to understand the aftermath and career progress of the 15% of women who voluntarily leave a corporate job

As the lead researcher, I bracketed my experience as it relates to this study. In 1999, prior to my experience at Exelon, I left a corporate job and started my own consulting firm. While my experience has motivated my interest in this study, I separated my experience from the experiences of the interviewees.

The Study Worldview

This qualitative study has a constructivist worldview. According to the *Women in the Workplace 2019* study, women and men enter the workforce at approximately equal numbers (48% and 52%, respectively). However, women remain under-represented throughout the corporate pipeline at every level across the globe. It is clear that a majority of the women do not opt-out of the workforce since men and women leave companies at the same 15% rate annually (Thomas et al., 2019). It is unclear what happens to women after they voluntarily leave a corporate job (Kossek et al., 2017). Given the Creswell and Poth (2018) description of phenomenological research as "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of phenomenon," a phenomenon driven research approach is used (p. 75). Using

Schwarz and Stensaker's (2016) core features of a phenomenon driven research paper, following is a description the study.

Phenomenon
The focus of the study is to understand why women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what they seek. The definition of voluntarily leaving a corporate job in this research study is women who choose to quit working at a corporation and find other employment. To further define "voluntarily leaving a corporate job," this means women who choose to leave a job in the public, private, or social sectors. The goal of the study is to better understand the lived experiences of the interviewees.

Aim and motivation
The purpose of the study is to learn from the experience of these women and share the findings. The majority of the gender career equality research has been to learn from the 85% currently employed by companies. By shifting the focus to the 15% of women that have left a corporate job, we may add new understanding on how to achieve gender career equality.

Audience and goal of research
The study is primarily for an academic audience. Subsequent articles may be both for academic audiences and practitioners.

Role of theory
Theory is used for explaining why this phenomenon and research question are relevant and unique compared to other research. Additional theories are applied when

making sense of the data in order to explain or provide insights to build on the current body of knowledge around gender career equality.

Research methods

This qualitative study has a constructivist worldview using phenomenon driven research methodology. Moustakas (1994) called this methodology transcendental phenomenology. The researcher builds knowledge through description of what appears in the conscious regarding the lived experiences of several individuals. In this study, the phenomenon is the lived experiences of the 15% of women that left corporate jobs. How did they experience it? The core processes of transcendental phenomenology include bracketing each experience in order to approach the next experience from a fresh and novel perspective. Next is the reduction of the description to categories (key themes) or meaning units (collection of significant statements). The researcher then writes a description of what happened and how the experiences happened. The culmination is then written as the essence of a common experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Contribution to knowledge

The study findings contribute to the gender career equality body of literature with a novel focus of why women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what they seek. Companies may gain insights on how to minimize voluntary employee turnover.

Data collection

Data was collected through one-hour semi-structured interviews with 27 individuals. Interviewees had left a corporate job voluntarily and were currently employed (with

any type of organization, such as corporations, entrepreneurial, academic, not-for-profit).

- 8 women who had left between 2013-2019

- 8 women who had left between 2008-2012

- 11 women who had left prior to 2008

The date ranges were determined based on the economic conditions in the United States and the unemployment rate, and the experiences of the women may be different due to availability of jobs. The average unemployment rate for five years prior to 2008 was 5.1%, between 2008 and 2012 it was 8.6%, and between 2013 and 2019 it was 4.8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). Is there a difference in why women voluntarily leave? Is there a difference on what type of work they do after leaving the corporate job?

The interviewees included a mix of levels, industries, and education from across the U.S. The interviewees were found through social media and meet the criteria outlined above. The interview was recorded, and the interviewer took notes regarding observations. This was done for data analysis. The recording was transcribed first through voice to text using Temi and then verified by the interviewer and kept confidential in a password-protected computer. All individual identification was removed from the hard copy of the transcript. Participant identity and confidentiality is concealed using coding procedures to maintain anonymity. Questions included:

- Describe what was happening at your corporate job prior to leaving. What were you doing? Thinking? Feeling?

- What were you hoping to achieve by leaving? In other words, what were you looking for in a new job (moving towards what)?

- Describe what has happened since you left. What is your career journey? Thinking? Feeling?

- To what extent have you achieved your goals for leaving your corporate job?

- In hindsight, what advice would you give?

Analysis

First, the Moustakas (1994) process of bracketing and reflection to document the interviewer's experience and responses to the interview questions was done to remain objective with making sense of the interviewee data. A systematic approach was used to be able to answer the questions about what the interviewees experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

In addition, the data was analyzed for themes based on demographics across all groups and within each group. The interviews were coded in Word using the Comments tool and then extracted using DocTools. The codes were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet where the quotes and horizon were captured. Once the horizon was captured, the categories emerged through data review and coding of the first, second, and third order codes using Creswell and Poth (2018) as a guide for data analysis and representation. The codes were checked and verified by one other researcher. Power

BI was then used to compare the codes by demographics. A free write response was written for each interview using Charmaz's (2014) guide to pre-writing exercises. Textural and structural descriptions were written for each interview using the Moustakas method (1994). The findings were reported in the essence of the phenomenon based on Creswell and Poth's (2018) procedure for conducting phenomenon driven research. The essence was sent to all 27 interviewees, and feedback was incorporated into the final version.

Potential Ethical Issues

The processes to avoid bias and protection of human subjects were used in this study by first being transparent that the transcripts of the interviews are not accessible and that no individual data will be utilized for this study, only cumulative group data. Second, the purpose and potential benefits of this study were communicated to the participants, and the procedures of the study whereby voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal procedures were clearly outlined.

An electronic informed consent form, which included sufficient information about the general scope of the study as well as the ability to voluntarily participate or withdraw at any time, was signed. Under the confidentiality section of the informed consent, participants were informed that although information obtained will be kept confidential, the data may be published or presented at professional conferences and their individual identity will not be disclosed.

Maintaining the anonymity of participants is important as qualitative studies have

small sample sizes. Interviews were digitally recorded, and the recordings were

transcribed and identifying information was removed. The files and data will then be

stored on Benedictine University's campus, locked under Marie DiVirgilio's

(Dissertation Chairperson) supervision. The data will be stored for seven years and

then destroyed.

Impact and Significance of the Study

In summary, this study builds on gender career equality research, intentionally

gleaning information about women choosing to leave the corporate workforce.

Subsequently, the study findings contribute a unique focus of why women voluntarily

leave a corporate job and what they seek, augmenting the gender career equality body

of literature. Consequently, companies may gain insights on how to proactively

enhance their efforts towards gender career equality. In the end, the study was

designed to bring us one step closer to understanding how organizations can achieve

gender career equality.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

In pursuit of my primary research question (why women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what they seek), I analyzed the interviews conducted to understand the extent to which these women had achieved the change they sought when leaving their corporate jobs. This chapter explores the findings from this research. The first section is focused on the findings based on the demographics of the 27 women who were interviewed. The second section is based on the analysis using coding techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994) to create a textural and structural map of the horizon of the phenomenon. The chapter concludes with a summary or the essence of the phenomenon, which integrates the horizon of the phenomenon and sets the stage for the discussion in Chapter 5.

Demographic Findings

Included in this study are results from 27 interviews. The interviewees must have voluntarily left a corporate job. Women were chosen for the study based on the year in which each left her corporate job, ultimately resulting in eight women who left between 2013 and 2019, eight women who left between 2008 and 2012, and 11 women who left prior to 2008. The date ranges were determined based on the economic conditions in the United States and the unemployment rate, and the experiences of the women may be different due to availability of jobs. The average unemployment rate for five years prior to 2008 was 5.1%, between 2008 and 2012 it

was 8.6%, and between 2013 and 2019 it was 4.8% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). Is there a difference in why women voluntarily leave? Is there a difference in what type of work they do after leaving the corporate job? In Table 2, there seems to be no significant trend in the responses based on the years of departure. In total, 12 women became entrepreneurs, 9 women moved to other corporate roles, 5 women went into academia, and 1 works for a not-for-profit.

In addition, there seems to be no significant trend in the responses based on the specific industry of departure, job level at the time of departure, nor the current education level of the participants. Table 2. Demographics of Women Interviewed

Table 2. Demographics of Women Interviewed

Years Left Corporate Role	No. of Women
2013 and beyond	8
2008 to 2012	8
2007 or earlier	11
Industry at Time of Departure	**No. of Women**
Advanced Electronics	1
Automotive & Assembly	3
Consumer Packaged Goods	3
Electric Power & Natural Gas	2
Financial Services	6
Health Care Systems & Services	1
High Tech	2

Media & Entertainment	1
Oil & Gas	1
Pharmaceuticals & Medical Products	1
Telecommunications	1
Other	3

Level at Time of Departure	No. of Women
C-Suite	1
Senior Vice President	1
Vice President	3
Senior Manager/Director	13
Supervisor/Manager	5
Entry level	4

Current Level of Education	No. of Women
Doctorate Degree	8
Master Degree	15
Bachelor Degree	4

Given the small sample size and the method of recruiting interviewees (women connected in my network), the spread of the respondents across industry, level, and education is varied. The interviewees are also diverse in age and pay. However, based on Table 3. Interviewee Age, Pay, and Race, there is limited diversity in race.

Table 3. Interviewee Age, Pay, and Race

Age When Left Corporate Job	No. of Women
25 to 30 years old	3

Age When Left Corporate Job	No. of Women
31 to 35 years old	5
36 to 40 years old	10
41 to 45 years old	3
46 to 50 years old	5
51 to 60 years old	0
61 and older	1

Current Annual Pay	No. of Women
$10,000 to $24,999	1
$50,000 to $74,999	2
$75,000 to $99,999	4
$100,000 to $149,999	6
$150,000 or greater	12
Prefer not to answer	2

Race	No. of Women
Caucasian	24
Black	3

Four trends were found for age, pay, and race, which are described in detail in the interview findings section when relevant to the findings. However, one woman articulated the spirit of the findings as a bit of a foreshadow:

> And I think it's why there's this generational culture clash because [millennials] are looking at [boomers and Xers] and being like, what are you stupid? And we say, but this is the way you do it. And they're like not us. I think it's one of the most exciting things I've ever witnessed.

As this entrepreneur expressed, the trends in age, pay, and race will be focused on moving away from a traditional working environment to a more flexible and inclusive work environment.

Common meaning of the phenomenon of women who leave corporate jobs did emerge for the 27 interviewees. Following Moustakas' (1994) methodology for data analysis, 157 significant statements captured the horizon of the phenomenon, which were reduced into 14 meaning units (collection of significant statements) and 4 categories (common themes). In summary, Table 4 provides the reduction of findings from the interviews into the categories and meaning units of the interviewees' lived experiences.

Table 4. Common Meaning of the Phenomenon

Categories	Meaning Units
Why women leave	Organization change
	Accumulation of issues
What women seek	Use my expertise
	Relationships matter
	Fluid flexibility
	Autonomy, freedom, control
	Make enough money
Enablers for success	Focus on what matters to you
	Open to opportunities
	Support systems

Categories	Meaning Units
Advice to companies	Gender equality is a societal issue
	Leverage strengths
	Genuinely offer flexibility

The categories were influenced by the types of questions that were asked, which is part of the phenomenological research process (Moustakas, 1994). Every interview began by asking for an explanation of what was happening at the interviewee's corporate job prior to leaving, which ultimately provided the first category addressing the issue of why women leave their corporate jobs. By asking each woman what she was hoping to achieve by leaving, the second category of what women seek emerged. The explanation the women provided about what happened since they left their corporate jobs, the extent to which they have achieved the goals they had hoped for by leaving their corporate jobs, and the advice the interviewees would give to women in the workforce coalesced into the third category of enablers for success. Finally, the fourth category highlights advice women gave to companies on how to achieve gender career equality. Each category was further explained in the meaning units. Table 5 represents the number of times the meaning units were stated in the interviews.

Table 5. Frequency of Meaning Units

Meaning Units	No. of Comments	Percent of Comments	No. of Distinct Individuals
Focus on what matters to you	366	17.73%	27
Use my expertise	293	14.20%	27
Accumulation of issues	230	11.14%	23
Relationships matter	204	9.88%	27
Autonomy, freedom, control	182	8.82%	20
Open to opportunities	182	8.82%	26
Fluid flexibility	129	6.25%	25
Make enough money	97	4.70%	25
Genuinely offer flexibility	95	4.60%	23
Organization change	83	4.02%	25
Gender equality is a societal issue	77	3.73%	17
Support systems	60	2.91%	20
Leverage strengths	33	1.70%	13
Not achieved	16	.73%	6

All 27 women who were interviewed mentioned all four categories (see Table 4).

However, only six women felt they had not achieved their goals after leaving a

corporate job. All 27 women mentioned the need to focus on what matters to an

individual, which had the highest quantity of comments. All 27 women mentioned the

need to use their expertise, and it was the second most frequently mentioned

comment. All 27 women mentioned relationships mattered to them, and 26 of the 27

women mentioned that women need to remain open to opportunities. Further

explanations of each meaning unit follow in the next section.

Interview Findings

This section is dedicated to reviewing the rich descriptions of the lived experiences of the women interviewed who left a corporate job and continued to work. It is organized in the four major categories with details around the meaning units as outlined in Table 4. Textural descriptions (what the interviewee experienced) and structural descriptions (how was the phenomenon experienced) are introduced to elucidate the meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). This section concludes with findings on women who have not achieved success.

Category 1: Why women leave voluntarily

Voluntary employee turnover has been studied by academic organizations (Lee et al., 2017) and non-academic organizations (Mahan et al., 2018). However, as the women in this study thought about the phenomenon of *why women leave* a corporate job and look at it in hindsight of what their lived experience was, there were two meaning units which the women in this study expanded upon. In the first meaning unit, 25 of the 27 women talked about an organization change, such as a shift in strategic direction, a reorganization, or a financial crisis. This sentiment is exemplified in a quotation by an interviewee: "I would still be there today if they didn't go through this kind of an upheaval." Women aged 45 to 65, had the most comments on organization change. The second meaning unit is an accumulation of issues, which was mentioned by 23 women and can be summarized by the following interviewee quotation: "It was not so much the job, it was just my whole life." Details of these two meaning units are provided in the next two sections.

Meaning unit 1: Organization change

The meaning unit called *organization change* was created based on the comments women made in this study regarding leaving an organization because something at the company had changed, which caused dissatisfaction. Comments about organization change from 25 of the women who were interviewed resulted in two textural descriptions. Five women identified a *financial incentive*, which was coded as a textural description. A woman who was turning 50 whose pension benefit was changing said, "It was an easy decision for me. They paid me to leave." Surprisingly, they were not all in the 2008 to 2012 timeframe, which was the supposition based on economic conditions in the United States and the fact that the unemployment rate during this timeframe ranged from 5% to 10% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). This was not the experience based on these interviews. With women who chose an exit package, you could almost hear relief: "I'm not quitting. I'm taking the package." Or another woman who said, "I actually took the package because it would have been stupid not to take it." Lastly, "Given the option to either move with them or take a package, I decided to leave the job" was stated by a mid-level manager.

The second textural description, which nine women described, is regarding *new leadership*. In the following quotation, a high-ranking executive said, "I reached the pinnacle of my career and my boss eventually lost his job," and another woman said, "They passed on the reigns to an outsider." It is important to note that women defined

leadership based on their direct manager. In some cases, they were mid-level

managers and in others it was the leaders in the C-suite.

<u>Meaning unit 2: Accumulation of issues</u>
The meaning unit called *accumulation of issues* was created based the comments

women made in the study about disenchantment with an organization happening over

time and due to a variety of reasons. One working mother reflected the sentiment of

accumulation of issues over time: "I deliberated about it for a long time thinking, is

this right for me." Another executive summarized accumulation of issues as, "I

couldn't put it together in the way I wanted to put it together." A mid-level manager

stated the following:

> [W]here I'm at now. I've been looking to move into a director position
> here at my company and have been told for the past few years that I
> cannot do that. I have been denied opportunity because I will not
> relocate…

The younger women (under 40) who left their corporate jobs mentioned more

frequently that it was due to an accumulation of issues (13% of comments compared

to 6% of women over 40).

The most commonly stated reason or textural description for the accumulation of

issues was my *career stalled* (16 women) and is emphasized in this statement from an

executive: "I wasn't getting the traction I wanted from a career perspective." One

structural description emerged from significant statements of 14 women, which was

that there was a *culture difficult to align with my values*. For example, "[a] little bit of

the bros club and that can be a little frustrating. Like they want to go out and drink

beer and I'm like, not really my thing." The passage below is another example:

> I came more face-to-face with some of the most challenging parts of
> the culture of the organization I was in. And in a way that felt, like I
> had to confront the incongruency of what I wanted in an organization
> and in a culture for my workplace…so there was a difference between
> those in a way that was harder to ignore

The next textural description is *reputation*. Interestingly, all six women who

commented on reputation were under 40. A passage from one of the women, who was

mid-career and facing a reputation issue, summarized it eloquently with, "[I] could

not have the career I hoped." Another woman said, "My confidence probably took a

hit. I didn't understand how things led to where I felt like I was [with a damaged

reputation]." Another woman explained, "I had a whirlwind of emotions." One

woman added, "I was very angry about the harassment." The emotions were

described by many women as confused, disappointed, sad, isolated, and hurt. All

three of the African American women mentioned an accumulation of issues as the

reason for leaving the corporate job. More importantly, all three talked about

reputation, whereas only 3 of the 24 white women cited reputation as the reason for

leaving. The issues stated by the three African American women included false

accusation during performance review, unconscious bias, and career limitations due

to one negative interaction with a senior leader.

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The next structural description is women feeling like *I did not matter*. Five women stated this, and again, all were under 40. Keep in mind that women under 40 were twice as likely to mention an accumulation of issues as women over 40. For example, a highly successful woman looking back on her early-career job change mentioned that "No one ever reached out to me. It felt like they didn't care."

A few additional things women in this study talked about were stress, workload, and travel. Particularly regarding travel, all of the women who mentioned travel had children and talked about frequency, global travel, and two specifically mentioned that "[The] 9/11 [attack] was a big event for me." All of these items added to the feeling of I did not matter.

Category 2: What women seek
The category of *what women seek* reflects the comments made by the women about what they were hoping to achieve by leaving a corporate job. Five meaning units of what women seek emerged. The number one meaning unit is *use my expertise*, with all 27 women in this study mentioning this topic most frequently. Women under 40 talked about it less than women over 40 (16% of comments and 23% of comments, respectively). The women talked about expertise in a variety of ways. A woman early in her career talked about her job change: "I didn't want to throw my engineering degree away." Another woman later in her career said, "My training is exactly to be a generalist leader." Across the board, when looking for a new role, the women wanted to build on what they already knew.

The second meaning unit is *relationships matter*, with all 27 women mentioning relationships, such as in this quotation from an interviewee: "Relationships are big for me." To describe what relationships matter means, this comment was made by an entrepreneur: "Relationships that you build when you're working, which become so valuable when you start your own business." In addition, this executive was describing relationships matter in her work: "Who am I working with matters; clients are even just as important." Even career decisions are influenced by relationships based on this mid-level manager: "Familiarity with the people was a big reason I went to the new company." The age group between 25 and 35 shows that relationships matter 75% more than the age group 36 to 65. In summary, women want to use their expertise in relationship with others.

The third meaning unit is *fluid flexibility*, which was mentioned by 25 women. The topic is broad. from "fluidity of energy and spirit, [which enable] the authenticity of person" to that more commonly stated by one interviewee: "I will do this job for as long as they let me because it's super flexible." Fluid flexibility is the core to how many women want to live their lives. "I became a happier person because I wasn't a slave to my desk," remarked one interviewee.

The fourth meaning unit of *autonomy, freedom, and control* was mentioned by 20 women. This title ended up with three words because there was not a consistent

definition. When asking one woman about clarity of these three words, she said, "whatever you want to call that, I want all three." Autonomy, freedom, and control means women want to feel empowered. The details are provided later in this section.

Finally, the fifth meaning unit is to *make enough money*, which was mentioned by 25 women. The topic of money was mentioned by many of the women only when prompted. For example, one individual contributor stated, "It wasn't something that needed to be different than my last company." The statement "I just wanted to have a reasonable income" accurately reflects the sentiment of many of the women.

As shown above, the category of what women seek consists of five meaning units. A definition of each meaning unit was provided as a means of introduction. The following five sections expand on the details for each meaning unit and introduce the textural descriptions and structural descriptions.

Meaning unit 3: Use my expertise
Use my expertise was the number one area of focus for all 27 women. The foremost structural description that emerged is these women said that I *love my work.* While 20 women mentioned loving their work, women over 40 were more likely to talk about it (6% of comments by women over 40 and only 2% of comments by women under 40). The following simple phrases capture the hearts of these women:

- "I'm just living the dream."

- "I loved what I did."

- "I felt energized and excited to go back to learning and to creating."

- "I still very much enjoy what I'm doing."

- "I really love the industry."

- "The type of work I was doing was actually great. I very much enjoyed my work and I very much enjoyed what I did before I took the severance. I love my profession."

Within the structural description of love my work, a critical element was noted by 19 women stating that they wanted to make a difference. All but one of the women used the context of the work they do as making a difference.

> How I define what making a difference is even in those slight interactions that I might have with a person or a client that fills me up in a way that doing an amazing PowerPoint presentation, changing minds and like really getting people to buy in to this new change, which I thought was the making the difference that counted. I'm realizing it's those like micro interactions that are so valuable to me that I'm seeking out more, even if they're less sexy projects or tasks or assignments.

A textural description within use my expertise is reflected in the women wanting work that is *really interesting intellectually*, which was mentioned by 18 of the women interviewed. For example, this statement from a business owner: "While I wasn't entrepreneurial per se, that part of it was really intellectually interesting." The range of examples goes from creativity ("I'm someone who loves a blank piece of paper; I love to create.") to intellectual curiosity ("[W]hen something is of interest or

I see an opportunity, [I not only] grow my own knowledge but support others."). In addition, "I have the freedom if I wanted to work with clinical faculty on just interesting stuff," as this woman described being on the cutting edge of really intellectually interesting work.

Confident in my ability was also important to 16 women and, therefore, was coded as a structural description. There was a surprising age range here; in other words, not only older women talked about confident in my ability, but younger women mentioned confident in my ability as well. A woman in her early thirties spoke about starting her own business: "What I meant was, I know I can do this work and build from there." A woman older than sixty said, "I don't lead with the fact that I'm a woman or that I'm African American…you have to have the prove them wrong mentality." Most of the women's views are reflected in this statement: "I have the confidence in my background and skills." Some even made career choices based on confident in my ability:

> I am more suited to my natural talents. One thing I do feel confident
> about for all of the things I don't is my ability to walk into the
> classroom and speak to a room full of people and close.

The next textural description under use my expertise is the desire to be *continuously learning,* which was expressed by 16 women: "I am a very much get bored easy kind of girl" or "You are constantly learning just to stay on top of the latest technology." This highly successful entrepreneur said, "I was going to learn everything that I

needed to learn. I was going to require them to teach me." In particular, many of the women who own their own businesses talked about continuously learning, as expressed by this entrepreneur: "I learned how to run a business. It was a rude awakening. I had to contract out for some aspects." The statement "There were not a lot of resources, learning a lot, very fast. Flying the plane while we were building it." expresses the steep learning curve these women experienced.

Wanting a *variety of work* was identified by fifteen women, which became another textural description for use my expertise. Typically, the idea was expressed by the interviewees as "keep me engaged and drive the love for what I do." The different types of work that were primarily mentioned by women who started their own business were board work, coaching, consulting, speaking, teaching, writing, and partnership. For example, one solopreneur said, "combining teaching and consulting and do this on my own." One business owner articulated the alignment of the variety of work: "I don't want to do disparate things. I want them to feed each other. So if I'm going to speak, I want to do speaking because it's my natural strength." A variety of work, or methods of working, "is a way of replacing traditional business development or selling" as expressed by this entrepreneur.

Meaning unit 4: Relationships matter
The second meaning unit within the category of what women seek is relationships matter. This quotation by an interviewee is an illustration of the importance of relationships: "I've always felt that the people I worked with were family, very close

knit and that's been a huge driver throughout my career." More specifically, the

desire to work with *amazing people* was stated by 24 of the 27 interviewees and

became a textural description. Amazing people refers to co-workers, "working with

amazing people, the variety of work that they keep me engaged and drives the love

for what I do." The manager relationship seems to be important and quite complex, as

stated by one mid-level manager: "just being in her presence can be really magical."

Not only is it the reason women leave jobs—"I mean that the boss was certainly the

biggest loudest in your face issue"—but also the reason women stay: "manager is

very important in your career, I just am so grateful for him because he totally changed

my life." In addition, there is a fear about a shift in work life balance when a manager

changes: "something that may change under my new manager; my supervisor

empathized but he could only hold the line so long." Since many of the women teach,

students were also mentioned.

> I remember receiving a thank you note from one of my students and I
> remember being in my office you know, at the accounting firm at the
> time and just thinking, Oh, this is what it's all about. And I think from
> that point on I was pursuing opportunities to do teaching full time.

Mentoring and sponsorship are also included in relationships with amazing people.

This includes being a mentor: "I love mentoring those coming into the field," or

"These are the women I love supporting." Also included is being a mentee: "I had a

good mentor. Our general counsel and so yeah, I felt like I was well regarded, and I

was on a good track." The women interviewed talk about the importance of this

mentee/mentor relationship: "[people] should find someone to mentor that doesn't

look like them" and "make strong connections with people who will help pave the way for that." The following quotation is from a senior level executive:

> Can I, can I bounce this off you, I need some advice. And there are people I turn to for business problems and personal problems. But they're definitely people and you know, you know, if there's someone you're talking to that you admire, that you look up to, they can be your mentor for you without you having to label it that way

Only three African American women volunteered for this study. With this limited data, there was still a trend of commonality in their descriptions. All three stated relationships matter and, more specifically, that they wanted to work with amazing people.

Eleven women talked about the need to connect with *like-minded* people which is a structural description. The following are some typical statements from a solopreneur: "One of my close friends is a very successful consultant doing this very similar work," or "Try to connect with other like-minded people for lunch, coffee, whatever. Find women who are successful doing the things they'd like to do in a way they'd like to do it". Women who experience being the only woman on a team also talk about the importance of like-minded people:

> It's my tribe of people, my support network, my mentors that I have are not necessarily formally defined as a mentor. They're people that I look up to and I admire. And they might be in totally different career paths.

As identified in the McKinsey *Women in the Workplace 2019* study, the tendency is for these women to have a sense of belonging (Thomas et al., 2019). One woman was struggling with the sense of belonging because she is the only working mother on her team:

> They literally don't have the responsibility that I have when I get home to take care of other people. I'm like socially isolated from the team. I can't tell them like you guys wasted an outrageous amount of time.

Another example of a mid-level manager also identified the positive side of finding out she was the only female manager:

> I found out I was the only female manager across the entire organization. If I have moments where it feels intimidating and I have moments where it feels empowering, I have this moment where I, I walked into this room and it was all men, so it was not just my team is all men and I was the only woman. And I realized the great thing is when I walked in, everybody knew who I was.

One of the women was also surprised early in her career that a female partner in a service organization reached out to her during the recruiting process. It made a difference in her decision to take the job to have like-minded people in the new company.

"I pursue relationships, healthy and symbiotic relationships." This quotation is by a business owner that reflected the textural description of 11other women on *networking*. Another business owner defined networking as "long term, sustainable, authentic relationships that allow you to survive the ups the down." Networking was seen as, "I have to build relationships and be constantly meeting new people for

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business development purposes." Although all three quotations represented seven

business owners, networking was also mentioned by two women within corporations

about building relationships across the company for both effectively working and

career development.

Meaning unit 5: Fluid flexibility
Women under 40 were more likely to discuss the meaning unit of fluid flexibility than

women over 40 (7% and 4% of comments respectively). The importance of *work-life*

balance was stated by 15 women but notably just as likely to be stated by women

with children as women without children to create a textural description. It was also

stated frequently with sarcasm: "Well, I've learned that work-life balance doesn't

exist. I wish it did." This sentiment is shared with Kossek et al. (2017) with the newly

coined phrase of *work-family perspective* (2016). Work-life balance is important in

career choices, as expressed by one woman: "I'd say that at least 30% of my decision

[to take a new role] was based on what I knew about their work-life balance [at the

new company]." More practically, one woman said, "I can do this. As long as I can

still get my kid on and off the bus." It is the simple things for working mothers, for

example, "I was able to after a few months to go part-time in that job so that I could

just get that one-hour extra sleep and function during the day." Also noteworthy is

that a few women, in fact, talked about the importance of meeting the company

needs: "women have to be flexible to meet company needs." In the final analysis, the

women have the need for work-life balance and are willing to be flexible to meet the

needs of the company while desiring the corporation to offer it in return.

The most intriguing concept was the definition of fluid flexibility, which, as a textural description, means *working when, where and how I want*. This was stated by 14 women with a much stronger need for women with children than without (4/5 ratio), as articulated by this working mother as a reason for leaving her corporate job; "because I was looking for a path where I could continue working but working a little bit more with a little bit more flexibility." Fluid flexibility and, more particularly, working when, where and how I want apply whether you work for a corporation as stated by this mid-level manager: "I needed and wanted flexibility; it is the most important thing." A similar sentiment is expressed by this individual contributor: "[I needed] work flexibility to…come and go as I pleased." Fluid flexibility was also defined by this solopreneur as, "doing what I want to do when I want to do it and taking on the work that I want to take on and not doing the work I don't want to do." The concept of fluid flexibility is more than part-time, more than flex-time; it is a new way of working or really living, as stated by this executive: "No one has an office; it's just an airport lounge space." One emerging trend is working from home: "Working from home includes reducing my commute, not get[ting] up, get[ting] dressed, get[ting] on the train and get[ting] into the city every single day." In any of these cases, it leads to "I am happier and more relaxed. I am way, way more relaxed."

Family friendly as a structural description is quite different from work-life balance, as 12 women pointed out. Family friendly means it "felt like I had support as a working

mom." And, more specifically, when "child care [is] integrated with work." A good example of what it feels like to work in a family friendly environment was described as follows: "It's helped me create a family way that we integrate our work and our life, [to] integrate my work-life balance, because people know lots about me and my family as well." Furthermore, one woman emphasized the importance of the role of your manager in the ability to have fluid flexibility: "My boss said, you don't need to enter that in the system. You work plenty of hours. You just work when you can and you know, keep your calendar up to date and that's all you need to do."

Lumping all these fluid flexibility concepts together would yield a very different outcome. Work-life balance is important to all women, fluid flexibility is important to all, but hyper important to working mothers, and family friendly only matters to women with children.

Meaning unit 6: Autonomy, freedom, control
In this study, 13 of the 27 women interviewed chose to *start my own business* which is the first textural description for the meaning unit of autonomy, freedom, control. One business owner reflected, "then I chose the terror of entrepreneurship over the sanctity of corporate life." In addition, this executive-turned-business-owner stated, "[The] best thing I ever did career-wise was starting my own business." One of the compelling reasons for start my own business asks, "This whole idea of going and working for somebody else, why would I go start over someplace else?" Many of the women did acknowledge how difficult it was to start my own business: "again, it

really is hard for me." However, a majority—9 of the 13 of these entrepreneurial

women—spoke about how "pride…comes with being a part of starting something

from scratch and seeing it grow and move," along with "proving to myself that I

could achieve the unachievable."

The word *control* is important as a textural description, used by 12 of the 13 women,

and was most associated with the ability to *control my own schedule*: "I loved the

freedom to set my own schedule after so many years of the corporate grind." Many of

the women also revealed the sentiment, "[I] just wanted more control of my life."

This is reflected in the following quotation, expressed by one of the interviewees:

"You have to schedule your downtime, your off time, your hours that you work, [and]

put what's important to you in the plan."

With autonomy comes the freedom to *make my own decisions,* according to 11

women: "I have the flexibility to do the things that I know are important and forget

about all the noise that's not." One woman, who moved from one corporate job to

another, was able to find freedom:

> I am essentially the manager. I've nobody to tell me, having control of
> you, of your choices and your decisions and who you are. Nobody to
> make the decisions that I believe are in the best interest for the team
> members, the department as well as the company.

Make my own decisions as a textural description seemed separate from the structural

description of *be my own boss* to seven women. One entrepreneur talked about be my

own boss, which allowed her the flexibility to "reward my people based on what I felt like was more than just merit." A solopreneur expanded her thoughts on be my own boss: "It sounds dramatic, but I felt liberated from that overwhelming sense of responsibility I've been dragging around for probably four or five years." The evolving gig economy is an enabler to autonomy, freedom, control and, specifically, be my own boss. "I don't think there's overqualified. I think there's short learning curves," interestingly elucidated by one interviewee about the challenge that highly educated and professional women face.

Meaning unit 7: Make enough money
Money was mentioned by 25 of the 27 women, but half the comments came after being prompted. For example, "Money is needed, but not in my top 5 motivators." As a structural descriptor, *money is not what drives me* was stated by 12 of the 27. One solopreneur stated, "I cut my cost of living by 1/5 [in the first year on my own]. Year two I am making the same amount [as] before [I] left [my] corporate job." Another woman stated more profoundly, "Do what you enjoy. Then make the money." Another comment, "Money is clearly a tool for me," emphasized the role money plays in her world as a business owner.

However, this does not mean money is not important to these women, as evidenced by this humorous excerpt: "I am not opposed to making a lot of it." It is about something more personal, as one solopreneur said, "I want to make more money and work less," or almost the exact same wording from another solopreneur: "My goal is

to work less and make more." This quotation sums up the attitude of most of the

women about money is not what drives me: "If I have to think about the money in

order to stay motivated for something, then it's the wrong work."

Also, women have different financial positions, such as being the primary

breadwinner or needing financial stability. "At the time I was divorced, so to have

benefits so that I could still have health insurance for myself and my children, money

is really important to me." A couple of women expressed the financial struggle,

which is reflected in this quotation:

> I have a difficult relationship with money. This is a big one for me
> because I've never come close to earning as an entrepreneur what I
> did, especially in my final couple of years, in corporate. Although I
> still don't have doubt that I'm capable of doing that as an entrepreneur.

Clearly, being *paid fairly* was important enough to 12 women to become a textural

description. One woman who moved to a new corporate job emphasized, "I think I

deserve to be paid what my experience and credentials are worth, regardless of

whether I want to be in an office five days a week or two days a week or zero days a

week." Another corporate woman said, "I felt that I was being fairly compensated and

had good benefits. I was happy with that because it completes my life." The mindset

of solopreneurs is articulated slightly differently: "I appreciate the direct impact of

how much I make now has a direct tie to how hard I work and perform, which equates

to how well the business is doing." As shown above, make enough money is relative

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to each woman in the study with the importance of being paid fairly while knowing money is not what drives me.

Category 3: Enablers for success

This section of findings evolved from the interview questions both on career journey and advice to women to form one category. The *enablers for success* reflect what women consider to be those elements of their life that allowed them to achieve their goals. The first meaning unit was stated by all 27 women suggesting *focus on what matters to you*. This meaning unit had the most comments, which made it difficult to summarize the category into one significant statement or meaning unit, but through the analysis, the significant statement emerged and is reflected in this quotation: "kind of get centered and really focus on what matters most." The following quotation takes it a little further into action: "[by] figuring out actually what you want and then ask for it," and "[by] being very intentional about what's really important to you and then figuring out how to make that happen."

All except one woman mentioned the importance of the meaning unit being *open to opportunities*. One woman stated the reactive form of being open to opportunities: "I was being developed and people were giving me opportunities to grow." Another woman emphasized the proactive nature of being open to opportunities: "[I was] tuned into being alert to opportunity." Finally, the journey was articulated by one woman: "So right now I feel like I'm in that phase where there are all these possibilities, but I do have to pick one and work towards that. It's been a journey that

I would not have imagined." The older women in the sample set, women ages 45 to 65, were 34% less open to opportunities than the rest of the age groups.

The third and final meaning unit of enablers for success is the importance of *support systems*. All twenty women who mentioned support systems had children. The need for support systems for family is reflected in this comment: "Every day when I leave work, my life gets harder." The need for support systems at work is identified in this statement: "I need a number two of my choosing." In summary, this quotation reflects a common theme, especially for those women who equally prioritized work and family: "If you want to do big career things and have a life, whatever that outside life is, you've got to figure out where are you going to get [support] from." Women ages of 36 to 45 ranked needing a support system to be successful as the most important.

Meaning unit 8: Focus on what matters to you
When focusing on what matters to you, 13 women mentioned *shifts in priorities,* which creates a textural description. The majority of the shifts were due to women having children: "[I was seeking] the lifestyle that I needed and wanted for my kids and me and family." However, not all women shift priorities due to children alone, as expressed by one woman's "personal crisis of purpose."

The need to *take a break* from the career pressure was expressed by 11 women all 11 women had children to form the next structural description. A woman who worked a

corporate job mentioned maternity leave was "a good time for me to take a break anyway," and another said, "[Maternity leave was a] time to reassess and figure out what I needed." One working mother expressed, "I need time to take a step back and think about what I am doing," which sums up the sentiment of the women who stated the need to take a break.

Eleven women mentioned the importance of *ask for what you want,* which represents a textural description of focus on what matters to you. Two of the women expressed the need to ask by stating, "If they want us, they're going to accept [what you ask for]. If they don't, move on. It's okay because somebody will give you exactly what you want." Likewise, "We're going to ask and be unapologetic about it. Because that's what men do." A few of the women heeded a warning, "Accept both the responsibility and the consequences of asking," which leads us to the next description.

Nine women expressed the need to make *tradeoffs for family decisions*, forming another textural description, like this late-in life mother who expressed, "That was the first mom decision I ever made." However, when making the tradeoffs for family decisions, one woman expressed concern for her career, "I knew that it was the right thing to do. I knew that it was best for my family, but not necessarily best for my career." Not only were these 11 women all in the $150,000 or more range in pay, but they all had children.

One caveat that was mentioned eight times to form a textural description is that women need to *perform* effectively in their role as a prerequisite to earning career options. "I think it's, it's showing them that you are reliable and capable and a strong performer and worth whatever it is that you're asking for..." was expressed by one interviewee. A further explanation gets the heart of the matter of the need to perform:

> But also…I have 25 plus years of experience and so I'm again a valuable asset with a lot of knowledge. I don't know that I would have been able to kind of find my way to this type of working three years out of college. I feel like there is a lot. And like even in my company, the folks that do work in an office tend to be the super junior people who do need to kind of lean on one another and are still learning from one another and need a little bit more accountability perhaps. And again, I'm not suggesting that those people don't have flexibility because they can and do, but often the younger people choose to go into an office because of the camaraderie and all the things that I don't need anymore.

Women in pay group of $150,000 or greater stated more frequently the importance of the need to perform effectively in their current role, to be considered for fluid flexibility, and other opportunities.

A surprising finding is that 11 women stated *believe in myself*, which was coded as a structural description of enablers to success. There are a few things at play: motivation—"always been really motivated"; confidence—"I have the confidence in my background and skills"; and determination—"I just learned my way through it," or "It was really up to me to make it work." The three concepts of motivation,

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confidence, and determination all leads up to self-efficacy, which will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

Meaning unit 9: Open to opportunities
A common significant statement, which created the first structural description, was used by 14 women, *I did not expect…* and then fill in the blank about being open to opportunities. For example, "I did not expect to be sucked back into work perfectly." One solopreneur said, "I cannot believe how much work has come my way." Very related to this topic was the advice many women gave about being open to opportunities, such as, "[You will be] taking some twists and curves and you know, detours and laterals and doing different things." In other words, I did not expect is precursor to being open to opportunities.

Believe in something bigger was discussed by 11 women, which created the other structural description for being open to opportunities. Believe in something bigger came across with slightly different perspectives, such as "push from the universe" or "I'm a strong person of faith, it was all divine intervention." One of the younger women showed her deep awareness: "We have an intuition. It's like a God-given gift to women and you need to listen." For the most part, believe in something bigger meant the women in the study understood their career success was contingent on more than their own hard work and desire.

Career growth was mentioned by eight women directly relating to remaining open to

opportunities*,* which became a textural description. One area of concern expressed by

the women in the study when choosing to take a new job was growth potential—for

example, the option of moving up and taking on greater roles and responsibilities, as

well as the opportunity to manage people or manage a team's work. One executive

interviewee gave advice about career growth and encouraged women to be open to

opportunities with "very high expectations, in a fast-paced environment, which gosh,

served me well just over the course of my career." One area of concern expressed by

the women in the study who are solopreneurs defined career growth as, "I have to get

enough practical experience in that field that I can marry it up with my business

experience and pitch myself to the world kind of at the level that I think I belong."

Whether the women were inside the corporate environment or had left the corporate

pipeline, career growth meant to continue to advance in your chosen career path.

Take informed risks goes together with career growth as a textural description

mentioned by seven women relating to remaining *open to opportunities*. There were

several significant statements on the attitude of being fearless as part of take informed

risks:

> Really understand who you are and be willing to own that and be
> willing to ask for what you need in order to fulfill all of the greatness
> that's already in you. You cannot be afraid. You have to be fearless
> about that.

Take informed risks also encompasses a few women mentioning wanting more. A succinct quotation from an executive about her wondering if she had "one move left, one more move in me" reflects the internal turmoil of take informed risks. All these comments reinforced the desire of, "I wish someone had told me to be less risk averse."

Meaning unit 10: Support systems

A common significant statement for the meaning unit of support systems, which created the first structural description, was used by 13 women when describing the need for a *supportive partner*. One executive stated, "I was clear that I needed the certain supports around me that allowed me to fulfill my family responsibilities in a way which I felt the quality was there. And fulfill my professional responsibilities." Most of the women who mentioned supportive partner had children (11 of 13). For example, "a life partner who allows you that opportunity to be flexible," or a woman with children said, "I made a deliberate decision to choose a good human being to marry." A summary of that partnership of a supportive partner includes the following:

> I honestly couldn't do my career now without my husband's support [be]cause I travel at least 50% of the time now for my job. So he has to help the kid with homework, get him where he needs to be, all his activities and school and all of that.

Two textural descriptions emerged for support system. The first is the need for *full-time support at home* was mentioned by nine women. It is important to note all nine women had children, were in the highest-level roles, and made the most money. Most of these women had nannies (5) as stated by one woman: "So I intentionally sought a

live-in nanny so that it would allow us and allow me to continue to do all the things that I already had been doing." This creates an outstanding question: Is full-time support at home an enabler to success or a requirement of success?

Technology (for example, internet, smart phone), the second textural description, was only mentioned by seven women in conjunction with support system. An interesting twist evolved in this statement: "I probably could have that work-family balance at some level in this organization because the technology allows both sides with the technology of what your kids have to connect with you and work." It was not just about access to work, but access to home in a less disruptive manner.

Category 4: Advice to companies

For the category of *advice to companies*, 25 women provided input. The mindset of the women in this study can be represented in this statement from one executive: "Men and women working together effectively could create such great leadership of our companies and corporations. We have to respect and learn from one another." Three meaning units emerged and are highlighted in this section.

Meaning unit 11: Gender equality is a societal issue
Gender equality is a societal issue was mentioned by 17 women for the first meaning unit of advice to companies. One woman strongly recommended companies need "understanding and awareness of the history of corporate America as it relates to women in the workplace." This textural description was voiced by eight women with

the need for *equal pay and representation*. One woman in this study articulated the following:

> I think unless male executives are leaving early to pick their kids up from school, women will pay a cost for that and they'll pay it in their own mind and they'll pay it in the way organizations perceive them and react to them.

Gender equality is a societal issue reinforces the earlier meaning unit of fluid flexibility and the difference between women with and without children in the statement, "I think there is so much of that [focus on women with children] there is sort of an exclusionary, like if you're not a mother then you don't have any problems because you're basically a dude." Another woman added, "There's still a bazillion ways that being a woman gets you different treatments and different responses." As these two women were reflecting, gender equality as a societal issue is beyond women with children—it is about equality in general.

A small segment of the women in the study (5) emphasized that many of the needs that women expressed applies to *all genders*, which created a textural description. One mid-level manager recommended, "I would advise companies to have…more flexibility because you have people that know the company, have history, fit in with the corporate culture. They just want a little more time off. And it goes for men too." The structural descriptions for gender equality as a societal issue emphasize how to achieve gender career equality. The gender issue is particularly important, and *men*

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need to have a voice in the movement towards gender career equality as expressed by

this woman:

> I say to the men that they are just as important in this fight because
> they can be champions too. Their voice matters too for them to bring
> in women into the conversation, give women that seat at the table.
> Because I certainly would not have gotten where I am today without
> certain men championing me just as much as women champion me.

However, as one woman warned and 6 others agreed, don't just listen to the men,

listen to what women say: "People cry before they leave and companies are not

hearing those cries and they're not acting on the cries." Another woman made the

connection to society in a very specific way: "I think the issue is when you think of it

as a woman's issue, it then becomes, 'Oh, I'm doing her a favor so that she can be

home when her kid gets home from school.'" In summary, "the problem is embedded

in our cultural behaviors," emphasized by an executive in this study.

Meaning unit 12: Leverage strengths
The second meaning unit of advice to companies was declared by thirteen women.

Companies need to *leverage strengths* and quit thinking about gender:

> [M]en when they see a job posting, if they meet most of the criteria
> they'll apply. But women won't unless they meet all the check boxes.
> So I think that there's something that needs to be done with how we
> recruit and how we write our job postings. Sometimes I feel like these
> job postings, you're looking for that, we call it the purple squirrel …
> this person [who] doesn't exist.

A few women mentioned the female leadership advantage in their interviews. One

entrepreneur succinctly stated what it means to leverage strengths: "Recognize the

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value that women often bring, the unique value that they bring to leadership and to problem solving and project team."

A textural description was added because ten women encouraged companies to *offer opportunities* for women. As one interviewee said, "Helping people see a path to success in industry that excites them is paramount for sustaining high-performing talent." This means being purposeful and proactive to offer opportunities to women.

The second textural description is to *provide career development*. An HR professional in the study stated, "Companies need to create pools of high potential talented individuals who are interested in moving up and training them and mentoring them and championing for them." Seven women wanted to see companies be more purposeful about career development opportunities being provided to women.

Meaning unit 13: Genuinely offer flexibility
Genuinely offer flexibility was stated by 23 women as represented by this quotation from a working mother: "You need to be more flexible and offer more flexibility in working arrangements for working parents." Or the flipside from another working mother: "[Companies] kind of want to offer it, but they definitely…were penalizing people who took advantage of it." Here is an example from a mid-level manager's experience:

> I think that there are a variety of reasons for [a stalled career], but I
> was just not around as much. I was not around as much as people were
> around and the days when I was there I was leaving at 5:15 to catch

the train and I think that definitely played into a way I feel we were penalized, those who took advantage of flex.

One interviewee warned, "Don't go part time because you're going to end up working that much anyway. You're better off keeping a full-time position and sneaking out when you can." A similar sentiment was given by other women in the study about part-time as a flexibility option which emphasizes the need for companies to genuinely offer flexibility.

Reinforcing the meaning unit of focus on what matters to you, the suggestion or textural description from six women in this study is that companies realize this and *ask candidates what they want*. Advice from one woman: "Don't feel like you need to treat everyone equally because everyone's experiences aren't equal."

Along the same line, seven women stated in order to *genuinely* offer flexibility, companies must *trust women to perform*, which forms a structural description. One interviewee specified, "I think if you hire the right people, they're invested in their job and they're here to get the work done." As an example, one woman talked about a job share opportunity. "They worked out their schedule. It was on them to coordinate the work."

There is a paradox presented in the final textural description with the need for *consistency, but policies may limit* when addressing individual needs. As expressed

by one woman, "It took everything in me to ask for [reducing my schedule to 4 days].

Companies should treat each employee as an individual case and make efforts to see

what works for that person." As one individual implored, "You might want to think

about your processes and policies," as she was speaking about unintended

consequences of consistency, but policies may limit.

Category 5: Not achieved success
Only six women felt they had not achieved success (yet), which was expressed in

three different ways. Four were because they wanted to do more with their career: "[I

have a] big bucket too that I haven't achieved yet," or "I wish in my corporate job

that I had gotten to the next level of group leadership. Maybe I just wasn't good

enough." Two were financially driven: "I already had a tricky relationship with

money." Two were about the type of work:

> On the downside, what I hadn't anticipated was that between working
> with my old company and teaching at the business school there wasn't
> really any time to do business development. What I hadn't anticipated,
> there wasn't really any urgency to do business development. I didn't
> acquire new customers the way I should have. In hindsight, I would
> say I did not spend enough time marketing.

The category of *not achieved success* has been included, even with a small number of

women, including significant statements about not achieve in order to more

thoroughly represent the horizon of the phenomenon, which is articulated through the

essence in the next section.

The Essence

Following the Moustakas (1994) process for phenomenological research, the essence of the phenomenon is a written summary reflecting the horizon, textural, and structural elements of the phenomenon. After the essence is described, it is presented in Table 6. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of findings.

Women leave companies for two major reasons: organization change and an accumulation of issues. Organization change can lead to financial incentives for women to leave and creates conflicts with new leadership. In all cases, women exit companies because of an accumulation of issues. Primarily, women leave because their career has been irrevocably stalled, and they felt they did not matter to the company. In addition, women leave because the culture of the organization does not align to their values. Unfortunately, some women leave because they are not able to recover from a hit to their reputation.

Once women leave, what they seek in a new working condition does not necessarily align with why they left their corporate job. All women seek to use their expertise. Women want work that is really interesting intellectually because, basically, they love their work. They want to continuously learn. They work with confidence in their ability and seek a variety of work experiences to leverage their expertise.

The very close second condition women seek in their new working condition is positive relationships with amazing people. Relationships with co-workers, managers, and clients matter to women. This includes finding like-minded people to build camaraderie, which often was a challenge in the corporate world when they are the only woman on their team. In addition, women actively pursue the opportunity to build authentic relationships through networking in their new career. It is more than building a business—it is building a mutually beneficial relationship.

The third critical condition for women is seeking fluid flexibility at work. Yes, work-life balance matters to all women and they are willing to work hard to achieve it. However, women with children and/or aging parents have a burning desire to have a more fluid approach to how, when and where they want to work. This includes a family friendly environment where talking about your kids and childcare are integrated into the way they work.

The fourth condition for most women is a sense of autonomy, freedom and control, which can be found in both starting their own business or within a company. It is the desire to control their schedule and make their own decisions. For some, it means being her own boss.

The fifth condition is women need to make enough money. Money is not a primary driver for women; however, it is important that they are paid fairly and can sustain the lifestyle they desire.

In order to be successful, women strongly endorse individuality by focusing on what matters to them. This includes understanding that throughout a career, priorities may shift. Women reevaluate their careers and potentially may need to take a break. Often, when asking for what they want, many women find their manager, in fact, will fight for them. This conversely requires that the effective performance continues. There may be tradeoffs for family related decisions, both in the career and the family.

Ultimately, if you believe in yourself you can create the career you desire. Be open to opportunities and notice when they present themselves. Seek career growth opportunities and they may come when and how you least expect it. Take informed risks with your career. Trust your intuition because most women believe in something bigger than themselves.

In order to be successful, women also know they need a strong support system. For many, that means a supportive partner. For others, that means full time support at home from a nanny. Technology advances are a tool to connect with support system at work and home.

Some women still feel they have not achieved success. Several want to do more with their career. A few women still have not achieved financial goals, while a few are still looking for a better fit with the type of work and leveraging their expertise.

Finally, the women in this study provided advice to companies to help retain women in the corporate pipeline, which may also apply to all genders. Prior to giving advice, women clearly understand that achieving gender career equality is as much a societal issue as it is a business issue. This means companies still need to provide equal pay and move toward equal representation of men and women at all levels within the organization. We know we will get there faster if men have a voice in the movement towards gender career equality in tandem with leaders listening to what women have to say.

Another piece of advice from women is to leverage strengths instead of focusing on differences. This means women are offered opportunities and companies proactively identify opportunities based first and foremost on strengths and expertise, not gender. In addition, companies need to provide women at the same level of equality as men with career development opportunities, including but not limited to mentoring, coaching, and training.

To wrap up the advice to companies, women advise that companies need to genuinely offer flexibility. This means asking job candidates and existing employees what they

want in their career—not just every once in a while, but consistently. Simultaneously,

companies need to evaluate antiquated policies that limit opportunities for women.

Finally, when women take advantage of the flexible working policies, trust women to

perform.

Summary of Findings

To summarize the horizon and major themes captured by the women in this study,

Table 6 shows the relationship to all the findings identified in Chapter 4. When

analyzing the data, all meaning units have at least one textural description. However,

not all meaning units resulted in a structural description. The reason for the lack of

corresponding structural descriptions was based on coding of the responses the

women made. Common significant statements did not always emerge to create a

structural description.

Table 6. The Essence of the Phenomenon of Women Leaving Corporate Jobs

Category		Meaning Unit		Textural Description	Structural Description
1.	Why women leave	1.	Organization change	Financial incentive New leadership	
		2.	Accumulation of issues	Career stalled Reputation	Culture difficult to align my values I did not matter
2.	What women seek	3.	Use my expertise	Really interesting intellectually Continuously learning Variety of work	Love my work Confident in my ability
		4.	Relationships matter	Amazing people Networking	Like-minded people
		5.	Fluid flexibility	Work-life balance Work when, where, how I want	Family friendly
		6.	Autonomy, freedom, control	Start my own business Control my own schedule Make my own decisions	Be my own boss
		7.	Make enough money	Paid fairly	Money is not what drives me
3.	Enablers for success	8.	Focus on what matters to you	Shift in priorities Ask for what you want Tradeoffs for family decisions Perform	Take a break Believe in myself
		9.	Open to opportunities	Career growth	I did not expect

Category	Meaning Unit	Textural Description	Structural Description
		Take informed risks	Believe in something bigger
	10. Support systems	Full-time support at home Technology	Supportive partner
4. Advice to companies	11. Gender equality is a societal issue	Equal pay and representation All genders	Men need to have a voice Listen to what women say
	12. Leverage strengths	Offer opportunities Provide career development	
	13. Genuinely offer flexibility	Ask candidates what they want Consistency, but policies may limit	Trust women to perform

In Chapter 5, three areas of contribution are discussed in the gender career equality literature, including how women in particular are affected in the workplace by self-efficacy, self-determination theory, and a nuanced view of work life balance. To complete the study, suggestions for further implications for research and practice are provided in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter Overview

The first section of this chapter sets the stage for the discussion with a restatement of the problem, summary of the methodology, and a synopsis of the findings. In addition, a brief introduction of the discussion is provided. The next three sections detail the discussion.

Setting the Stage

Based on the literature review in Chapter 2, much is known about the 85% of women who remain in the corporate pipeline and much is known about voluntary employee turnover. However, little is known about the aftermath and career progress of the 15% of women who voluntarily leave a corporate job. The purpose of this study is to gain insight from these women on how to achieve gender career equality. The research question for this study is "Why do women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what do they seek in their next role?"

This qualitative study has a constructivist worldview using phenomenon-driven research methodology. The phenomenon studied is what happened to the 15% of women that left corporate jobs. How did they experience it? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 women. The interviews were coded, and the descriptions were used to create categories (key themes) and meaning units

(collection of significant statements). The culmination is then written as the essence of a common experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The study found that women voluntarily leave corporate jobs either because of an organization change or an accumulation of issues. At work, women seek to use their expertise, to work with amazing people, to have fluid flexibility, and to have autonomy while being paid fairly. However, to achieve their career objectives, women need to focus on what matters to them individually, be open to opportunities, and develop a support system. Finally, the women provide advice to companies to understand gender career equality as a societal issue, to leverage women's strengths, and to create a culture which includes genuine fluid flexibility.

In the next three sections, I explore the three most significant findings from this study. The discussion flows in the order of the research questions. The primary research question for this study seek to answer why women voluntarily leave a corporate job and what they seek. Although the entire study aims to answer this question, the first significant finding answers this question literally. The second significant finding is targeted at answering "To what extent do these women achieve the change they seek?" This discussion is focused on how women define success. Finally, the third significant finding is targeted at answering "How do the interviewees' careers progress?", which is discussed in the context of limiting factors of achieving success.

Match Between Why Women Leave and Advice They Provide

Every interview began by asking for an explanation of what was happening at the interviewee's corporate job prior to leaving, and every interview ended by asking for the advice that these interviewees would give to companies to achieve gender career equality. Each interviewee tended to respond to both questions with the same answer. First, we will explore the responses in context of existing literature on voluntary turnover. Second, we will explore the advice the interviewees gave to companies and how it aligns both to why women leave corporations and the literature on how to retain women.

Turnover nuances

While turnover research identifies career development as the number one reason women leave (Lee et al., 2017; Mahan et al., 2018; Mercer, 2019), women in this study mentioned career development in the context of an accumulation of issues. The point that the women in this study made is that it is not just one thing. It is an accumulation of issues over time. The politically correct answer these women provided their employers was career development. In a nutshell, if the women in this study were able to use their expertise, work with amazing people, have fluid flexibility, have autonomy, and were paid fairly, many would have stayed within the corporate pipeline.

The other primary reason the women in this study specified for leaving an organization is due to changes in the organization where they worked. In the *2018*

Retention Report, the seven reasons for leaving a company that are preventable

include career development, work-life balance, manager behavior, well-being,

compensation and benefits, job characteristics, and, finally, work environment

(Mahan et al., 2018). Customarily, organization change would be considered outside

the preventable reasons. However, if you look more closely, some aspects of

organization change are preventable. For instance, five women in this study took a

package willingly even though other job opportunities existed in the company. With a

little effort of matching what the company offered to the woman's career

development, a turnover could have been stopped. Unfortunately, in all five cases, the

company chose to not offer the job the woman wanted for her career development.

Additional common reasons stated by the women in this study for voluntarily leaving

corporate jobs include poor manager behavior, such as managers clearly being less

supportive of women than male counterparts or as blatant as sexual harassment.

Recently, Schwantes (2018) looked at the type of leaders who retain women and

found that servant leadership or transformation leadership are the winners. This is

consistent with other research findings about how the work environment causes

voluntary turnover due to everyday discrimination and women feeling isolated by

being the only woman in the room (Network of Executive Women, 2018; Thomas et

al., 2018).

Organizations' roles in achieving gender career equality

The advice the women in this study gave for organizations to achieve gender career

equality align with the three enabling factors for a positive organizational climate

related to gender equality researched by Kossek et al. (2017). The three enabling

factors are (a) fairness and nondiscrimination, (b) leveraging talent, and (c) workplace

support. In Table 7, a comparison of responses by women in this study is made to

Kossek et al. (2016) factors.

Table 7. Enabling Factors for Positive Organizational Climate

Kossek et al. (2017) Factors	Study Finding—Why women left corporate job	Study Finding—Women's advice to organizations
Fairness and nondiscrimination	Reputation and Culture difficult to align my values	Gender career equality is a societal issue
Leveraging talent	Career stalled	Leverage strengths
Workplace support	I did not matter	Genuinely offer flexibility

While the responses by the women in this study align with Kossek et al. (2016), the

responses also align to why the women left a corporate job and the advice they would

give to companies. The value to organizations of leveraging women's strengths is

further supported by Eagly and Carli (2003) and Bass and Avolio (1994). Eagly and

Carli (2003) claimed that women are more likely than men to lead in a style that is

effective under contemporary conditions. Their meta-analysis reinforces Bass and

Avolio's (1994) perspective that transformational leadership is where there is a

female leadership advantage because there is consistency with the role and demand

for supportive, considerate behaviors. The women in this study emphasized the need for companies to stop using gender as an excuse for lack of career progression and to recognize the strength standing right in front of them in high heels.

Women in this study talked about the need for workplace support, explaining their needs and how their expertise would benefit the company and literature corroborates this fact. Comments from the women in this study were consistent with Cimirotić et al. (2017), who found that women mentioned the need for support from life partners and workplace support. In the report *When She Rises, We All Rise,* the research showed that "Creating a culture of equality unlocks human potential and uncovers the key drivers of a workplace culture in which everyone can advance and thrive" (Shook & Sweet, 2018, p. 2). Even the need for fairness and nondiscrimination was highlighted in the *UN Women Annual Report*, which emphasized that equal pay and career gender equality cannot happen easily in an organization full of white men at the top (UN Women, 2018). Workplace support is required by men and women, and those in leadership positions in the corporations need to listen and respond to the needs of women in the workplace in order to achieve gender career equality.

What Women Seek Is All About "Self"

The second significant finding is targeted at answering the question, "To what extent do these women achieve the change they seek?" This discussion concentrates on how women define success by focusing on what matters personally. Alignment to existing theories helps to extend the understanding of what women personally seek.

Self-determination theory for women

When analyzing the results of what women seek in their new job after leaving a corporate job, it became clear that why women leave is not directly linked to what they seek. What they seek is the ability to use their expertise, work with amazing people, have fluid flexibility, and have autonomy while being paid fairly. Three of these requirements align directly with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, which is concerned with human motivation and the conditions for enhancing an individual's experience. Table 8 highlights the alignment amongst this study, self-determination theory, and the business pop culture book *Drive,* which translated motivation theory into every day practice (Pink, 2011). *Drive* is included in this comparison because it is a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and it has reinforced self-determination theory by drawing on four decades of scientific research on human motivation (Pink, 2011).

Table 8. Self-determination Theory Comparison

Study	Requirement #1	Requirement #2	Requirement #3
Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	Competence	Autonomy	Relatedness
Drive (Pink, 2011)	Mastery	Autonomy	Purpose
What happened to the 15% (Karesh 2020)	Use my expertise	Autonomy, freedom, control	Relationships matter

The conditions that foster a positive process of self-motivation and personal integration include competence, relatedness, and autonomy. While this study finds similar results to Ryan and Deci (2000), the findings are nuanced in the context of gender career equality.

Competence
According to Ryan and Deci (2000), competence includes perceived competence or the belief that you can do something and have a feeling of competence because you have successfully faced a similar challenge in the past. Feeling competent comes from positive feedback about performance, rewards, and interpersonal communication (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The women in this study referred to using their expertise, which includes the concept of competency. This encompassed having really interesting and intellectually stimulating work as well as the desire to continuously learn and stay on the cutting edge of their field. Many openly talked about having the confidence to do the work, based on expertise and experience, in conjunction with the passion of loving the work. The findings in this study aligned with a case study conducted by Cimirotić et al (2017) of management accountants in which the women highlighted said that what they had to offer was professional expertise. In addition, Kossek et al. (2017) posited an enabling factor to achieve gender career equality is the need to leverage talent, which, at the individual levels, means the individual perceives that they are able to contribute both skills and knowledge and they have a congruous fit with the work. Given these points, the nuance of adding what the women said in this study about using their experience as in relates to career

development could support the findings in the *2018 Retention Report* that the number one reason for voluntary turnover is the desire for career development (Mahan et al., 2018).

Autonomy

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), autonomy means having a choice or an opportunity for self-selection. However, both autonomy and competence must be present to be intrinsically motivated. The women in the study talked about autonomy, freedom, and control together as an interrelated entity. Freedom came from choice or making your own decisions. Control came from being able to manage your own schedule. Autonomy appeared in a variety of ways including starting your own business and being your own boss. The unbiased data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.-b) on women starting businesses is a little old. The new data is due out in December 2019. However in 2016, they saw an increase of 2.8% in women owned employer firms in the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). The women in this study helped support this positive trend with 14 of the 27 women starting their own business specifically for autonomy, freedom, and control.

Relatedness

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), relatedness means positive interpersonal relationships, which bring a sense of security. The feeling of relatedness must be present for women to flourish and be intrinsically motivated. In this study, the women described relatedness in the significant statement "relationships matter to me." Relatedness in this study is described as working with amazing people, from co-

workers to bosses, from direct reports to mentors. Notably, women in this study described needing an outlet to connect with like-minded people either at work or outside of work through networking activities. Tharenou et al. (1994) found that women were highly affected by career encouragement, including the importance of relationships and the importance of career preference. More specifically, the mentoring relationship was also supported by the women in this study in the concept of relatedness. Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) revealed a critical finding in their study on the process of achieving gender career equality, which is the presence of mentoring early in a woman's career.

The finding in this study of women choosing to leave due to new leadership is another aspect of relatedness. This finding is corroborated by the leader-member exchange theory, in which Northouse (2016) recapped the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers. The importance of creating leader-follower relationships can be identified by the information, influence, confidence, and concern by the leader for the follower and the subsequent productivity, dependability and involvement of the follower (Northouse, 2016). Mahan's (2018) study reinforced the importance of the leader-follower relationship with special emphasis on thwarting turnover by creating a positive and productive relationship with your manager. In short, as the women in this study would say, relationships matter.

Self-efficacy may be the missing link

"I believe in myself" was a significant statement from the women in this study. It

leads us to self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997) as an individual's belief in her

capacity to engage in behaviors necessary to perform. Self-efficacy is reflected in this

statement from a solopreneur: "You know, I just do have that drive where I want to

succeed." Bandura (1997) would have used the words *perception, motivation,* and

performance to describe a person's sense of ability and capability (1997). Self-

efficacy is an echo of confidence in the ability to regulate one's own motivation,

behavior, and social environment (Bandura, 1997). In this study, a perfect example of

self-efficacy is the mid-level manager who wants to be on a corporate board and

perceives she can do it with the right career progression. One mid-level manager even

made career choices based on confidence in ability:

> [Teaching] is more suited to my natural talents. One thing I do feel
> confident about for all of the things I don't is my ability to walk into
> the classroom and speak to a room full of people.

Bandura (1997) believed women who are self-assured can overcome obstacles, such

as reemployment, which represents the sample in this study.

In this set of 27 women, there were several trailblazers. One of the women was the

first pregnant global leader in a top five consulting firm. One woman was the first

person in the C-suite with a toddler and working partner. Another woman in a

manufacturing company was the first Gen X-er in the C-suite. These women were

more likely to face stereotypic evaluations from their group members based on

studies of the impact of tokenism and being the only woman on a leadership team

(Cohen & Swim, 1995). More importantly and typified in these trailblazing women,

Bandura (1997) believed self-efficacy is a determining factor for overcoming major

obstacles.

Through the statements documented above on self-efficacy, you can hear the essence

of authentic leadership. Authentic leadership is an approach to leadership that

emphasizes building the leader's legitimacy through honest relationships with

followers who value their input and relationships built on an ethical foundation.

Generally, authentic leaders are positive people with truthful self-concepts who

promote openness (Servon & Visser, 2011). To encourage a culture where women

can show up authentically as themselves, both self-determination theory and self-

efficacy explain the self-concepts of authentic leadership.

Unnecessary Barriers

Two barriers were identified by the women in this study while discussing career

progress. The first barrier is in the control of the woman, which is the choice to have

a family and how to prioritize work and family. The second barrier is in the control of

the company, which is how much flexibility the company is willing to genuinely offer

to working mothers. These two barriers are seen as related and unnecessary.

Career preference theory

Six women in this study mentioned that they always wanted both career and family.

However, the struggle to have both continues to be a real issue, as stated by one

working mother: "I didn't win any mom of the year awards." The judgment is obvious in this quotation from another working mother: "[W]hether you want to call it selfish or whatever." Findings in this study unquestioningly support the career preference theory, which states that approximately 60% of women have an adaptive form of work-life balance where they want to work, but not totally (Hakim, 2006). According to Hakim (2006), only 20% of women are work centered, which is consistent with this study and is articulated by an entrepreneur who said, "My work was centered around [my daughter] being included in everything that I did." Given that there were no home-centered women in this study, the general attitude of the interviewees was, "Every person's situation is very personal, and you have to do what's right for you and your family."

While the career preference theory is supported by this research, the women in this study did not see balancing career and family as a limitation but as means to get creative. Every woman with children in this study, whether they were the adaptive style or work centered style, created work-life solutions that were not traditional. Some of the solutions were in their home with full time support from a nanny or a partner, or integration of children into the work, or working remotely, or choosing to be a solopreneur for the flexibility. This does not imply giving up on work or being less committed—this is being exceptionally creative and proactively realistic. What companies have done to address the more adaptive style of women is covered in the next section

Fluid flexibility replaces work-life balance and flex time

The women in this study considered companies offering flexibility to achieve work-life balance as a given, which is consistent with the current findings in the McKinsey *Women in the Workplace* study (Thomas et al., 2019). This finding signifies an already realized societal shift from work-life flexibility as a "gift" from a company for working mothers to a cultural norm, an expectation. In a study about women in IT, the concept of flexibility is emphasized as an important retention strategy to balance the relationship between managing work stress and family responsibility (Armstrong et al., 2007). Women in this study wanted a family-friendly environment which means they can talk about their kids and integrate childcare with the way they work without negative repercussions.

The insight from the women in this study was the intriguing shift from flex time and flexible working arrangements to fluid flexibility. One of the historically common ways of achieving work-life balance was documented by Day and Antonakis (2018) as a tradeoff: "Part-time schedules and breaks from employment lower women's human capital relative to that of men and thereby contribute substantially to gender gaps in pay, advancement, and authority" (p. 249). The women in this study believed companies do not reduce workload with the commiserate reduction in pay, which causes frustration and careers to stall. Kossek and Ollier-Malaterre (2019) found this to be true in a study on how to create sustainable reduce-load work. Based on this inability to reduce the workload when work time is reduced, unsurprisingly, the

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perceptive women in this study said "don't go part time." They suggested figuring out how to work more flexibly, which meant they wanted to continue with the expected workload but accomplish the job when, where, and how they want. The women in this study are not asking for it. They are doing it.

Conclusion

In summary, this study contributes to the literature on gender career equality in three ways. First, the nuance for women in turnover data related to career development in conjunction with understanding that women want to use their expertise, work with amazing people, have fluid flexibility, and have autonomy while being paid fairly. With these needs being met, women might have stayed within the corporate pipeline. Second, understanding both self-determination theory and how self-efficacy allows women to flourish in the workplace provides insight into why women leave the corporate pipeline. Finally, shifting mindsets from seeing work-life balance as a tradeoff between career and family to women creatively gaining alignment between career and family contributes to understanding flexibility in the workplace. In Chapter 6, implications for future research and practice are discussed based on the potential contributions to literature.

Chapter 6: Implications for Future Research and Practice

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I identify implications for future research, which focus on validating the results and learning from the success of creating a culture that includes genuine fluid flexibility. Implications for practice are also presented. A summary of the research is provided to complete this section.

Implications for Research

Implications to extend this research are discussed regarding three topics. First, expanding this study to include men and non-binary genders may enrich the uniqueness of the insights from women. Second, the sample size is addressed. Third, the need to understand fluid flexibility is discussed.

Expansion of genders

Almost every person interviewed in this study asked if the study was being conducted with men. The belief that replicating this study with men relevantly relates to two important factors. First, men need to have a voice in the movement toward gender career equality (Sherf, Tangirala, & Weber, 2017). Given that there are more men in the corporate pipeline from the manager level through the C-suite, men must have a voice in decision making to promote and include women (Thomas et al., 2019). Second, most of the women in this study predicted men would have similar needs. We know this is true for work-life balance. In the U.S., the top-listed reasons for both

male and female voluntary employee turnover, according to the *2018 North America Employee Turnover* study, were personal/family (57%), promotion opportunity (35%), career change (27%), base salary (24%), and job satisfaction (24%) (Mercer, 2019). In the *2018 Retention Report,* the reasons for leaving were similar and identify seven reasons that are preventable, including career development, work-life balance, manager behavior, well-being, compensation and benefits, job characteristics, and work environment (Mahan et al., 2018). Turnover for women was also studied by Lyness and Judiesch (2001), and they were surprised by uncovering that voluntary turnover by both women and men are relatively equal.

When conducting this study with men, it may be beneficial to also do the demographic comparison to see if millennials or non-binary genders change the culture. One woman in the study articulated this issue beautifully:

> I see it in younger people who come through training at organizations I've been training at for years. Men are like, well, I'm not working that schedule. I have to go home and be with my kids. I want to put them to bed. I did hear that come out of a young man's mouth. It's amazing how much it shocks me and then makes me happy. That initial shock is absolutely a part of me. It is shifting, but not enough.

For most American men in their 30s and 40s, it is assumed that men and women are in tandem care for family and children and that the workplace should reflect this (Thomas et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.-a), there has been a slight increase from 2013 to 2018 in the number of hours men engage in household activities from 1.3 daily hours to 1.8 daily hours; interestingly, women

stayed the same at 2.2 daily hours. Glynn (2018) analyzed the data presented in the

time-use data and the results can be summarized that women, in general, spend more

time than men working. Working includes both paid work outside the home and

unpaid work in the home. By studying men, we may be able to see a shift in this

dynamic.

Broaden the sample size

A clear limitation of this study is the sample size. Although the study effectively

achieved saturation (Mason, 2010), a larger sample size would allow for further

analysis. Taking the findings and creating a quantitative approach would allow the

researcher to move beyond description of the phenomenon to identifying supported

trends. In addition, adding a large sample size would allow for more diversity of

thought.

By adding more diverse women to this study, the nuances of the demographics would

become clearer. For example, would the results be different with a more diverse

sample set than with just the three African American women included in this study?

We saw a few trends with the African American women, which were consistent with

all other women, such as the importance of relationships and money not being a key

driver of success. More importantly was the difference in terms of reasons the African

American women left since all three referred to reputation. A larger sample size may

help to solidify the trends and reinforce the importance of intersectionality of race and

gender to break the glass ceiling (King, Maniam, & Leavell, 2017).

Genuine fluid flexibility

Another important focus of further research is to extend our understanding of how companies can take the fluid flexibility that the entrepreneurs in this study found and make it happen in the corporate environment. One executive did find fluid flexibility within the corporate structure through 100% remote working. However, many organizations lack understanding on how to effectively implement work-life policies and interventions or support their workforce's increasing diverse work-life demands and the need for fluid flexibility (Thomas et al., 2019). A study was conducted to validate that flexible work arrangements still resulted in the same level of performance (Bray et al., 2018). If this is the case, why are companies not doing it? A field process study of creating a culture that includes genuine fluid flexibility may unravel the mystery.

Implications for Practice

Three implications for practice based on this research are discussed in this section. First, companies can leverage stay interviews. Second, leadership development programs need to understand the importance of "self." Third, career gender equality needs to be part of the company's overarching diversity and inclusion strategy and workplace practice.

Stay interviews

To begin with, companies need to have a strategic approach to retention (Fox, 2014). A stay interview (i.e., a discussion focused on retaining talent) is a critical element to a retention strategy (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2015). Through the findings in this study

on understanding why women leave companies and what they seek, a stay interview

can be even more powerful by revising the questions and customizing them for the

specific needs of women. The questions recommended by Dr. John Sullivan (as cited

in Fox, 2014) provided in Table 9 have been modified based on findings from this

study.

Table 9. Stay Interview Questions

Sullivan Questions	Revised Questions
Do you feel fully utilized?	Do you get to use your expertise? If not, how else can we take advantage of your talent and interests?
Have you been exposed enough to executives and decision-makers?	Have you had opportunities to develop relationships with executives including mentors?
What frustrates you in your current job?	What challenges do you face in your current role with work-life balance? How can we more flexibly meet your needs?

Kaye and Jordan-Evans (2015) coined the "stay interview" term and concept, which

provides valuable information that can greatly lessen the likelihood that an exit

interview occurs. Through the stay interview process, you develop more committed,

productive, and engaged teams. If the right questions are asked focusing on women's

needs, the stay interview may even be an even more powerful retention tool.

Leadership development programs
Hopkins et al. (2008) provided specific recommendations to organizations and

consultants for assisting women to take control of their own careers by creating

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custom leadership development programs and opportunities. A study by Vinnicombe and Singh (2003) suggests the women-only training should focus on articulating leadership ambition, identifying a woman's leadership strengths, and providing an opportunity to promote women into leadership positions. Gordon and Whelan (1998) contributed to the leadership development literature with a focus on women in midlife and how their needs shift from identity development to work-life conflict and subsequent support needed for retention. With the advice of these scholars in mind, there are two dimensions to leadership development that could be explored in practice that reflects self-determination theory and self-efficacy.

A study by Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) used action research on leadership development to understand adjustments for women, which is needed to overcome gender bias and to build identity. Fitzsimmons et al. would agree based on their finding that process of achieving gender career equality must include the presence of mentoring and leadership development programs early in a woman's career subsequently making up for the lack of some capital acquisition in childhood and it may likely build self-efficacy in the process (2014). One critical component for building self-efficacy is the quality of the feedback, specifically 360-degree feedback, which links to value of relationships (Day et al., 2014). According to Ibarra (2019), the relationship of a sponsor has profound effects in advancing a woman's career because of the improved quality of feedback and the advocacy for woman to obtain the necessary experiences in preparation for advancement in the corporate pipeline.

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Gender career equality is part of diversity and inclusion strategy

The literature review provided in Chapter 2 on gender career equality is difficult to separate from the more comprehensive topic of inclusion. More generally, Nishii (2013) provided the definition of an inclusive environment: "individuals of all backgrounds—not just members of historically powerful identity groups—are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in core decision making" (p. 1754). With this in mind, gender career equality fits within the broader goal of inclusion. The findings from Bajdo and Dickson's (2001) study explain that the strongest predictors of women advancing in an organization are high gender equity practices, which means the organization focuses on inclusion. Findings in the McKinsey *Women in the Workplace* 2019 study (Thomas et al., 2019) lead to the same conclusion that companies, managers, and employees are similarly committed to racial diversity as they are to gender diversity.

Given the literature review on gender career equality and, more broadly, inclusion, the findings in this study may apply to all of humanity and not just women. For instance, self-determination theory and the need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness applies to all of humanity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The women in this study provided significant statements that aligned to Ryan and Deci's (2000) work with *use my expertise*, *autonomy, freedom, control*, and *relationships matter*. Potentially other findings in this study would apply to anyone in the workplace and not just women. In

other words, by focusing on gender career equality, you are not alienating other aspects of diversity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insight on how to achieve gender career equality from the 15% of women who voluntarily left the corporate pipeline and are still working. The study found women voluntarily leave corporate jobs either because of an organization change or an accumulation of issues. At work, women seek to use their expertise, to work with amazing people, to have fluid flexibility, and to have autonomy while being paid fairly. However, to achieve their career objectives, women need to focus on what matters to them individually, be open to opportunities, and develop a support system. Finally, the women provided advice to companies to understand gender career equality as a societal issue, to leverage women's strengths, and create a culture that includes genuine fluid flexibility. The study findings contribute to the gender career equality body of literature.

Appendix A: Consent Form for Interview

To: Potential Interview Participant

From: Angela Karesh

Subject: Informed Consent to Participate in Study

Date: June 24, 2019

Dear: ^^Insert name of whoever is granting you permission to access participants^^

My name is Angela Karesh and I am a PhD student at Benedictine University. I am researching gender career equality. I am particularly interested in these main areas: The focus of the study is to understand what happens to women after they voluntarily leave a corporate job and to what extent they achieve the change they seek. The purpose of the study is to learn from the experience of these women and share the findings to move towards gender career equality.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the interview. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If at any time you do not want to continue with the interview, you may decline. Your time and involvement are profoundly appreciated. The entire interview will take approximately one hour. To maintain the essence of your words for the research, I will record the information. At any time you may request to see or hear the information I collect.

The interview will be recorded and the interviewer will take notes. This is done for data analysis. The recording will be transcribed by the interviewer and kept confidential in a password-protected computer. All individual identification will be removed from the hard copy of the transcript. Participant identity and confidentiality

will be concealed using coding procedures. For legal purposes, data will be transcribed on to a jump drive and transmitted to a Benedictine University faculty member for secure and ultimate disposal after a period of seven years. Dr. Marie Di Virgilio is the Benedictine University faculty member who will secure and ultimately dispose of the information. Her information is at the end of this form.

Excerpts from the interview may be included in the final dissertation report or other later publications. However, under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics appear in these writings. If, at a subsequent date, biographical data were relevant to a publication, a separate release form would be sent to you.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form on the line provided below to show that you have read and agree with the contents. Please return it by email to me at angela.karesh@comed.com. An electronic signature is acceptable.

_____

Your electronic signature above

(If you have problems with the electronic signature please email me at angela.karesh@comed.com.)

Once I receive your signed consent form, I will connect with you to schedule your interview at a convenient time. This study is being conducted in part to fulfill requirements for my PhD program in Values-Driven Leadership at Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois.

The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Benedictine University. The Chair of Benedictine University's Institutional Review Board is Dr. Alexandra Devall. She can be reached at (630) 829 – 6295 and her email address is adevall@ben.edu. The chairperson/advisor of this study is Dr. Marie Di Virgilio. She

can be reached at mdivirgilio@ben.edu or 630-829-2178 for further questions or concerns about the project/research.

Sincerely,

Angela Karesh
Benedictine University

Appendix B: Demographic Form

A. What is your name:

B. What is your email address?

C. When did you leave your corporate job?
2013 to 2019
2008 to 2012
2007 or earlier

D. What was your marital status when you left your corporate job?

o Single	o Married
o Single parent	o Married parent

C. What industry were you in when you left your corporate job (Thomas et al., 2018)?
- o Advanced Electronics
- o Aerospace & Defense
- o Agriculture
- o Automotive & Assembly
- o Capital Projects & Infrastructure
- o Chemicals
- o Consumer Packaged Goods
- o Electric Power & Natural Gas
- o Financial Services
- o Healthcare Systems & Services
- o High Tech
- o Media & Entertainment
- o Metals & Mining
- o Oil & Gas
- o Paper & Forest Products
- o Pharmaceuticals & Medical Products
- o Private Equity & Principal Investors
- o Public Sector
- o Retail
- o Semiconductors
- o Social Sector
- o Telecommunications
- o Travel, Transport & Logistics

D. What was your level when you left the corporate job (Thomas et al., 2018)?
- o Entry level
- o Manager
- o Senior Manager/Director
- o Vice President
- o Senior Vice President
- o C-Suite

E. What is your race (Thomas et al., 2018)?
- o White
- o Black
- o Latina
- o Asian
- o Multiple

F. What was your age when you left the corporate job?
- o Under 25 years
- o 25 to 30 years
- o 31 to 35 years
- o 36 to 40 years
- o 41 to 45 years
- o 46 to 50 years
- o 51 to 55 years
- o 56 to 60 years
- o 61 to 65 years
- o Over 65 years

G. Level of education?

- o Some high school, no diploma
- o High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- o Some college credit, no degree
- o Trade/technical/vocational training
- o Associate degree
- o Bachelor's degree
- o Master's degree
- o Doctorate degree

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Date:

Time:

Place:

Interviewee:

Purpose statement: Women and men enter into the workforce at approximately equal numbers. However, women remain under-represented throughout the corporate pipeline at every level across the globe. It is clear that a majority of women do not opt-out of the workforce (women and men leave companies at the exactly same rate of 15% annually). It is unclear what happens to women after they voluntarily leave a corporate job and to what extent they achieve the change they seek. The focus of the study is to understand what happens to women after they voluntarily leave a corporate job.

Before we begin, take a depth. Place yourself back into the corporate role you left and focus on that experience.

1) Describe what was happening at your corporate job prior to leaving. What were you doing? Thinking? Feeling?
2) What were you hoping to achieve by leaving? In other words, what were you looking for in a new job (moving towards what)?
3) Describe what has happened since you left. What is your career journey? Thinking? Feeling?
4) To what extent have you achieved your goals for leaving your corporate job?
5) In hindsight, what advice would you give?

Thank you for participating in the interview. Once all the interviews are complete, a thorough data analysis will take place and findings will be share prior to publication.

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