

# RETAINING WOMEN

**Across industries, savvy companies develop new ways to attract female employees and keep them on board.**

By Jennifer J. Salopek

Amid the furor and ballyhoo over the “brain drain,” mass worker retirement, and an anticipated labor shortage, some visionary companies have learned that the very place to look for qualified employees is right in their own backyards. They have also seen how seeking to reduce attrition, especially among women, can reverse those negative staffing trends.

these skilled, experienced employees rather than attempting to replace them. When these efforts are extrapolated to global businesses in all sectors, their enormous financial implications become evident.

In brief, CWLP researchers found that fully 52 percent of women in SET careers quit their jobs. For most women, attrition rates spike roughly 10 years into their careers—not coincidentally, the stage at which many women choose to marry or have children. The report goes on to detail the stakes: “Reducing female attrition by one quarter would add 220,000 people to the highly qualified SET labor pool.”

Training and development programs specifically targeted at and designed for female employees are growing in number and creativity, and are customized to industry, professional specialization, and even stage of life.

Earlier this year, the Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP) in New York released

a report titled “The Athena Factor: Reversing the Brain Drain in Science, Engineering, and Technology [SET].” This groundbreaking research report included quantifiable metrics on the numbers of women leaving SET careers, the costs associated with those losses, and a clear business case for retaining

Laura Sherbin is the director of research at the CWLP. “Women represent untapped talent that employers desperately need, and employers have realized that they really need to care. The talent pipeline is not filled only with white males,” she says.

Forty-four companies make up CWLP’s “hidden brain drain” task force, and furnish many of the positive examples cited in the Athena Factor report. From them, Sherbin has assembled a short list of foundational elements that can help companies attract and retain female employees.

**Mentors.** Pairing women with more experienced female employees allows them to “see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

**Sponsors.** This goes one step further than mentoring—Sherbin describes a sponsor as someone who “has faith in the female employee’s ability and is willing to use up chips on her behalf.”

**The tone at the top.** Sherbin emphasizes that employees know, and need to know, whether diversity is on the agenda of their company’s CEO.

**Clear career paths.** “Companies must strive for openness and transparency about what it takes to succeed,” Sherbin says. CWLP researchers found a great deal of inconsistency among companies that claimed to have individual development plans for their employees.

Successful corporate programs directed toward female employees aim their solutions at various stages of the employment cycle.

## Recruitment

At startup in 2003, Rio Tinto Mining Company’s new Hail Creek mine in Queensland, Australia, was designed to be something new and better.

“Our objective was to bring a fresh perspective to this operation, and to establish a corporate culture that was more consistent with the broader community,” says Andrew Woodley, general manager of operations.

The company wanted a better, more balanced team dynamic, believing it to be more conducive to productivity. At

the time, women made up just 3 percent of the total workforce in mining nationwide, but Hail Creek wanted more. The mine launched a dedicated marketing campaign specifically focused on women, emphasizing that no mining experience was necessary.

The campaign touted the mine’s training programs, pleasant residential environment, and flexible work schedules, and drew 1,200 initial applications. The campaign was so successful that a local newspaper ran an editorial cartoon depicting heavy mining equipment carrying hundreds of applications.

Woodley emphasizes that because no mining experience was required, the hiring process focused on other qualifications, such as capability, leadership, and cultural fit. Industry and safety training was intensive, featuring an on-site simulator and a program designed to break down barriers, fears, and misconceptions about mining as a profession. Women now compose 19 percent of the mining workforce at Hail Creek and 24 percent of the professional workforce.

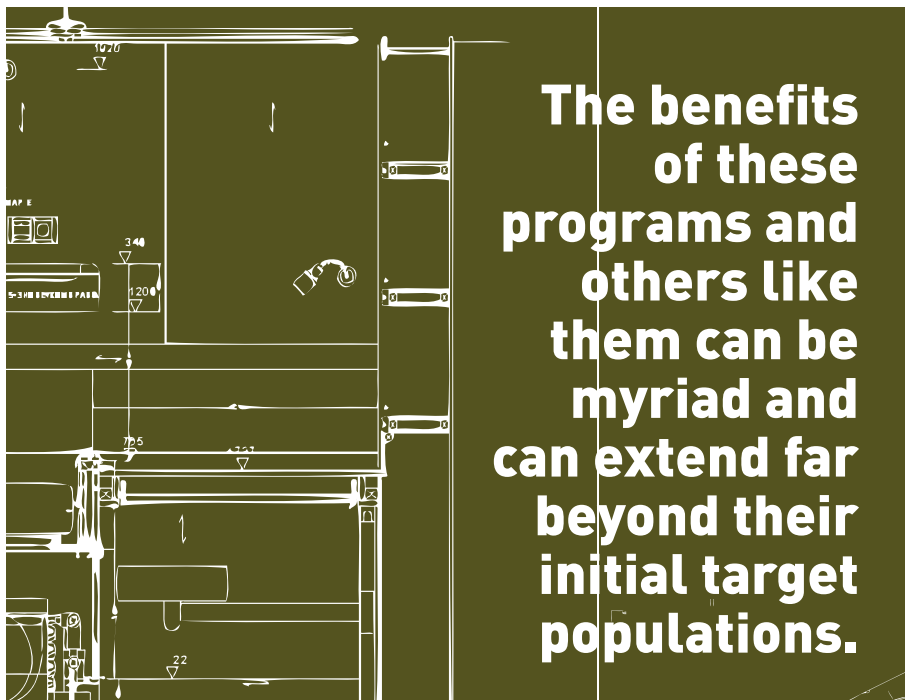
“From a productivity perspective, we have seen a tremendously positive outcome,” Woodley says.

Once the mine attracted its female employees, however, it had to keep them. Hail Creek is more than 100 kilometers from Mackay, the nearest city. Employees work a schedule of three days on, one day off, three nights on, five days off. During their “on” periods, they live and sleep in the mine’s on-site accommodation village, which features private rooms with lockable cupboards for personal items; a gym, a swimming pool, a bar, and tennis courts.

The mine has implemented a job-share arrangement, which permits two employees to split their shifts. The company provides a great deal of support and coaching, and tries to provide opportunities for workers to change roles, make lateral moves, and progress within their careers. Although the mine is relatively young, one female employee has already advanced to a training role.

The program is constantly under revision. “You can’t keep doing what you

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were doing a few years ago and expect a better result,” Woodley says.

### Retention

Although Johnson & Johnson had been experiencing “no dramatic attrition problem,” according to Arisa Batista Cunningham, vice president for global diversity in the comprehensive and surgical care groups, “We still wanted to reduce it.”

The company decided to take a new direction rather than tackling problems by degrees, and an analysis of women’s leadership initiatives showed that its efforts had been ineffective in reaching multicultural women and women of color. A key goal of the revamped program was to provide a reward rather than remediation. Thus, “Crossing the Finish Line” was born.

Launched last year, “Crossing the Finish Line” was developed for high-performing, high-potential multicultural women and women of color. Candidates must be nominated in employee-supervisor pairs by a vice president in their division; though several hundred candidates are nominated each year, the program takes only 40 pairs for its twice-yearly meetings.

The program was developed by interviewing top leaders within Johnson & Johnson for their perspectives on success factors, landmines, and signs of success as an employee advances in the company. It is designed as a two-and-a-half-day dialogue and project assignment in which the female participants take part in open conversations with their supervisors and with executives including the CEO and vice chair of the company.

“This program helps us identify women who should be given new opportunities or stretch assignments,” says Cunningham. “It sometimes took longer for multicultural talent to be recognized as ‘ready now,’ because there are large groups within our population who assume that hard work earns one’s due—they are reluctant to put themselves forward.

“We have tried to let these women know that Johnson & Johnson employees are in charge of their own careers. They must be visible, establish networks, and ask for assignments,” Cunningham says.

At the same time, the program strives to educate supervisors about cultural differences and to be more aware of the effects that an employee’s culture and

upbringing might have on her career. “Most of these multicultural and ethnic considerations are surfaced by the employees themselves, who then carry the dialogue forward from challenges to solutions,” says Cunningham.

Global consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) operates a residential leadership development program near Washington, D.C. In 2005, a project conducted within that program discovered that while women represent fully 50 percent of employees at entry level, that number drops to 15 percent at the partner level.

To address this issue and increase the promotion and retention of women within the firm, PwC created the Gender Advisory Council, and appointed Cleo Thompson its director. Since then, Thompson has been overseeing, tracking, and promoting innovative programs aimed toward women in PwC locations around the world from her office in London.

“We regard the retention of women as a business issue, not another diversity training course,” she says. “We needed to share best practices from pockets around the world.” The “women at PwC” section of the corporate website is replete with information about the Gender Advisory Council, new and established programs and best practices, awards, and role models.

A new initiative that Thompson cites as exemplary has been piloted in PwC’s New York and Los Angeles offices in the past year. The “mentor moms” program grew out of the desire of a single female director to find colleagues who had recently returned from maternity leave, as she had.

The program emphasizes informal coaching conversations and pairs mentors with mentees for a 20-month partnership that begins four months before the mentee’s due date and continues for 16 months afterward. Formal written guidelines for both roles are available, and useful steps and interactions are outlined. Mentors are equipped with a pre-loaded Starbucks card to take their mentees out for coffee, and send them gifts and cards when the baby arrives.

“We have very strong statistics that prove that replacing an experienced employee costs about two and a half times her salary and benefits,” says Thompson. “Under those circumstances, the return-on-investment of a program like mentor moms becomes quite clear.”

### Re-attraction

Bangalore, India, is a hotbed of developing engineering talent, and roughly 20 to 30 percent of new graduates are women. However, after a decade or so, those women tend to quit their jobs for many of the same reasons that the CWLP researchers uncovered—the realities of the job simply are not compatible with the realities of family life.

In early 2007, at a meeting of the General Electric Women’s Network, senior human resource manager K. Murali heard many of his colleagues expressing frustration over the company’s attrition rate among female employees.

“Women were leaving GE, but not for our competition,” Murali explains. “Some would come back after a break, mostly out of loyalty to their managers, but those who returned were few.”

Launched this year at the John F. Welch Technology Center in Bangalore, “restart” is a program directed toward female engineers who leave any company in the area and want to return to work. The program has four main components:

- connections—each participant will have a “buddy” within the company before they ever attend a GE recruitment event to meet individuals other than HR managers
- an initial assessment of interest level and fit
- an orientation program that emphasizes what it’s like to work at GE and seeks to assess what the prospective employee needs to find career satisfaction
- a technical orientation.

Murali emphasizes that most of the critical steps were taken before the actual development of the program. “I would advise anyone in any company contemplating such an initiative to first,

ask some tough questions about the corporate culture, making sure that the company is ready internally.”

To prepare to launch the program, Murali and his colleagues spent most of 2007 retooling company processes to ensure multiple modes of entry and flexibility, and educating managers on how not only to utilize corporate programs and opportunities but to proactively promote them among employees.

The company held a large recruitment event in August that served as the public debut of the initiative. GE expects to hire 15 to 20 program participants this year, which would double its rehire numbers overall.

The benefits of these programs and others like them can be myriad and can extend far beyond their initial target populations, CWLP’s Sherbin emphasizes.

“Many companies have realized that work-life programs are not just an accommodation for women, and that they can make a strong link to the business case. It’s not just about women and minorities; these innovations are about supporting the entire workforce.”

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