Study: Women make management strides when firms downsize, restructure

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Women can make inroads into male-dominated management ranks as companies that downsize restructure their scaled-back workforces, according to new research by a University of Illinois sociologist.

John Dencker says the findings are surprising because downsizing whittles the pool of jobs available for both men and women, but also show that firms apparently make an effort to balance gender inequities during staff shakeups.

"It might be that they try to make up for past inequalities or they may be aware of other firms that have had legal difficulties and want to make sure they don't run into the same problems," said Dencker, a professor in the University of Illinois' Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations.

But women's sharp gains during downsizing are short lived, said Dencker, who studied nearly 30 years of employment records of a Fortune 500 manufacturer that pared its workforce in the mid-1980s and again in the early 1990s.

Women entered management ranks at rates up to 25 percent higher than men in some grade levels after downsizing, which created supervisory openings as older male managers took company-offered buyouts, Dencker said.

But the gap closed within a year or two as management jobs became scarcer in the aftermath of restructuring, according to the study, which appears in the June issue of the *American Sociological Review*, the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association.

"Everybody's rates of promotions slowed after downsizing because there simply weren't as many positions to promote people into," Dencker said. "With fewer positions available, promoting women more rapidly than men would be more visible and the company may have been concerned about how male managers would react."

Overall, women accounted for nearly 36 percent of the company's managers after restructuring, compared with an average of about 24 percent during the period from 1967 to 1993, according to the study.

But Dencker said women made less headway into top levels of management, composing about 17 percent of the highest salary grade level after restructuring compared with an average of about 11 percent during the 26 years studied.

He says a host of factors slowed the climb up the corporate ladder for women, who make up half of the nation's management workforce but hold only 15 percent of top leadership positions.

Along with the decreased pool of jobs after downsizing, Dencker says women also began their management careers in lower-tier jobs, so they have farther to climb.

"There remains this sort of glass-ceiling effect," he said. "Women have more rungs to climb, so their rates of promotion relative to men slow as they move up the corporate ladder."

Parity is likely 15 or 20 years away, but Dencker says he is more optimistic that women will close the gap than he was a decade ago.

"I think women are going to keep pushing higher and higher up organizational ladders," he said. "As far as CEO-level positions, I think it will be easier once it reaches critical mass. But that's a long way off."

Source: American Sociological Association

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