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GUEST BLOG: HOW TO CLOSE THE GENDER GAP WITHIN PROFESSIONAL FIRMS

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By Yanitza Brongers Marrero

In the year 2015, inequities in pay and career advancement still exist between the sexes. This is true in almost every profession, and it's true within my own: architecture.

There are a number of theories about why these gaps exist, and while some of them tend to explain early career inequities—for example, lost time at work during a woman’s child-rearing years—they do not explain why many women never catch up to their male counterparts.

Fixing the situation begins with recognizing the problem and some of the reasons for it.

First, consider that women make up more than half of the US population and earn nearly 60 percent of undergraduate and master’s degrees. It’s no longer a rarity to find women in traditionally male-dominated professions. In fact, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, women hold more than half of professional-level jobs.

Yet, women hold less than 15 percent of the top five leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. Less than five percent serve as Fortune 500 CEOs, and less than 17 percent are on Fortune 500 boards.

When it comes to pay, women don’t fare any better. According to the White House, full-time working women earn 77 percent of what their male counterparts earn. This means that women need to work approximately three months more to earn what men make in one year.

And because of professions requiring licensure, as mine does, child-rearing and other family responsibilities often make it difficult for women to invest the time necessary to study for exams. Company cultures are also critical. It’s harder for women to feel comfortable in a male-dominated profession or in a firm run exclusively by men.

While closing the gap starts with culture, we also have to look at how we position ourselves with each other and with the public.

This was a topic of discussion recently when several other women and I presented on a panel at the American Institute of Architects Ohio Valley Region Convention in Columbus, which focused on women in the profession. We looked at the problem and offered some possible remedies.

One thing we noticed was the prevalence of all-male panels at meetings and conferences. However, diverse perspectives are exceedingly important to the advancement of the profession and the success of individual firms. Let’s give women the microphone. And let’s eliminate panels that don’t reflect the diversity within our professions.

If women want to close the gap, we need men who are willing to go to bat for what's right. We need to advocate for transparency so women know where the gaps exist. After all, diversity simply raises the level of quality and excellence for those we serve. Let's identify our male allies and arm them with the information needed to help us close the gap.











If every profession surveyed its firms concerning flexibility, both men and women would be drawn to those that encourage balance between family and career. The law profession is doing this—Above The Law publishes a top ten list every year. We should take a lesson from that example. Let's also encourage family-friendly firms by honoring those who go above and beyond.





A prevailing "culture of hours" is keeping back men and women who need balance. Of course, we all need to do our jobs well and meet client expectations, but cultures that expect practitioners to regularly put in extra time on weeknights and weekends can result in burnout and loss of key talent. Let's acknowledge the importance of a work-life balance for both men and women.

Are things changing? The growth of women in the workforce indicates they are, but until we put women and men on equal footing, women will never reach their true potential.

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