

Female career progression in retailing

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to highlight the factors that limit and support female career progression in the retail industry.

Methodology/Approach: The research used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Data were collected from employees and managers working in 31 stores belonging to national stores operating in the East Midlands as well as ten SME independent retailers based in the region.

Findings: The women in this study can be categorised into those women who are not interested in pursuing a career in retail, those that seek promotion but have difficulties balancing the demands of their work and domestic circumstances and those who have actively pursued a career in the industry. Despite these categorisations, the study suggests that the career progression of all female staff is helped and hindered by a number of interrelating factors, such as whether they have a role model, are loyal to the store they work in or have children.

Practical implications: It is proposed that career initiatives in retailing need to be more adaptable so that they take account of the different development needs of these three types of women.

Originality/value: This is a large-scale study that uses a mixed method approach and considers the opinions of store staff working in a range of roles.

Keywords: Women, careers, stores, part-time

Type of paper: Research paper

Introduction

Although a defining characteristic of the UK retail industry is the high number of women it employs, particularly on a part-time basis, there still remains an under-representation of women in retail management positions. In a sector where 71% of retail and sales assistants are female but only occupy one third of management posts (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005), it would appear that there are continuing barriers to career progression for women working in retailing, especially at store level. Furthermore, although women have a higher representation in retail managerial positions than in other industries such as IT and production (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005), these figures suggest that the number of women in retail management are disproportionate to the numbers employed in the industry as a whole.

To help understand why women working in retail are not fully represented in store management positions, a research team from Nottingham Business School who were part-funded by the European Social Fund, undertook an eighteen months regional study to investigate this further. Specifically, the study set out to explore the extent to which gender segregation impacts upon female career progression in the retail industry in the East Midlands. According to the British Retail Consortium (2006), the East Midlands, which includes Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Mansfield and Chesterfield, has a high concentration of FTSE 250 retailer's head offices, it employs 14.4% of all those working in UK retail and in 2002 retail was worth £22.5 billion to the region. Retailing is therefore a major contributor to this region's economy. Furthermore, the study also offered the opportunity to examine the experiences of women who work in roles that have low levels of pay in a region that has a concentration of low skilled and paid jobs (EMEO, 2006). This is in contrast to much of the research on careers and gender which has focused on the 'glass ceiling'

experienced by female managers wanting to progress (Broadbridge, 1996; 1998; Traves *et al.*, 1997).

Research design

The study set out to identify the factors that limit and support female career progression in the retail industry from the perspective of both the employer and employee. It also attempted to identify any labour market issues that could affect promotion, as well as consider the extent to which supportive company policies were in place and enacted. These areas were explored whilst taking account of individual characteristics such as ethnicity, age, disability, gender and qualifications as well as personal and working circumstances like their job role and travel to work arrangements.

The research used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Data and materials were collected in both national retailers with outlets in the East Midlands and small, independent retailers (SMEs) also operating in the area. Although national retailers employ a significant number of retail employees, it was also important to include the opinions of those working in SME independent retailers since a third of all shops in the UK are reported to employ less than five people (All-Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group, 2006).

The large retailers

Employees working at a total of 31 stores belonging to three national retailers in the DIY, supermarket and health/beauty sectors were involved in the research. In 2006 the smallest of these retailers employed over 35,000 people and all three retailers were key players in the sector. Typically, the outlets involved in the study were the flagship stores operating in key cities and towns across the region and were located

in a variety of areas such as 'out-of-town', 'rural' and 'suburban'. One thousand completed questionnaires were collected as this was the target set by the research team in conjunction with the funding body. These questionnaire responses were gathered from store staff employed in a range of roles (managers, supervisors, general assistants etc) and with differing personal circumstances (with and without children, for example) and characteristics (age and ethnicity, for instance). Table 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the questionnaire sample. Opinions from male staff were included since they provided a useful comparison to the opinions of female employees. In addition, sixty follow-up interviews were conducted with a range of store staff working in the same stores. The interviews gave the research team the opportunity to explore in more detail the factors that helped and hindered the interviewee's career progression as well as their career aspirations.

	Percentage of total questionnaire sample
Male	26%
Female	74%
Full-time	53%
Hourly paid general assistants	73%
Junior management and supervisors	20%
Senior store staff	7%
Aged under 19	8%
19-24 years old	18%
25-59 years old	71%
Aged over 60	3%
White British	93%
Indian	4%
Respondents with children	55%

Table 1: Key characteristics of questionnaire sample

Nearly two thirds of the questionnaire respondents were female and nearly half of all the questionnaire respondents worked on a part-time basis. Approximately 70% of the questionnaires had been completed by staff aged 25-59 years old and most respondents were 'white British'. Interviewees working in the large retailers were typically female, white, able-bodied, aged in their 30s and just over half had children of school age and under.

The SME independent retailers

Collecting materials from the small, independent retailers required a different approach as these businesses were initially hesitant to be involved in the study due to time pressures and their reluctance to be involved in academic research. The research team therefore used their contacts to help select ten regional SME independent retailers willing to participate in the study. As far as possible, these retailers were taken from a range of sectors which included clothing, food, gifts and home improvement retailing. They also differed according to the number of employees and their location (rural, suburban, city/town centre). In each of these businesses, in-depth interviews were conducted with the owner/managers and a selection of employees such as sales staff, assistant managers and supervisors. These respondents were asked the same questions to those explored with staff working in the large retailers, and where necessary these were adapted to take into account the SME independent retailer working environment.

Findings

Overall the research revealed that the factors impacting on women's career progression were a dynamic and complex interaction of personal and job related

factors. The following explains some of the key areas that appeared to have the most impact on a woman's ability to progress in store.

Store loyalty

Whilst working in retailing was only rated as 'very important' by 19.8% of female respondents, there were much higher levels of commitment to the store where they worked (55% of all women). This store loyalty, however, was less strong for their male counterparts (41%). It appeared that women placed greater value on their working relationships with store colleagues, local management and customers than male staff. These relationships partly explained why the women in this study had a strong allegiance to their workplace, as one female general assistant working for the health and beauty retailer commented:

'I used to come to this store and thought what a nice, friendly place it was. Now I work here that is so important to me. I would like to progress but at this store where I know everyone.'

The general preference among women to remain in the store where they worked was further reinforced by the fact that many in the lower paid roles relied on public transport to travel to work and had child care responsibilities which reflected the need to be close to home. Yet because the policy and practice of the career schemes of the larger retailers frequently meant that staff had to move stores in order to progress, some women were unable to pursue a career with the retailer.

Working part-time

Compared to staff working full-time, it was widely perceived by men and women that staff working part-time were disadvantaged in terms of their career progression. The

belief was that staff were more likely to be promoted if they worked full-time since part-time jobs were generally not regarded by respondents as career roles. A female part-time duty manager explained how she had difficulties trying to maintain part-time working whilst being a manager for a large store in the supermarket retailer:

'I wanted to come back [after maternity leave] part-time. But the company didn't really recognise part-time workers. There were part-time workers out there but this store has never ever had a part-time manager so it wasn't recognised.'

Further difficulties experienced by part-time staff highlighted by respondents were that development events were often held at times when they were not working or training could be of a duration that could be difficult to combine with child care arrangements. As 85% of the part-timers in the sample were women, the constraint on progression due to working part-time had a disproportionate impact on women's career development.

Personality and qualifications

In terms of store career progression, possessing the 'right' personality was regarded by 44% of all respondents as more important than having formal qualifications (19%). This was demonstrated by a comment made by a female supermarket manager:

'The expectation in retail is that you have to have personal skills rather than 'I can work a checkout'. It's more about the personality of the individual.'

According to the respondents, confidence, self-belief and assertiveness were personality traits that those seeking progression should have. Furthermore, it was

felt by many respondents that male staff were more likely to possess these characteristics, enabling them to exploit career opportunities better than their female colleagues. The findings also suggest that less senior women tended to make incremental career steps, ensuring that they were competent and confident in their job before moving to the next stage. A male team leader for the health and beauty retailer explained that:

'The opportunities are there but you've got to be prepared to 'have a go'. I think a lot of the women who I've come across don't want to take the chance unless they are 100% in the job they are doing.'

Role models

The previous section has highlighted that some women needed to be encouraged when seeking advancement. Indeed, where women had progressed to managerial positions, they reported that role models and personal mentors had played a part in their personal development by providing support, advice and insights into retail management as well as setting examples to follow in terms of how to progress. Just over a third of women said that 'seeing people like me progress' helped 'a lot' with their progression compared to approximately a quarter of men. One female store manager for the DIY retailer explained that her rapid career progression was as a direct result of the influence of a female mentor:

'There's one store manager who's been quite a big role model...the way she thought and the support she gave me really did make a big difference.'

Home support networks

Female staff with caring responsibilities relied on their partner, parents, other family members and friends to help manage child care. The study found, for example, that those women who worked part-time and had children were more likely to work on a Saturday, implying that they worked on that day because family members working or studying during the week were able to provide childcare. This reliance on family and friends was especially true for those in lower paid roles who could not afford to pay for child care provision. For many female employees, if a promotion demanded changed or longer working hours, a key consideration was the demands this would place on their home support network. As one recently promoted female supervisor working in the supermarket retailer commented:

'I could only take the job because my mum collects my son from school three days a week'

Working in independent SME retailers

In addition to the factors discussed above, the study found that for the SME independent retailers there were certain issues that related specifically to the size of their organisation that had an impact on female career progression. Due to their size, these retailers had fewer opportunities for formal career progression compared to the larger retailers. As one older female sales employee working in a home improvement retailer stated:

'There's not a huge amount of movement here so younger staff have to go elsewhere for promotion.'

Nevertheless, employees believed that they had more opportunities to increase their skills and level of responsibility than they would in a large retailer as they were less

likely to be pigeonholed into one job role. Most staff working for the SME independent retailers were able to carry out a variety of roles associated with running a store, such as merchandising, serving customers and managing stock.

Providing adequate cover could be arranged, SME owner/managers also appeared to have a more flexible, informal approach than the larger retailers to the hours people worked. This was beneficial for those with caring responsibilities who were generally female and applied equally to those owning and managing the business.

Types of women

The different factors affecting the ability of women to progress led the research team to categorise the female respondents in three different ways according to their career aspirations.

The first group consisted of women who wanted to remain at entry level and were not seeking to pursue a career either with the employer or in the retail industry. This group was classified further into those employees working in retail as a short-term measure, such as female students, and older women who were not interested in pursuing a career but whose wages still formed an important part of the household income. Indeed the study found that the importance of pursuing a career appeared to become more crucial to women aged between 20 and 30 years while those women under 20 who were more likely to be studying were not concerned with the training and promotion prospects offered by their employer.

The second group of women enjoyed working in retail and wanted to remain in retailing. They also welcomed the opportunity to progress to a better job, provided the requirements of the role could be balanced with their family commitments.

Frequently, however, they experienced difficulties trying to maintain this sense of balance. The final group comprised of women who had successfully pursued a career in retail either as direct entrants to a retail management pathway or as a result of working their way up the store career ladder whilst successfully negotiating those factors that had an impact upon their ability to progress, such as the store's location and whether they had children at school. In the SME independent retailers these were typically the owner/managers. These were women who had set up their business because they wanted to have the freedom to make their own decisions whilst exploiting a gap in the market.

Discussion and conclusion

Although this study relied on convenience sampling to meet the project's targets set for data collection, the findings nevertheless indicate that there are a number of interrelating factors that can help and hinder the career progression of women in retailing. Although some of the findings here reflect themes already highlighted in academic literature and practitioner publications, such as the recent Women in Work Commission's (2006) report 'Shaping a Fairer Future', this study shows that there continues to be a gender imbalance in retail managerial roles, suggesting that many women are working below their potential and that retailers are not utilising a large part of their workforce's talents to full effect. In this research, for example, we found that 77% of those working as hourly paid general assistants were female whereas only 54% of senior managers were women.

Two major challenges for employers, particularly the large retailers, are identified as a result of this research. Firstly, there is a need for retailers to provide inclusive career development policies and supportive HR policies that are accessible to both part-time and full-time staff. Secondly, these initiatives need to offer development

opportunities to not only the career oriented women but also those aspiring to progress whilst trying to balance the demands of work with their domestic circumstances. Overall this suggests then, that retailers need to consider alternative career models that are much more adaptable and inclusive (Mavin, 2001). That said, retailing enables people to get on the first rung of the career ladder relatively easily due to the selection processes not being heavily reliant on a person's qualifications and in this sense, retailing is an industry that provides a 'gateway' to employment (Greater London Authority, 2006).

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