

## BEYOND ORGANISATIONAL BOUNDARIES

Jenny Pollock and Emma Shute from Women to Work, a coaching-based business, have been working on a research project with professor of organisational psychology Penny Dick to look at women's careers.

**Jenny:** 'We were inspired to start Women to Work back in 2014 during a conversation over a cup of tea – the start of so many organisations – about the unfulfilled potential we saw in women all around us: brilliant, bright, capable, motivated women unable to meet their potential for a variety of reasons. Our research with Penny has been enlightening, at times saddening, but also hopeful and hugely informative for our coaching practice and the coaching work we do with women.'

**Penny:** 'I wanted to examine whether current understandings of "career" adequately reflect and capture the working and non-working experiences of adult women in the United Kingdom.'

**Emma:** 'We have a saying that is the basis of how we work together and that we realise, through this research, sums up the attitude expressed by many of the women who took part: ambitious for our whole lives, not just in our work. It's such a simple phrase but is so revealing when we reflect on our focus and what is really important to us'

We want to share some of the findings from this research into women's careers and what they tell us about how women make sense of their career paths and goals, plus what this might imply for career or work/life coaching. We hope that, by spreading the word, this research will make a difference.

The research project – supported with funding from the British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grants competition – involved observation of women taking part in Women to Work's work/life discovery coaching workshops, with follow-up interviews with 27 of these women, conducted on three separate occasions over a two-year period.

Here, we focus on two of the core findings of the research: how women understand success and how they arrive at these understandings; and the role of chance and serendipity in shaping women's career trajectories. We hope these insights help you to consider how your coaching practice can support women you work with who may be experiencing some of these issues.

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### HOW DO WOMEN UNDERSTAND SUCCESS?

We think it's fair to say that, for many people in our society, career success is associated with upward progression into higher-level roles, bringing with it an attendant increase in pay and status. This common notion of success was not one that resonated with many of the women participating in this study, though it did for some.

While it is definitely the case that many women rule themselves out of pursuing upward career progression due to the obligations that are often required for such pursuit (such as long working hours and the subordination of home to work) many of the women we spoke to felt that there was, in any case, much more to life than pay, status or career progression.

The women taking part in this study want fulfilment in their work and their home lives. They believe that the two domains can enrich each other if organisations are prepared to do more to support and recognise the commitment that many women show to their jobs, while also recognising that their lives at home are equally as important. If organisations encourage and reward primarily those individuals who do put work first, this may not motivate other staff to emulate these individuals. Rather, it risks alienating experienced and talented staff who have developed their own definitions of success, and who might then seek alternative employment that enables them to experience the fulfilment they consider important.

An important discussion generated by this finding has been about identifying ways to encourage women to share positive stories about themselves, their lives and their careers – practical accounts of how they have successfully challenged the norm of upward career progression. The importance of role models can't be underestimated here, as they make different ways of 'doing' careers more visible and accessible. Identifying role models whom everyone can learn from could be a powerful element to support a mindset shift.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COACHING?

There is an opportunity through coaching to support women to think outside of conventional and traditional notions of success when they are considering their career direction and what they see as their strengths and developmental needs. Enabling the women we work with to consider their work and life holistically can help them focus on what is really important to them, their needs and wants from both work and life, and how these can be met. We hope this insight helps prevent some women from overlooking and underestimating their existing strengths and how they enable them to lead a rounded life that has meaning and fulfilment.

Often the individuals we work with feel alone in their feelings, perhaps feeling inadequate or like a failure if they aren't meeting traditional societal expectations of career success. We feel this research shows that success comes from work/life balance, and that just knowing that others feel the same can be hugely empowering to the women we work with. Sharing this message is important to us, so that women start to feel successful and define success in terms of what it means to them, valuing and trusting themselves to create the work and life that is right for them, not what we believe to be a narrow societal construct of success.

Several of the women interviewed had decided to take a risk (maybe starting their own business or moving to a less secure job) in order to experience the fulfilment lacking in their current role. Often this lack related to the amount of time or energy expected, which simply did not provide the positive emotional payback these women wanted. Taking the risk, while scary, was also exciting and liberating.

### CHANCE AND SERENDIPITY IN WOMEN'S CAREER TRAJECTORIES

How many of you were asked, as children, what you wanted to be when you grew up? The question is underpinned by the idea that we develop strong ideas about our career goals from very early in our lives, an idea that perplexed and troubled many of the women taking part in this research. The vast majority of these women told us that they had never really known what they wanted to do in terms of a job or a career and that this uncertainty did not ever really go away.

Most of the women we talked to did not find themselves in particular careers by design but by default – they followed hunches and suggestions by friends or family, or simply fell into jobs as a consequence of feeling the need to have some kind of employment. They told us that their sense of who they were and what they were good at emerged from these experiences; it did not precede them.

Many told us that they had learned more about what they didn't want to do from being in jobs they found unsatisfying than learning what they did want to do from getting into jobs they thought they might be suitable for. As their various occupational experiences enabled them to learn more about themselves – their skills, their values, and what did and did not interest them – they began to develop more of a definite vocational identity; for example, more certainty about wanting to be in a technical role rather than a people-facing position.

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## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COACHING?

Reflective practice is such an important aspect of coaching, and when considering this finding there is an opportunity to enable women to reconsider the frames they are using to view their lives. This provides an opportunity to review and reflect on every job and every role as a positive learning experience that not only reveals things to individuals about who they are and what they're good at, but also helps them reimagine themselves and their potential opportunities. This approach may create a positive mindset shift, enabling definitions of success to encompass an enriching process of exploratory self-discovery through the twists and turns of a life lived, as well as a life yet to be discovered.

One woman in our study whom had been badly bullied at work emerged from this experience with the certainty that she would never allow that to happen to her again, and a newfound sense of her own power as an individual – a certainty that played a major role in her decision to become self-employed and leave her occupation as a teacher. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this self-employment led her into making instructional videos, and she discovered a talent she hadn't known she had. Helping women think beyond what they believe they know about themselves is critical.

**Emma:** *'For us all, this has been an enjoyable, interesting and insightful piece of work, and one that informs our coaching practice. With Penny we hope to share the research findings far and wide to support individual women to feel empowered – empowered to consider success in a way that is meaningful to them with confidence and self-belief, and in the knowledge they are not alone.'*

**Penny:** *'We hope that this article has given a brief insight into the research, and importantly into women's understandings of their careers and work-related experiences.'*

If you would like to be involved in this ongoing work, we have a community of practice (CoP) that you would be welcome to join. The purpose and scope of a CoP is to work collaboratively to identify issues we can work on together and agree actions we can take.

For more information, email Professor Penny Dick at [p.dick@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:p.dick@sheffield.ac.uk) or Jenny and Emma at [info@womentowork.co.uk](mailto:info@womentowork.co.uk).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Penny Dick (above left) is a professor of organisational psychology at Sheffield University Management School. Her long-standing research interests are in gender inequalities in workplaces and how to understand these in ways that embrace the diversity of women as a group, including their race, religion, class, motivations and goals. Penny worked as a practitioner psychologist for several years before her academic career, which has sharpened her concerns with trying to render academic ideas accessible and applicable.

Coaches Jenny Pollock (above middle) and Emma Shute (above right) are founders and directors of Women to Work, a business that works with organisations and individuals with a special interest in coaching for personal and professional development, resilience, women-only initiatives, and coaching and mentoring for all. Emma and Jenny were inspired to start Women to Work when having a conversation about the unfulfilled potential they saw in women around them: they knew they wanted to make a difference if they could. They're proud to have run women's development programmes in both the public and private sectors; to have designed and delivered various group coaching workshops; and to have supported many individuals with varied backgrounds and motivations via one-to-one coaching. They love what they do and are passionate about how coaching can help the people they work with to see new horizons that best fit their values, helping them to feel positive, motivated and able to create a fulfilling professional and personal life.

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