

Three quarters of UK women want business action to lift the 'second glass ceiling'

3 years ago



Improved support for menopause could help women stay in work – according to a global study for [BSI](#).

Women in the UK are urging politicians and business leaders to take steps that help older women to remain productive in the workforce for longer, as research shows more than half (54%) feel it would be difficult for them to raise issues, including menopause, with their employers and three fifths would also feel uncomfortable bringing up health and wellbeing issues with a male manager.

The findings come from a [new BSI report](#) entitled Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling, which explores why some women leave the workforce early for reasons other than personal choice. The research finds that 75% of UK women want employers to take action to retain older women in the workforce, while 71% would like politicians to drive this change.

The report by BSI, the business improvement and standards company, finds that 29% of UK women expect to leave work before retirement with 42% expecting this to be due to health or well-being, while another fifth specifically cite menopause. Against a backdrop of high numbers of Britons retiring early post-pandemic^[1], Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling explores the barriers to the retention of experienced women. It also characterizes the economic and social benefits that could be realized by lifting the Second Glass Ceiling (whereby women leave the workforce early and for reasons other than for personal preference). It concludes that this earlier retirement is not only an issue for older women, as male colleagues and different generations can also contribute to creating a diverse, equitable and inclusive culture of care.

Anne Hayes, Director of Sectors, BSI, said: “Addressing the Second Glass Ceiling (SGC) can offer many benefits, from enhancing productivity to ensuring organizations retain talented people and providing mentors who can draw on their experience to guide newer members of staff.

“As our research shows, there are many factors that can lock women out of the workforce – but there are also clear strategies to address this, from support for workers experiencing menopause to steps in other areas such as working flexibly and breaking down stigma that could contribute to an enhanced work environment for all. Rather than see the considerations facing older women as a challenge, we can gain by seeing this as an opportunity for investment in current and future generations and an opportunity to boost growth, innovation and accelerate progress towards a sustainable world.”

More than two-thirds of UK women say experienced female mentors can benefit the development of younger women (67%), yet less than half (46%) have had the opportunity to learn from them themselves, and a third say it remains uncommon to see women in leadership positions. Given that 72% of women are comfortable raising menopause with a female employer, but far fewer with a male manager, having more female leaders could be central to overcoming a key barrier to women remaining in work in the UK.

In May, BSI published the menstruation, menstrual health, and menopause in the workplace standard (BS 30416), setting out practical recommendations for workplace adjustments, such as the appointment of workplace menstruation and menopause advocates. 74% of UK women say they believe employers have a role in offering women support around issues such as menopause, and 76% would welcome greater flexibility to manage associated challenges, yet at present, only 4% of UK women are aware of formal policies in their organization to do so.

Kate Field, Global Head Health, Safety and Well-being, BSI, said: “There are clearly many reasons women decide not to stay in the workplace, and when that is a genuine choice that should be celebrated. However, the data shows there are those who would like to remain in work and would welcome greater support from their employers to do so.

“Organizations have the opportunity to partner with their people to build diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace cultures with the potential to bring enormous benefit to individuals, organizations, and society. As BSI’s Prioritizing People Model© sets out, when organizations build a culture of care that addresses everyone’s well-being, including physical, psychological and fulfilment needs, the result can be an engaged, committed, and productive workforce.”

Asked about barriers to remaining in work, a fifth (21%) specifically cited caring responsibilities – lower than the global average of 29%, while 18% cited a lack of flexibility, 11% cited a lack of progression opportunities for women and 12% lack of pay parity.

In a sign of optimism for the future, younger women (65% of 25–34-year-olds compared with 45% over 55) were more optimistic that the second glass ceiling could be lifted, saying that they believe that their generation will receive the flexibility and support needed to stay in the workforce as long as their male colleagues. 63% believe the next generation will receive the flexibility and support needed to stay productive in the workforce for as long as men.

The report makes a series of recommendations to lift the SGC, including:

- Recognize the benefits of lifting the second glass ceiling. Rather than see this as a challenge,

organizations can approach it as an opportunity to boost growth, innovation and accelerate progress towards a sustainable world.

- Open the dialogue – ask women what they want – uncovering solutions that can reverse the trends and enable more women to thrive throughout their professional lives
- Ensure support is available and accessible, whether around menopause or other considerations
- See flexibility as an asset and recognize that small adjustments where possible can help ensure an accommodating workplace
- Institute a broader culture of care – prioritize people by promoting individual needs
- Share best practice – collaboration across organizations, sectors and countries can drive progress

The research follows best practice guidance published by BSI last year around creating an age-inclusive workforce ([BS ISO 25550:2022](#)). BSI's Prioritizing People© model is a best practice framework for human high performance focused on culture, engagement and well-being over the career lifecycle.

As a purpose-driven organization, BSI is committed to advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals, making a positive impact for the benefit of everyone. Lifting the Second Glass Ceiling can help us all take steps to fulfil these goals, including Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) and Goal 10 (reduced inequalities).

This whitepaper was developed by Malvern Insight, a UK-based consultancy focused on global insight-driven strategy and brand proposition development, drawing on a survey of 5,000 women across four continents, one-to-one interviews with senior global executives conducted online between May and June 2023, and in-depth evaluation of economic and social data.

The survey was conducted by Censuswide, who surveyed 5,074 people who self-identify as women (18+) in the UK, USA, Australia, China and Japan between 11th and 17th May 2023.

For more information, or to read the report in full, please visit

<https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/topics/prioritizing-people/lifting-the-second-glass-ceiling/>

[\[1\] Older workers | economically inactive workers | over 50s quit work \(britsafe.org\)](#)