

What shapes careers: **A McKinsey Global Survey**



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Executives around the world say the events that most profoundly affected their careers originated largely at work, not from family or personal issues, according to a *McKinsey Quarterly* survey.

Although 40 percent of respondents say they have had difficulty balancing work and home life, they also say this challenge doesn't drive most career decisions.

The survey uncovered few differences between the experiences of men and women. However, women are more likely to have had a mentor or role model and to have experienced discrimination.

Respondents are satisfied with the outcome of career-shaping moments, saying that they led to more interesting and important jobs and to higher compensation.

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Male and female executives—parents and nonparents alike—define the event that has had the most significant effect on their careers and report that factors at work are far more important than factors at home. Women are more likely than men to say they have had role models and mentors.

Executives around the world say the events that have had the most profound effect on their careers originated largely at work, not from family considerations or changed personal aspirations, according to the latest *McKinsey Quarterly* survey. This holds true for both men and women and for executives with and without children.

The survey asked respondents about any decisions or events that led to a significant long-term change in their work situation.¹ Among other findings, both men and women say the single most pivotal event in their careers occurred when they were around the age of 30, after they had spent about eight years in the workforce. Nearly 40 percent say that an outcome of this event was taking a new job in a new industry, and 40 percent say they have had difficulty striking a balance between work and personal life.

Executives indicate that they have experienced about five such pivotal moments. According to the vast majority, whatever the specific outcome of the most important event, it had a positive effect on their careers—some 40 percent of the respondents are now C-level executives—and on factors such as the intellectual interest of the job, compensation, and rank in the organization.

When asked how the career-changing moment influenced work–life balance, however, slightly more executives say it had a neutral effect than those who report a positive one. More broadly, executives seem to be basing fewer career decisions on work–life balance than might be expected given the attention this relationship receives and the number of people who have had difficulty with it. The respondents chose it far less frequently as a factor in defining pivotal moments, for example, than they did many personal and workplace events, such as being offered a new job or developing a passion for a new industry.

¹ *The McKinsey Quarterly* conducted the survey in July 2007 and received responses from 482 male and 409 female executives from around the world, across industries, and at varied points in their careers. Thirty-nine percent are C-level executives. All data are weighted by the GDPs of the constituent countries to adjust for differences in response rates.

What shapes careers?

To define career-shaping events, our survey asked respondents to select relevant factors from a list of family, personal, and workplace experiences. The median number of factors the respondents selected is three. Among those who actually choose that number, the most frequent choices are realizing that they had become passionate about new roles or industries, taking new job opportunities, and a tie vote between realizing that they were not leading the lives they desired and that their current jobs had become less attractive (Exhibit 1).

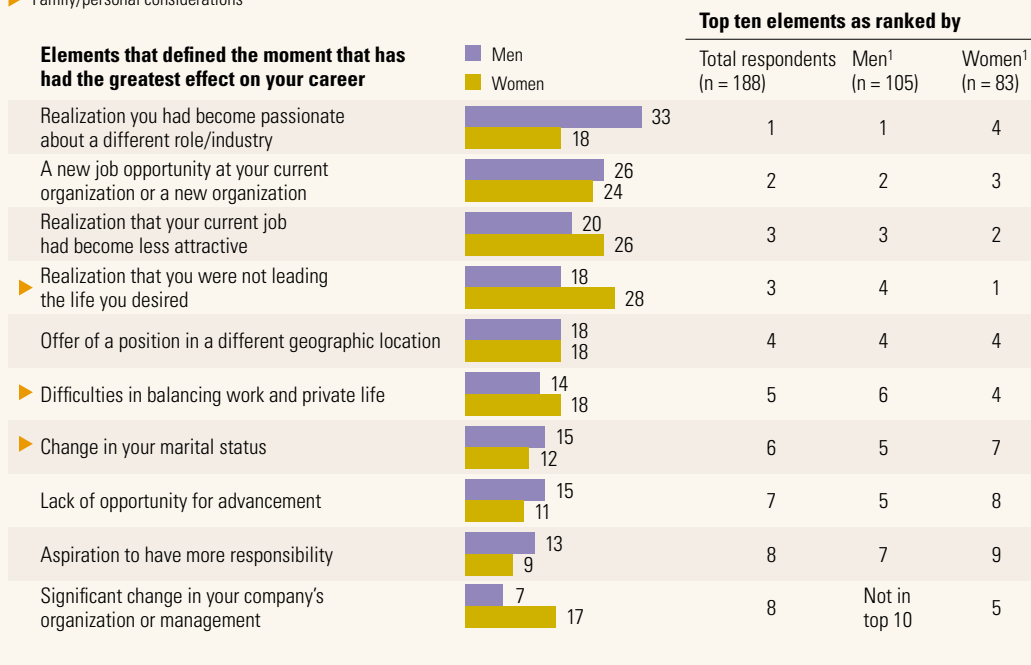
These four factors, in various combinations, are the ones most frequently chosen by both male and female respondents and by parents. Perhaps not surprisingly, executives without children are also likely to choose being offered a position in a new geographic location.

Exhibit 1

Top factors affecting career

% of respondents who experienced at least 1 career-changing moment and chose 3 defining elements

► Family/personal considerations



¹Numbers that repeat indicate several elements tied in ranking.

In addition, the survey asked respondents which potentially career-shaping events they had experienced (Exhibit 2). One of the few notable differences the survey found between men and women emerged from the responses: 27 percent of the women, but just 7 percent of the men, say they have experienced discrimination.

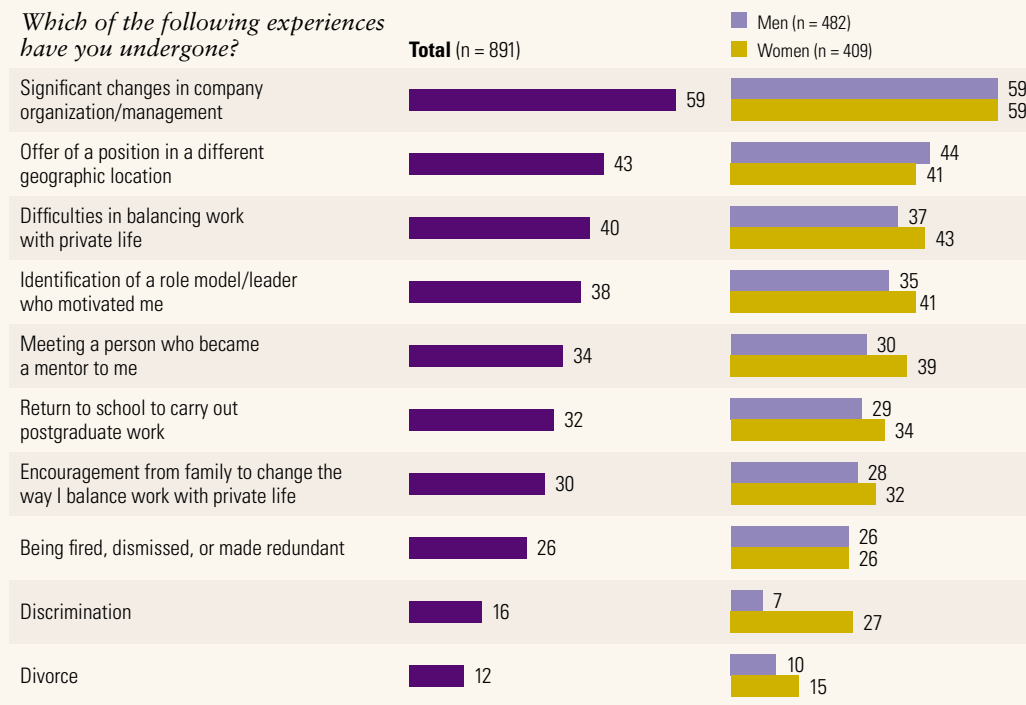
However, only 10 percent of the women say that discrimination had any role in their careers' most pivotal moments. Women are also somewhat likelier than men to say they have

had difficulty balancing work and private life, though parents are only a bit more likely than nonparents to say this, at 41 percent and 38 percent, respectively.

Exhibit 2

Workplace experiences

% of respondents¹



¹ Respondents could select multiple answers; those who answered "none of the above" are not shown.

Who helps manage change?

Twice as many respondents say their companies were supportive as not supportive when dealing with their pivotal career moments; a third of the respondents, however, say their companies played no role. Whatever the respondents say about the supportiveness of their companies, they cite similar factors as important for a company to support (Exhibit 3). What's most notable is that the factors relating to work–life balance are neither particularly important in this connection nor particularly missed if they aren't offered, regardless of whether the respondents have children. Indeed, the

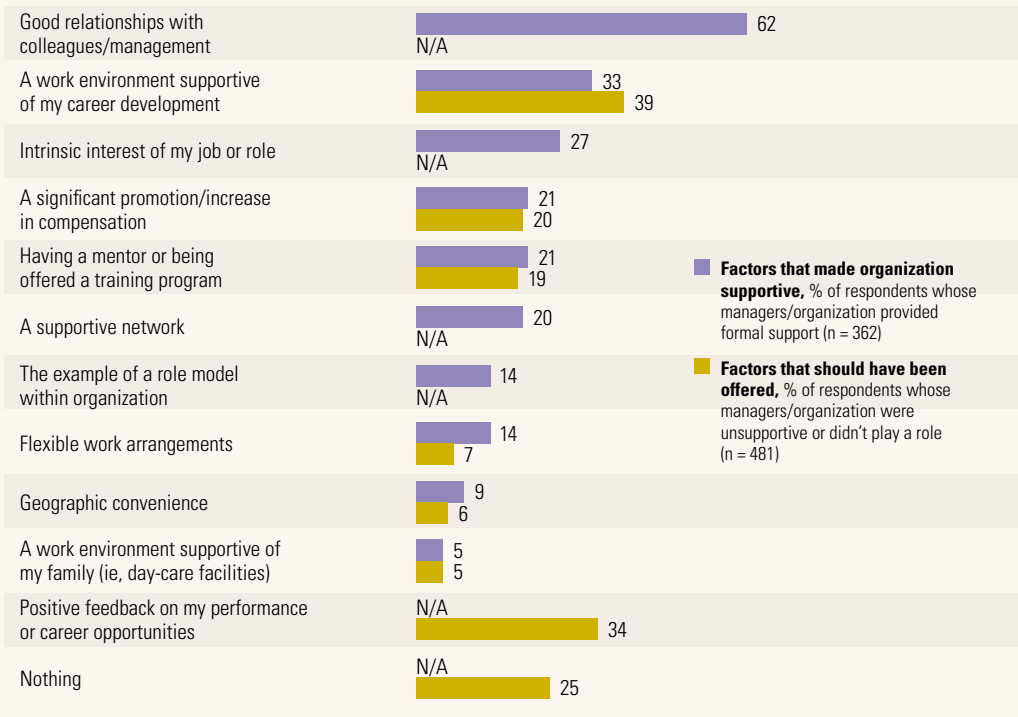
percentage of parents who say that any of these work–life factors played a supportive role is just under a third—somewhat but not markedly higher than the proportion of nonparents at 25 percent.

Exhibit 3

The role of the company

% of respondents¹

Which factors at your organization made it supportive? What should your organization have offered to support you better?



¹ Respondents who answered “other” or “don't know” are not shown.

Women are likelier than men to have had a mentor or motivational role model and likelier to credit such people in their companies with supporting them through a career change. But women who say that their companies were

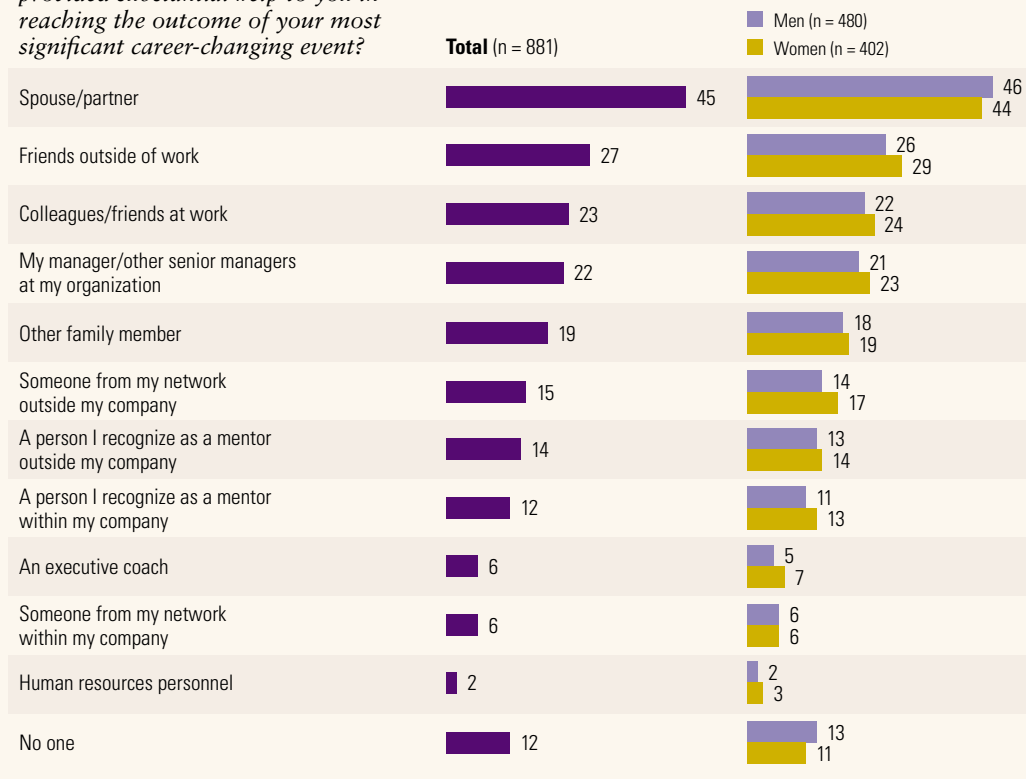
unsupportive are no more likely than men to say a mentor would have helped. Overall, when women and men are asked who, inside or outside their companies, provided substantial help, they offer very similar answers (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4

Helping hands

% of respondents who experienced at least 1 career-changing moment¹

Which of the following people provided substantial help to you in reaching the outcome of your most significant career-changing event?



¹ Respondents could select multiple answers; those who answered "other" are not shown.

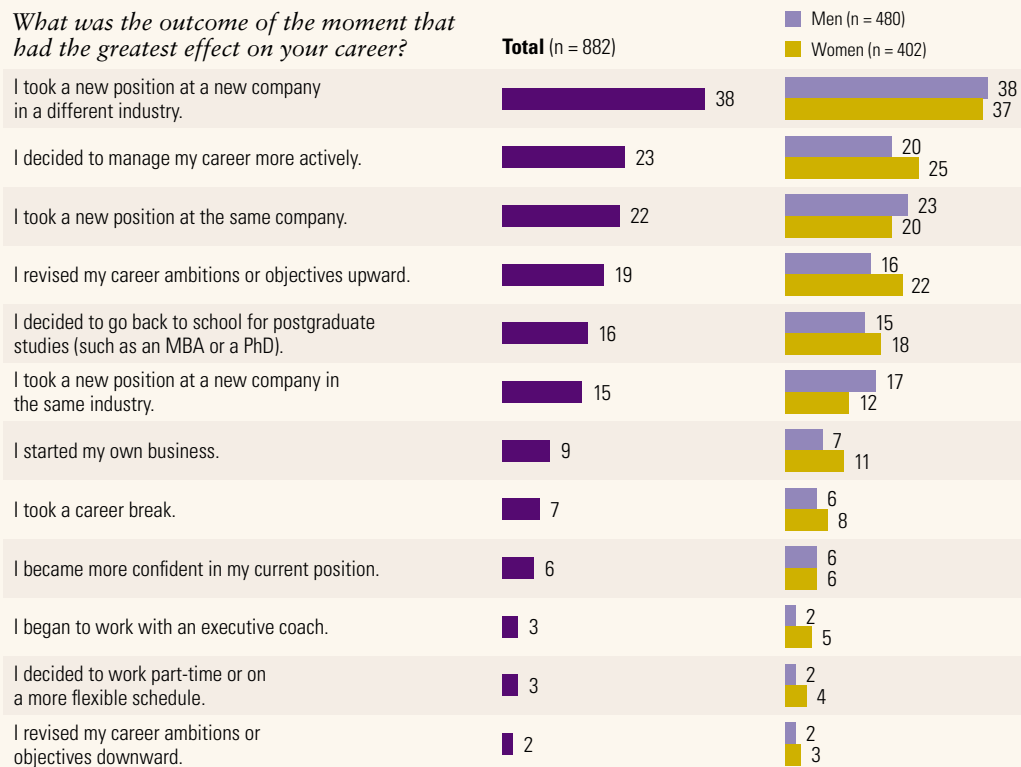
Career outcomes

Whatever defined the respondents' most significant career-changing event, the most common outcome was a new job. There are, however, some notable differences between men's and women's responses (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5

Career outcomes

% of respondents who experienced at least 1 career-changing moment¹



¹ Respondents could select multiple answers; those who answered "other" are not shown.

Executives are overwhelmingly positive about the overall effect of career-changing events—89 percent say the effect was positive, and significant majorities of those executives say these events had a positive effect on factors such as job satisfaction and intellectual interest (Exhibit 6). The respondents were less positive

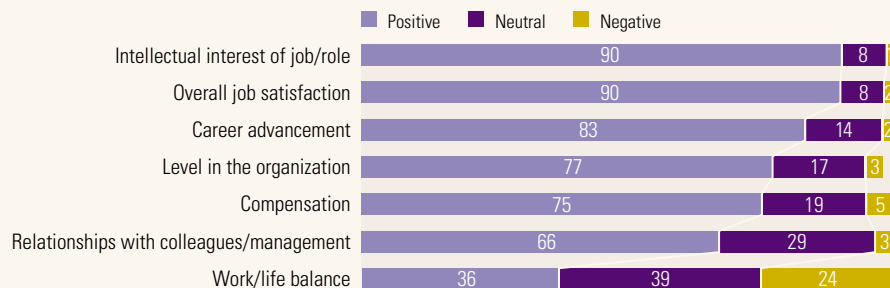
on the effect of career-changing events on work–life balance. And 85 percent of the respondents who have experienced more than a single career-shaping event say that the second most important one had a positive overall effect as well.

Exhibit 6

Positive overall effect

% of respondents who experienced at least 1 career-changing moment that had a positive, long-term effect on career,¹ n = 881

You experienced a career-changing moment—one which had a positive, long-term effect on your career. What kind of effect did it have on...



¹Figures do not sum to 100%, because respondents who answered “don’t know” are not shown.



The contributors to the analysis and development of this survey include **Pascal Baumgarten**, **Georges Desvaux**, and **Sandrine Devillard**, respectively, an associate principal, a director, and a principal in McKinsey’s Paris office. Copyright © 2007 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.