



Think Business, Think Equality

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# INTRODUCTION

This guidance is for small and medium businesses who want to improve gender equality and diversity in their workplace. You can use this alongside our other *Think Business, Think Equality* resources to make a positive change in your business.

Delivering workplace equality makes good business sense. Having fairer working practices allows you to attract and retain the best talent, reduce recruitment and training costs, and makes your business more productive, more innovative, and more profitable.

This guidance provides information on development and progression and the positive impact this can have for gender equality and the business, as a whole. It sets out the steps you need to take, to improve equalities practice around development and progression.

## WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE?

The term ‘development’ can mean different things to different people and businesses, and it can cover a range of offerings. Here, development is discussed in a broad sense, encompassing formal and informal training and development opportunities which enable employees to build capacity relevant to their current or future roles.



In the workplace, progression can also have multiple meanings depending on the context. It often refers to career progression, where an employee advances through promotions, increased responsibilities, or skill development. This can be structured (e.g. moving up a defined career ladder) or more fluid (e.g. gaining experience in different roles or projects). Progression can also relate to pay progression, where employees receive salary increases based on tenure, performance, or qualifications.

This resource focuses on career progression.

*The Think Business, Think Equality* resources are designed to be used together to enable you to improve your employment practice alongside policy. The action you take in each area will reinforce actions in the others.

**The Think Business, Think Equality online tool is available at:**  
[www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk](http://www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk)

## LEGAL DISCLAIMER

While every effort has been made to ensure that the explanations given here are accurate, only the courts or tribunals can give authoritative interpretations of the law.



# KEY MESSAGES

These key messages are where you should begin. You can use them as a starting point to think about what you need to do in your business to improve fairness in access to development and progression, and reap the benefits.

## **1. Women often miss out on development opportunities.**

This can make it harder for them to build skills, grow in confidence, and progress at work.

## **2. Inequality in access holds women back.**

If women don't get the same chances to develop as men, it limits their ability to move into more senior or higher-paid roles.

## **3. Informal decisions can lead to unfairness.**

When access to training or key projects is based on discretion, women can be overlooked – especially if they work part-time or flexibly.

## **4. Targeted support can help level the playing field.**

Development programmes designed for women can support progression and help build a more diverse leadership pipeline.

## **5. Flexibility makes development more accessible.**

Offering training at different times or locations helps staff fit it around their role and personal circumstances.



**6. Think beyond formal training.**

On-the-job learning, mentoring, networking, and shadowing are all valuable ways to support development.

**7. Staff on maternity leave shouldn't miss out.**

They should be kept informed about opportunities and supported to take part if they want to.

**8. Clear policies support fair decision making.**

A formal approach helps managers make consistent, objective decisions about who gets access to training and development.



# HOW GENDER INEQUALITY AFFECTS WOMEN'S ACCESS TO DEVELOPMENT

Women typically find it more challenging than men to access development and progression opportunities within a business, due to a range of barriers. Working to ensure women have fair and equal access to development and progression will enable you to improve various areas of your business, and you will reap the benefits of greater gender equality.

This section sets out what you need to know about women's experiences of development and progression.

## THE GLASS CEILINGS

Across all sectors, women are more likely to be concentrated in lower grades and low-paid roles than men, and are less likely than men to be found in senior positions and in roles with decision-making power. This is often described as the 'glass ceiling': the invisible barrier that prevents women from progressing, despite seemingly fair and neutral progression and promotion practices.

### The first glass ceiling

Companies usually find that they have two glass ceilings: one below senior management, and one above senior admin workers. It's unusual to find progression pathways from senior admin because the skills required to do admin work are often not seen as transferrable. This means you're missing out on their talent: skilled admin workers have potential to develop and progress, but aren't getting the opportunities.



It's also often assumed that people in stereotypically 'female' roles, such as admin, caring, or cleaning roles, aren't interested in development or progression, and they're passed over for training opportunities. This assumption is also prevalent for women who have children.

## The second glass ceiling

This can be described as the 'broken rung', which refers to the barriers that keep women stuck in lower-level management roles. It also leads to fewer women in the pipeline for senior leadership roles. This means women are then underrepresented at every subsequent level of management, making it harder to achieve gender equality in your business.

## ACCESS TO DEVELOPMENT

Women have less access to both formal and informal training and development in the workplace. Men in operational and senior roles are more likely to access training, particularly the type of training that leads to increased pay or promotion.

## Part-time workers

Part-time, low-paid women are the group of workers least likely to be offered training and development opportunities in the workplace, but they are also the most likely to be over-qualified for their job. This is due to the lower status attributed to these roles and to part-time work more generally. Assumptions are also made that part-time workers aren't as interested in, or suitable for, progression. This means women in these roles are typically excluded from development opportunities.



## Caring roles

Having responsibility for childcare and/or care for adults makes it more difficult for women to participate in development and progression opportunities, especially if they take place outside of working hours. This means people with caring roles are less likely to be selected for progression which places women in your business at a disadvantage.

## Maternity leave and childcare

Women who are on maternity leave, or have taken a career break to care for a child or adult, can find that keeping their knowledge and skills up to date can help them to make a successful return to work. However, businesses often don't keep women on maternity or carer leave updated on development opportunities, and don't provide training or support on their return.

## Where development opportunities are discussed

Often development opportunities are discussed in informal networks and settings, from which many women are excluded – intentionally or unintentionally. Where opportunities aren't communicated widely this can lead to them going to the same groups of people. This means wasted potential in those who aren't given the same chances.

## How decisions about development are made

Where line managers have discretion over decisions on access to training there is scope for bias to creep in, and for some staff to be given preferential treatment. This could also result in some staff, especially women, being passed over for training opportunities, based on employer assumptions that women who are pregnant or on maternity leave, or have childcare responsibilities, aren't interested in development and progression.



Discretion in decisions can also lead to women being less likely to be assigned to important projects that can raise their profile in your business and lead to promotion.

## When training takes place

One reason part-time workers are less likely to access learning and development is that opportunities are often scheduled to align with full-time hours. In some cases, staff are asked to undertake mandatory training in their own time. This creates barriers for women, as they are more likely to work part-time and/or have caring responsibilities.

## QUALITY OF DEVELOPMENT

The types of training accessed by men and women are often different and can lead to different outcomes around progression. Men are more likely than women to receive a pay rise following training, while women are more likely to be offered generic training, for example on health and safety at work, which has little or no impact on their development or progression. Men are also more likely to have access to training which will enable them to become people leaders or gain access to more senior roles.

This is also seen in apprenticeships, where frameworks are highly gender segregated, with men concentrated in higher-paid technical and construction roles and women in low-paid care and service roles. This means women are less likely to access higher-paid pathways through apprenticeships, and employers may miss out on skilled candidates who don't see certain frameworks as 'for them' simply because they aren't represented there.



## OPPORTUNITY AND VISIBILITY

Women are less likely to be assigned high profile projects that facilitate development and progression both through the work itself and by exposing employees to more senior and specialist staff. Women are more often given projects with lower visibility and impact, which holds back their progression, and this is a particular problem for racially minoritised women.

## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT FOR BUSINESS

### **Why invest in training and development?**

The most successful organisations make the best use of their most valuable resource – their people. Managing people in a way that enables and encourages them to reach their full potential benefits not only them but also your business.

Attracting and retaining skilled people is a key challenge for businesses. By developing effective training opportunities, your business should find it easier to retain skilled staff, while benefiting from improved morale and increased productivity and innovation.

Investing in your employees' development adds value to your business, ensures your workforce stays up to date on skills and knowledge, and boosts your reputation as a good employer.



# HOW TO GET DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION RIGHT

This section sets out what you need to do to ensure your staff have fair and equal access to training and development in your business.

## TYPES OF DEVELOPMENT

Providing a range of development options means your staff are more likely to find an opportunity that meets their needs.

### Networking

You can improve women's access to networking opportunities by sharing information on opportunities both internally and externally, and ensuring women can have time out to attend events. This can help to build cross-company relationships, emphasise that your business values difference, and drive cultural change within your own workplace.

### WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

Women's professional networks are particularly effective in supporting career progression by providing peer support, mentoring, and access to opportunities that may otherwise be difficult for women to access due to workplace inequality. These networks help to reduce occupational segregation by creating safe and supportive spaces for women to share experiences, develop skills, and build confidence, particularly in male-dominated industries. They also facilitate informal and formal mentoring, which has been shown to increase career satisfaction and leadership aspirations. Additionally, networks can provide



visibility for women within an organisation, helping them build professional relationships and gain access to senior leaders. By addressing barriers such as lack of role models and exclusion from key decision-making spaces, women's networks contribute to greater gender diversity in leadership and improved retention rates.

## Mentoring

You should provide mentoring opportunities specifically for women in your business. For many women, mentoring provides the ideal space to learn from someone who understands the particular challenges faced by women in the workplace.

Structured mentoring programmes have been found to empower participants, with mentors and mentees feeling more confident and forming meaningful connections that aid career advancement.

### THE VALUE OF MENTORING

Mentoring is a personal development tool and is an effective way of helping people to progress in their careers. It's a partnership between two people (mentor and mentee) normally working in a similar field or sharing similar experiences. A mentor is a guide who can help the mentee to find the right direction and who can help them to develop solutions to career issues. A structured formal programme would usually provide training and guidance for both potential mentors and mentees to ensure expectations are realistic and achievable. Mentoring can also be a more informal arrangement between senior and junior colleagues. It's a valuable way to help people develop and progress within a company.



## On-the-job training

Not all development requires formal courses or external training. Many effective learning opportunities can be built into day-to-day work.

Examples of informal or on-the-job training include:

- Buddying a new or developing employee with a more experienced colleague to provide support, build confidence, and help them gain practical skills.
- Making use of online resources, such as videos, articles, or e-learning platforms, which offer flexible and accessible learning options.
- Line manager coaching, where managers support their team's development by providing regular feedback, demonstrating tasks, and encouraging reflection and growth through everyday work.

## External training

Providing your employees with the opportunity to attend external training enables them to expand their knowledge and expertise, and exposes them to fresh perspective and ideas which can drive business improvement.



## APPRENTICESHIPS AND EQUALITY

Apprenticeships combine work-based learning with formal qualifications, and can be an effective way for businesses to develop skills and build their future workforce. However, apprenticeship frameworks are highly gender segregated. Men dominate in construction, engineering and technical apprenticeships, while women are concentrated in care, hairdressing and service roles. This segregation means women are less likely to access higher-paid pathways through apprenticeships, and employers miss out on talented candidates who are channelled away from their sector.

As an employer, you can help challenge this pattern by designing apprenticeship opportunities with equality in mind. This includes promoting apprenticeships widely, monitoring applicants by gender, reviewing recruitment materials for gendered language, and actively encouraging underrepresented groups to apply. Our [quick guide for apprenticeship providers](#) sets out how you can use the [Think Business, Think Equality tool](#) to make your apprenticeships fair, inclusive, and a genuine pathway to success for all.

## SPECIFIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

You should map if and where women are underrepresented in your business, in order to identify where development support could be best targeted. If your business has few women in senior roles, a targeted development programme can support women to progress, helping to build a more diverse and representative leadership team. This is a form of positive action.



## POSITIVE ACTION

The law says that if you've identified that certain groups of people are underrepresented in a particular role within your business, you can take targeted action to try to address this. This is known as positive action and is lawful under the Equality Act 2010.

Positive action doesn't mean giving someone an unfair advantage. Rather, it's mitigating the disadvantage caused by inequality, to put them on a level playing field with their counterparts.

You can also use positive action as part of internal recruitment processes where women are underrepresented in the role you're hiring for. For example, you could offer women-only information sessions on the role, and discuss the features that make a good application and interview.

For more information on positive action and the law, visit the [Equality and Human Rights Commission's website](#).

## MAKING TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

### Timing

You can widen access to training through effective scheduling and working with staff to find solutions that work for them.

Schedule training and team meetings at a time when everyone who wants to can attend, and avoid holding training outwith work hours wherever possible.



If training session conflicts with a staff member's caring arrangements, consider:

- rescheduling the session,
- adjusting the staff member's hours (with their agreement),
- offering financial support for childcare or other care, or
- provide payment or time off in lieu for any extra hours required to attend training.

Explore training options that can be delivered on a flexible basis. This can benefit all staff but particularly those working part-time, or on maternity leave.

Line managers should consider time spent on training and adjust workload/targets accordingly to enable staff to attend training and development opportunities. Offering protected training time is a great way to ensure this.

## Location

Pressures on budgets can mean that online training is a good option for smaller businesses. Where offering online training, you should ensure staff have access to the IT equipment and systems they need. Allowing staff the time and resources to complete online training during working hours means that all staff will be able to participate.

## Financial support

Supporting staff to study for a work-related, formal qualification can be beneficial for businesses, and also demonstrates a commitment to staff. There are a range of ways to support staff which could include making a financial contribution, granting paid or unpaid time off to study or to attend classes, and agreeing for them to work flexibly so that they can study alongside work.



## SUPPORTING DISABLED WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

Disabled women face additional barriers to development in the workplace. You can improve disabled women's access to training and development, and therefore their ability to progress at work, by embedding the following in your approach.

- **Ensuring accessibility** – Training materials, venues, and digital platforms should be fully accessible, with options like captioning, sign language interpretation, screen reader compatibility, and step-free access.
- **Flexible training options** – Providing remote, part-time, or self-paced learning opportunities allows disabled women to engage in development without facing physical or time-related barriers.
- **Targeted mentoring and networking** – Enabling access to mentoring schemes that specifically support disabled women can provide guidance and help build confidence in career progression.
- **Awareness and inclusive culture** – Training line managers and HR teams on disability inclusion ensures that development opportunities are proactively offered, and individual needs are considered.
- **Reasonable adjustments** – You should provide adjustments such as extra time for training, alternative formats for learning materials, or one-to-one coaching.

By embedding these strategies, employers can support more equal access to career progression pathways and ensure disabled women have the same opportunities for growth as their colleagues who are not disabled.



## SUPPORTING PROGRESSION FOR STAFF IN LOWER-GRADE ROLES

You should undertake an organisational skills analysis to determine if and where your people could be working below their skill level. You could do this by surveying staff in lower-grade and admin roles on their work experience and access to development and progression opportunities.

You should map progression routes for admin staff, and ensure staff are aware of how they can progress from their role. You can aid progression by developing an initiative to provide targeted training opportunities to staff in lower grades and admin roles.

## STAFF ON MATERNITY LEAVE

If a staff member is on maternity leave, you must keep them up to date on training and development opportunities, and ensure they're able to participate if they wish to do so. Staff on maternity leave can use their keeping in touch (KiT) days to participate in training and development opportunities that they're interested in.

If an employee is excluded from training opportunities because they are on maternity leave this is likely to be pregnancy and maternity discrimination if they are disadvantaged as a result, for example, by not being considered for a pay rise or promotion.

You should ensure you support staff to return to work after maternity or other parental leave, or from a longer career break, for example a break to provide care for a child. Offering mentoring for women returning to work after maternity or carer leave can help to make the transition more positive, and to ensure that staff are supported to find a way to balance their work with caring roles and stay in a role that fully utilises their skills.



You can find out more about supporting staff who are pregnant, or on leave to provide care for a child, in [our suite of resources on pregnancy, maternity and parental leave](#).

## VISIBILITY ON PROJECTS

Assigning women higher profile projects to lead on is a great way to facilitate development and progression, by enabling them to stretch themselves and build their profile in your business.

### Communication with staff

You should consider how these opportunities can be communicated to staff and how selections will be made to ensure decisions are fair and objective, and avoid high-profile projects being allocated to the same group of staff.

This will lead to more gender equality and diversity within your company as more women will be able to showcase their talents and raise their profile in your business, meaning greater eligibility for progression opportunities.

### The selection process

Staff responsible for deciding who should lead on projects should be able to justify those decisions objectively. Having a clear selection process in place can assist with this. Taking a fair, systematic and consistent approach helps ensure you select the right person for the job.



Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

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