Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience

120 respondents · Survey fielded Sept 15 – Oct 15, 2026 · In partnership with Washington University Olin Business School

When it comes to professional advancement, women do not lack ambition. But persistent obstacles can make the path difficult -- so difficult that some women are considering leaving their current position or the St. Louis region altogether. Whether they stay and advance at their current employer largely comes down to three factors: a clear pathway to advancement, sponsors, and fair recognition. Among women who don't see a clear path, **26%** are weighing an exit right now. Among women who do, only **2%** are. In September/October 2026, TEMPO St. Louis surveyed 120 women from a variety of industries throughout the region about the top challenges they face in the workplace. This report details those findings.

59%
have considered leaving their organization because they saw no clear path to leadership

44%
have held back from a promotion because of a lack of support or other barriers

62%
get less than male peers on manager support, sponsors, visibility, or recognition

89%
have felt their gender limited their opportunities at least at times

39%
say their organization gives them a clear path to advancement

Key takeaways

1. **With support, women stay.** Women with a clear path, sponsors and fair recognition are far less likely to consider leaving.
2. **Women have the ambition but not a roadmap.** 73% feel encouraged to take on stretch work, but only 39% see a clear path and 38% have sponsors.
3. **Visibility is the widest gap with men.** 43% say they get less visibility for promotion than male peers.
4. **Work-life demands are the top barrier (49%).** After that come gaps employers can address, including leadership development, sponsorship, and bias in promotion decisions.
5. **St. Louis risks losing talent.** 17% are considering leaving their organization now, and 39% have considered leaving the region to advance. Written answers point to closed networks and few local headquarters.
6. **Pay equity is the strongest lever.** 92% say compensation equity would influence their decision to pursue advancement.

RED FLAGS AND BRIGHT SPOTS

Where employers can make a difference: Retention risks, gaps and strengths

Findings below are organized by theme. Each row identifies the group represented and the number of women included. Red highlights retention risks, amber signals gaps to address, and green identifies strengths to build upon.

Retention risk

Women without a path or recognition are the ones heading for the door, and the region could lose them too.

26%	**Of women without a clear path are considering leaving right now** Against 2% of women who do see a clear path.	19 of 72 respondents
88%	**Of women who don't feel recognized and have considered leaving** 38% of them are considering it right now, against 8% of women who do feel recognized.	30 of 34 respondents
71%	**Of women ages 45–54 have considered leaving their organization** This is the largest age group – women in their peak leadership years. 27% are considering leaving right now.	37 of 52 respondents
39%	**Have considered leaving the St. Louis region to advance their careers** 10% are considering it right now. Written answers point to closed networks and few local headquarters.	47 of 119 respondents

Gaps in path and sponsorship

Most women lack the structures that move careers forward, and many hold back as a result.

61%	**Don't see a clear path to advancement in their organization** Only 6% strongly agree that a clear path exists.	73 of 120 respondents
62%	**Don't agree they are provided with sponsors** Sponsorship is the gap that respondents name most often in their written answers.	74 of 119 respondents
44%	**Have held back from a promotion because of barriers** 58% of women without a clear path have held back, against 22% of those with one.	51 of 117 respondents

Equity and sustainability

Women experience less visibility than men, and many doubt senior roles fit a sustainable life.

43%	**Get less visibility for promotion than male peers** This is the widest of the four gaps with male peers.	51 of 118 respondents
34%	**Disagree that senior roles in their organization fit a sustainable personal life** Burnout is the top personal reason women hesitate to step up (39%).	41 of 119 respondents

Bright spots

There is a strong foundation to build on. Women are ambitious, eager to develop, and often feel valued day to day.

86%	**Say targeted leadership development would make them more likely to pursue advancement** Women are eager to grow. Development is a lever employers can pull now, and 36% strongly agree this would help.	102 of 119 respondents
73%	**Feel encouraged to pursue stretch assignments** Women are being invited to grow. Turning stretch work into a defined path is the next step.	86 of 118 respondents
71%	**Say their contributions are recognized fairly** Day-to-day recognition is largely in place.	85 of 120 respondents
67%	**Get the same or more support from managers as male peers** Managers are a strength to build sponsorship on.	79 of 118 respondents
57%	**Rate career advancement as very or extremely important** Ambition is strong. 42% want to advance within two to five years.	63 of 110 respondents

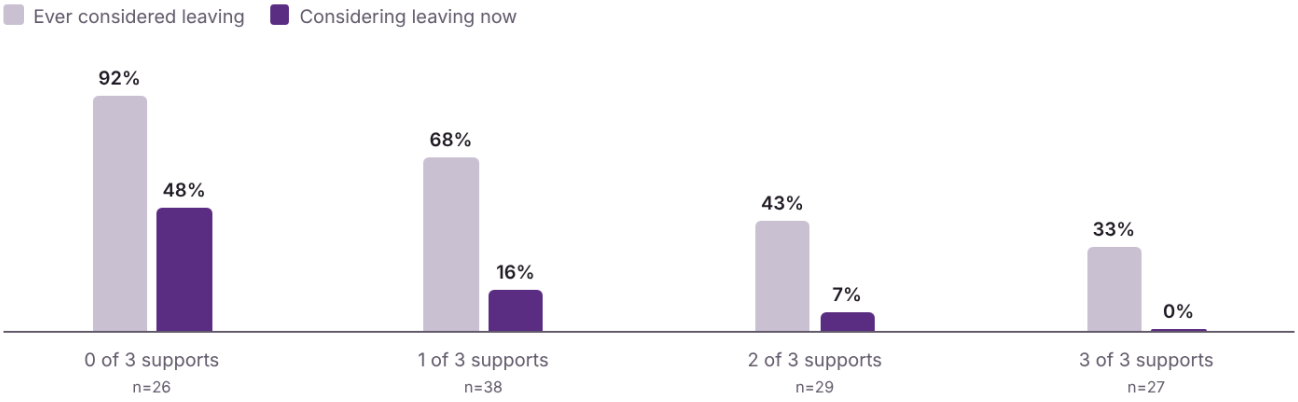
RETENTION

Three supports are critical in retaining top talent

Three supports emerged as critical to retaining top talent: a clear path to advancement, sponsors, and recognition. The fewer supports a woman has, the less likely she is to stay at her current employer.

Thinking about leaving, by number of supports

Share who have considered leaving their organization over a lack of path to leadership



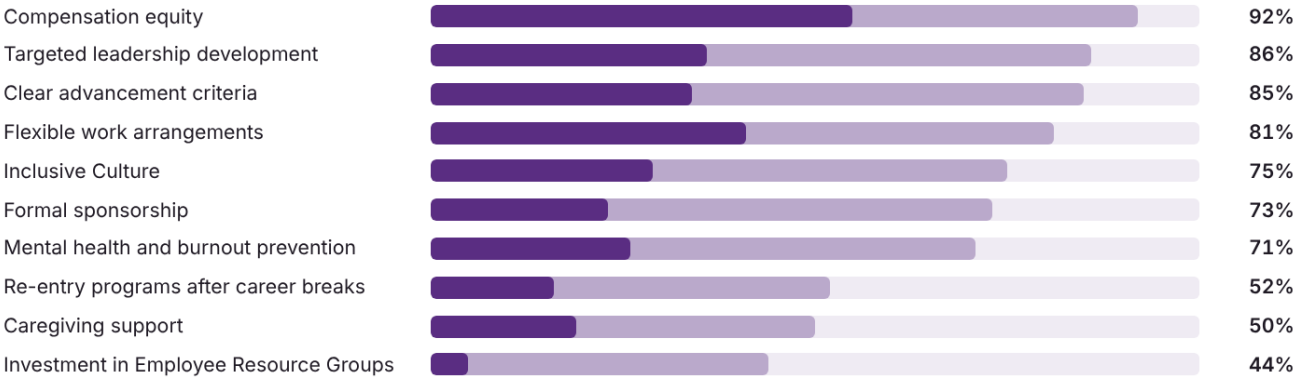
WHAT WOULD HELP

What would most influence women to pursue advancement?

Compensation equity is the strongest draw: 92% agree it would influence them. Leadership development, clear criteria, and flexible work follow. Employee resource groups rank last.

Practices that would influence the decision to pursue advancement

Dark bar is strongly agree; full bar is agree or strongly agree

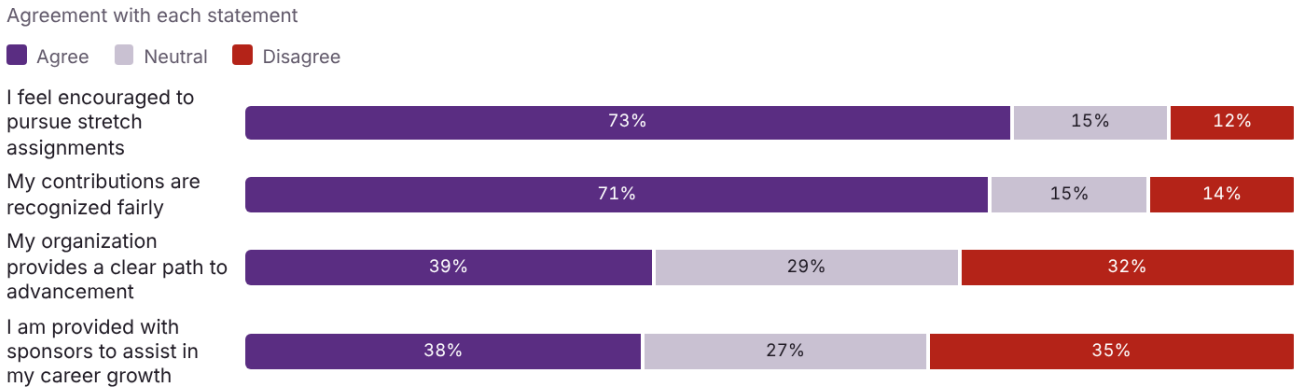


WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

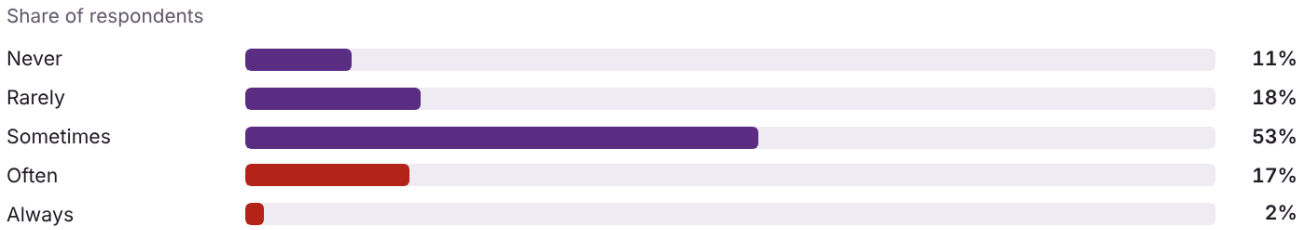
Recognized for contributions, but without a map for advancement

Most respondents feel recognized and encouraged to take on stretch work. But only 39% see a clear path forward, and 38% have sponsors. Compared with male peers, 43% of women say they have less visibility for promotion.

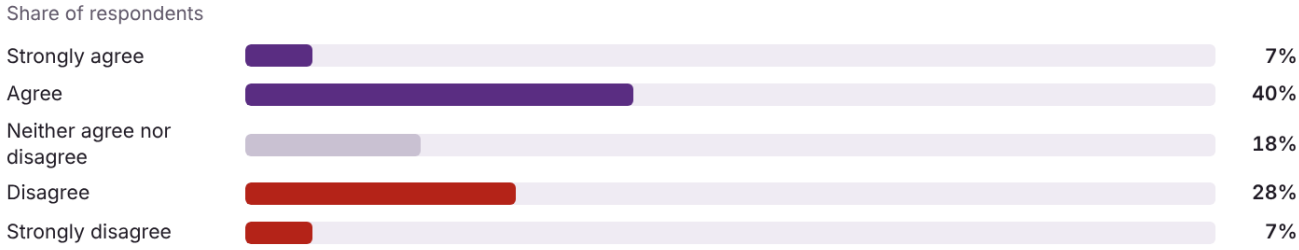
How respondents rate their organization



Has your gender limited your opportunities?



Senior roles here fit a sustainable personal life



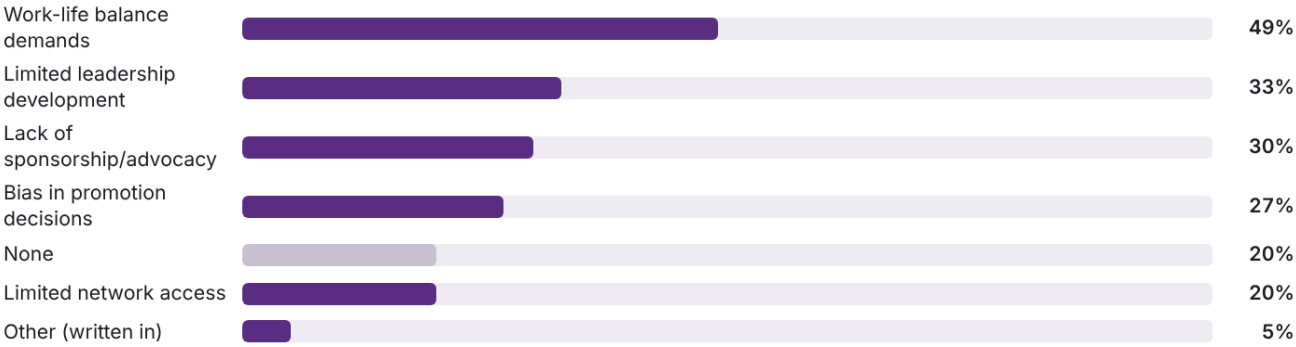
BARRIERS

Work-life load is top barrier, then structural gaps

Work-life demands are the most common barrier to advancement at 49%. After that come gaps that organizations can fix: limited leadership development, no sponsorship, and bias in promotion decisions. On the personal side, concern about burnout is the top reason women hesitate to step up.

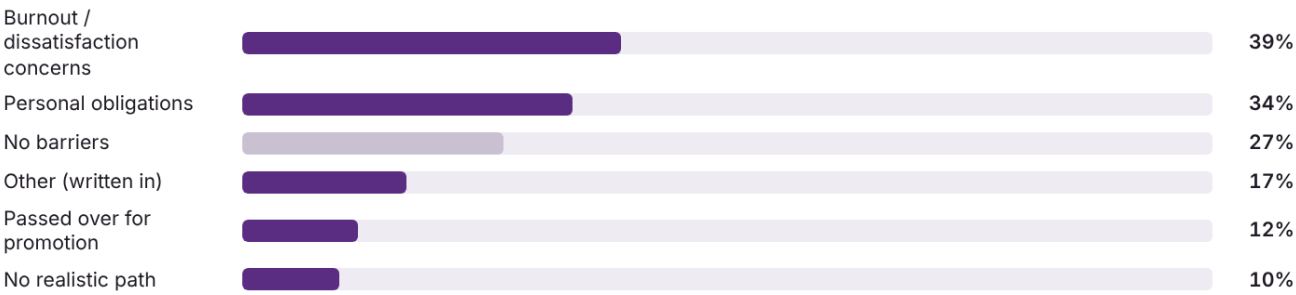
Barriers to advancement

Select all that apply



What makes you less likely to pursue advancement

Select all that apply



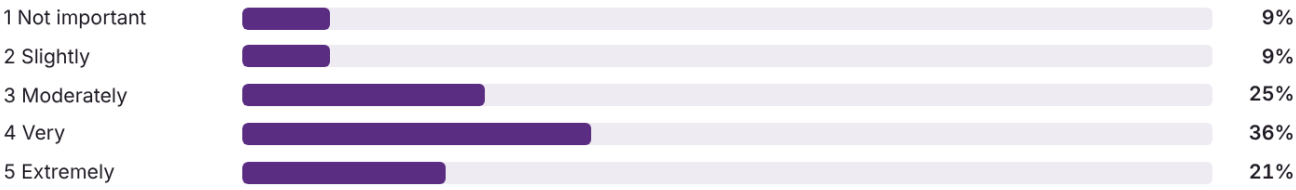
AMBITION & MOBILITY

Ambitious, and some are looking elsewhere

42% of respondents say they want to advance within two to five years, and 24% are seeking a promotion now. Many have thought about leaving: 17% are considering leaving their organization right now, and 10% are considering leaving the St. Louis region to advance.

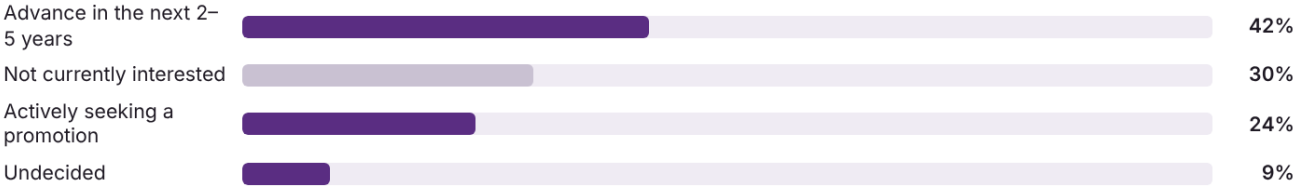
How important is career advancement?

1 = not important, 5 = extremely important



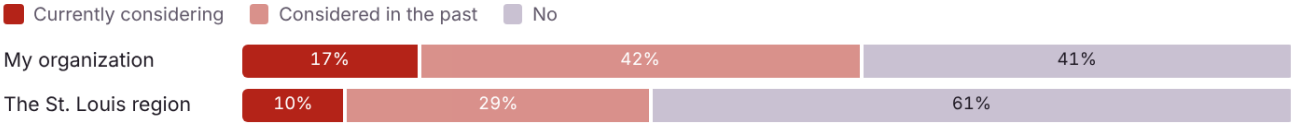
Advancement timeframe

A few respondents chose more than one



Considered leaving...

Her organization, over a lack of path to leadership, or the St. Louis region, to advance



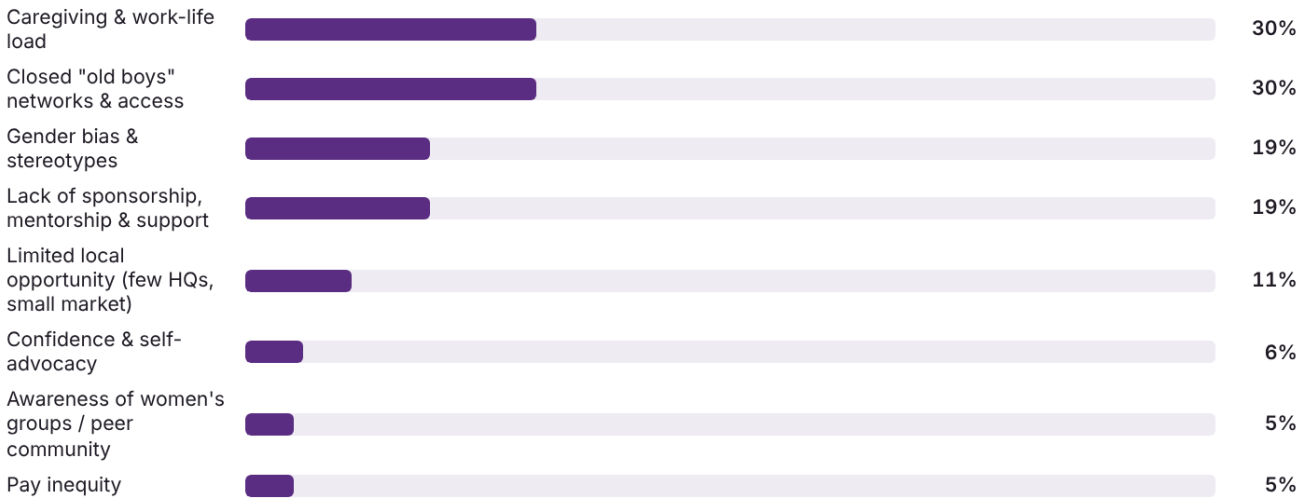
IN THEIR WORDS

Responses to open-ended questions

We grouped these written answers into themes. One answer can fall under more than one theme.

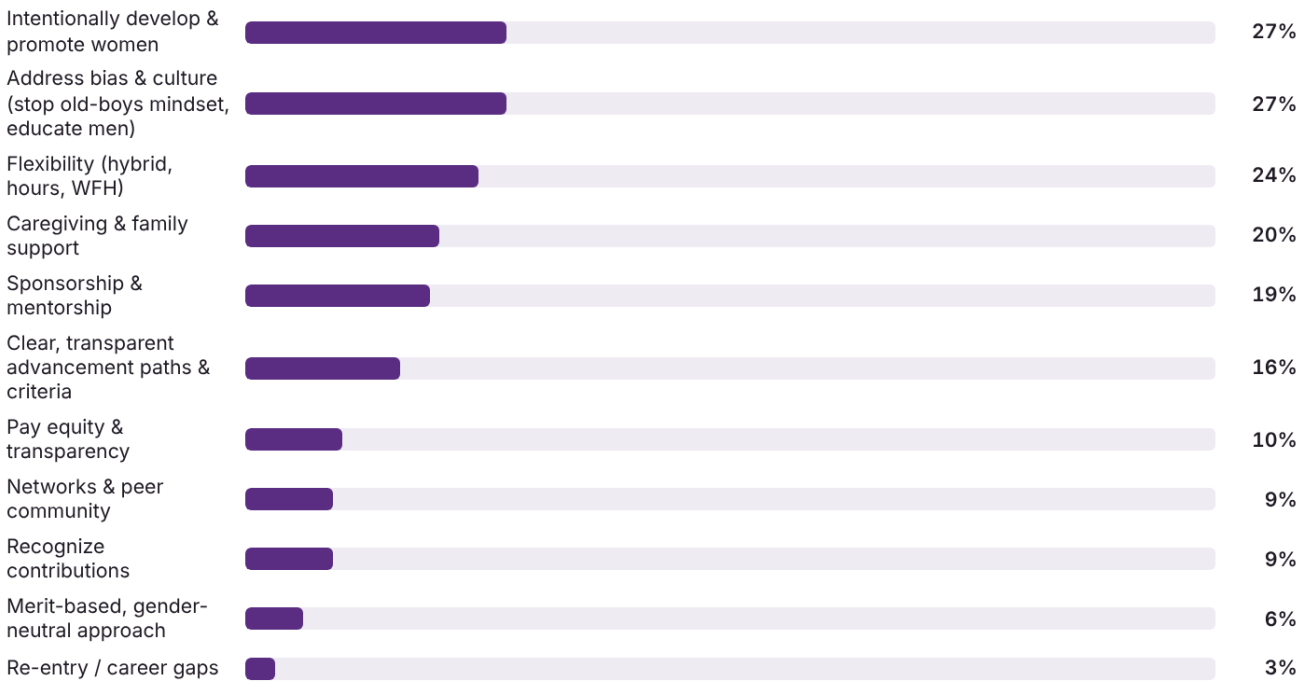
The biggest barrier facing women leaders in St. Louis

Share of 101 written answers



What companies should stop or start doing

Share of 90 written answers



Selected comments

> *"The biggest barrier facing women leaders in St. Louis is the region's tightly knit, relationship-driven business culture, where long-standing (and largely male) networks still decide who gets sponsored, recommended for board seats, and tapped for top roles, often before a formal opening ever exists."*
>
> Executive Leadership, 45-54

> *“I think so much bias is still unconscious, and one incredibly under recognized fact is that senior women do not generally have a stay-at-home spouse taking care of the mental labor at home - even if they have a relatively equal partnership on the domestic labor. Many men in C-suite positions have a spouse who can help in handling the calendar and the kids’ schedules, but this still weighs very heavily on working women.”*
> Executive Leadership, 45-54
>
> *“Lack of larger, headquartered companies based in St. Louis. There are only a few companies with fewer executive level roles limiting advancement opportunities.”*
> Executive Leadership, 65+
>
> *“Not being held to the same standards as men; for example, when I complete deliverables, they have to be above-and-beyond effort. Competence isn't enough.”*
> Executive Leadership, 45-54
>
> *“Bias toward women who did not grow up in St. Louis and/or are not part of old St. Louis families.”*
> Senior Management, 55-64
>
> *“Lack of childcare support or ‘punishment’ for taking on the parental brunt of sick days, child doctors’ appointments, etc.”*
> Mid-Level, 25-34
>
> *“STOP relying on mentorship without sponsorship. Advice is useful, but leaders also need someone advocating for them when succession, stretch assignments, and promotions are decided. START making sponsorship an executive responsibility. Every senior leader should actively open doors for talented leaders who don't naturally sit inside their existing networks.”*
> C-Suite, 45-54
>
> *“The real gap is sponsorship, so they need senior leaders who actively put women forward for high-visibility, P&L-carrying roles. They should also start building transparent promotion and pay criteria and flexible work norms that don't penalize caregiving, because women leave when the path up is opaque and the cost of staying is unsustainable.”*
> Executive Leadership, 45-54
>
> *“Companies should stop expecting women to adapt to systems that weren’t designed for them and start changing the systems—making advancement, pay, flexibility, sponsorship, and access to leadership opportunities intentional and equitable.”*
> C-Suite, 55-64
>
> *“Ensure women leaders aren't automatically responsible for office housekeeping (e.g., taking notes, making the agenda, doing administrative tasks that are beneath the pay grade - note, I respect those roles deeply, but my current role does not involve that type of work, and yet I somehow get assigned to it). Companies should be equitable- I often look around the room and notice it is very white and very male-dominated. Additionally, pay equity must be implemented, particularly with respect to performance, experience, and education.”*
> Executive Leadership, 45-54

SEGMENTS

Which groups face the greatest risk of leaving?

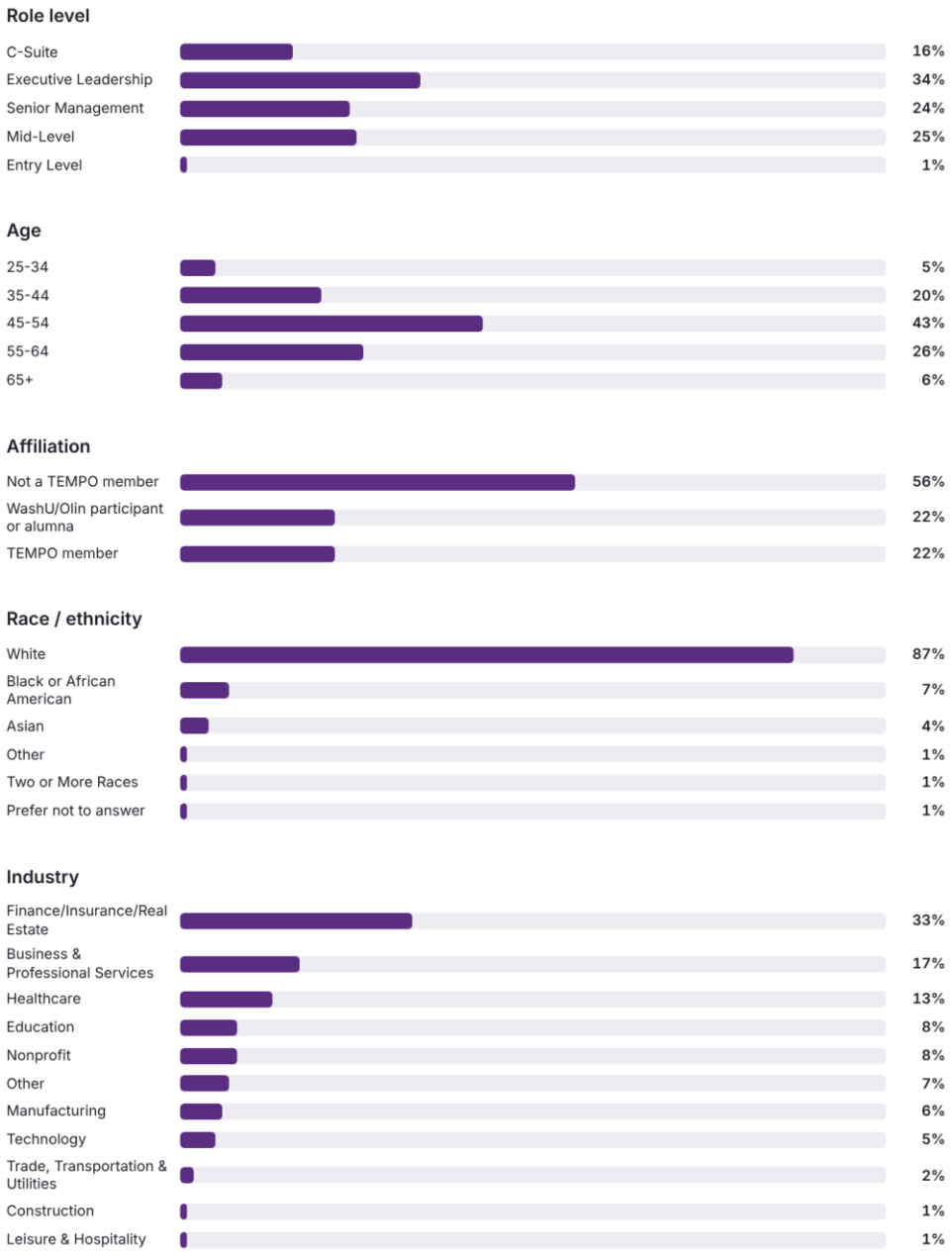
Percentages below reflect respondents within each group. Results for groups with fewer than 20 respondents suggest patterns but should be interpreted cautiously. “Leaving now” refers to women currently considering leaving their organization because they lack a clear path to leadership. Darker shading indicates higher percentages within each column.

Group	n	Leaving now	Ever considered leaving	Held back from promotion	Less than men (any)	Gender limited often	Clear path	Has sponsors	Senior roles sustainable	Burnout concern	Considered leaving STL
All respondents	**120**	**17**	**59**	**44**	**62**	**18**	**39**	**38**	**47**	**39**	**39**
Affiliation											
TEMPO member	26	4	60	40	58	27	62	42	50	32	35
WashU/Olin	26	27	65	50	76	15	31	46	46	35	58
Not a TEMPO member	66	17	55	42	57	15	35	34	46	44	34
Role level											
C-Suite/Exec	60	10	55	43	55	20	53	42	54	30	44
Senior Mgmt	29	28	59	50	72	14	17	41	31	43	41
Mid/Entry	31	19	68	39	65	19	32	27	48	55	29
Age											
Under 45	30	7	40	34	60	27	30	37	33	50	27
45-54	52	27	71	53	60	15	40	38	52	44	44
55+	38	11	58	38	67	16	45	38	51	24	43
Race / ethnicity											
White	103	17	58	43	62	20	40	37	46	40	35
Women of color	15	13	60	54	60	7	33	47	60	33	73
Industry											
Finance/Insurance/Real Estate	39	10	59	39	62	21	46	49	51	38	28
Business & Professional Services	20	6	50	37	67	20	55	45	32	32	21
Healthcare	16	25	50	44	56	12	44	33	62	44	44
Other industries	45	24	67	50	62	18	24	27	44	42	56
Clear path to advancement											
Agree	47	2	41	22	50	13	100	61	68	26	32
Neutral or disagree	73	26	71	58	69	22	0	23	33	49	44
Provided with sponsors											
Agree	45	4	40	30	56	16	62	100	51	27	33
Neutral or disagree	75	25	71	51	66	20	25	0	45	47	43
Contributions recognized fairly											
Agree	85	8	48	37	52	14	54	43	53	39	36
Neutral or disagree	35	38	88	59	85	29	3	26	32	41	47

WHO RESPONDED

Respondent profile

Women ages 45 to 64 make up the highest number of respondents, and most work in finance, insurance and real estate or in professional services. Most are not TEMPO members, so these results reach beyond our network. The sample is mostly white, so results for women of color are directional.



METHODOLOGY

How we analyzed the data

Source: the survey platform's individual response export was pulled Oct 19, 2026. All 120 responses were collected through one web link and every one is marked complete. Two were auto flagged as poor quality (for profanity and a non-word). We reviewed them and kept them because their answers were substantive.

What's next

TEMPO will convene business and community leaders on November 18, 2026, to discuss these findings and highlight meaningful progress in advancing and retaining women leaders. This event is open to the public. The conversation will focus on practical solutions and shared accountability across the region. More information: Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience.

About TEMPO

TEMPO is a network of more than 560 executive women and nearly 300 emerging women leaders dedicated to advancing women in leadership. For over 50 years, TEMPO has provided professional development, networking, mentorship and advocacy to empower women in the metro Milwaukee area to achieve and sustain leadership roles. In September 2026, TEMPO launched its first chapter outside Wisconsin in St. Louis to meet the needs of women leaders across industries in this community.

About the research

Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience was conducted in September/October 2026 in conjunction with Washington University – Olin Business School. The survey includes responses from 120 Women across executive, C-suite, and professional roles. The research is part of TEMPO's broader commitment to serving as a data-driven voice on the issues shaping women's professional experiences.