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The 2014 soccer world cup final in Rio de Janeiro marked an important watershed in women's professional progress.

It was the first time that three women were the representative heads of state at the award ceremony on the dais: Dilma Rousseff, the president of the host country, Brazil, Cristina Kirchner representing Argentina as the runners up, and Chancellor Angela Merkel, who received the gold trophy on behalf of the winning Germany team.

If being at the helm of the C-suite is *the* indication of gender progress, then there is much to be sanguine about. As it is not just politics and global policymaking where women are making/have made important professional strides (think IMF head Christine Lagarde, or US Federal reserve chair, Janet Yellen). In virtually all non-business (academe and NGOs) and business sectors — technology (old and new), automotives, industrials, fast moving consumer goods, and even mining —

viewed by many as a bastion of masculinity — the glass ceiling has been shattered, with women not just ascending into the C-suite, but also acquiring the coveted CEO role.

In fact, the number of women CEOs in the Fortune 500 has been rising steadily since 1998, when Jill Barad of Mattel and Marion Sandler, Co-CEO of Golden West Financial were the only female chiefs of such corporate giants. The female Fortune 500 CEO population is now at an all-time high of 24 [and 22 in the S&P 500]; a definite trend in the right direction.

Yet women are still underrepresented in the C suite. Even at the best of times, CEO succession is difficult; demanding that the successful candidate exhibit a range of skills, product exposure, deep knowledge of organisation management, and an unflappable temperament. As businesses have become more complex and more global, the combination of broad and deep knowledge rarely coincides in individuals.

Despite recent urgings for women to “lean-in,” many women (and men for that matter) have yet to solve the practicalities of managing competitive and demanding careers with family life. Relatedly, networking — widely acknowledged as a critical aspect of career progression and success — suffers despite best efforts to balance personal and professional life. These factors exist across sectors, and most corporations, regardless of industry, have responded by offering flex time and mentoring schemes to combat these hurdles.

There is also the issue of culture; the argument being that over many decades a male-centric culture has deterred and impeded women from staying and succeeding in leadership positions in a number of industries.

The good news is in many companies there is no longer an explicit systematic agenda to keep women out of these crucial roles just because they are women.

To the contrary - both explicit public campaigns for greater gender representation (such as the 30 percent targets for management and the board room popularized in Europe), and implicit business case realizations have placed the "women agenda" at the core of succession planning are clearly making inroads.

If nothing else, there is a clear-eyed appreciation that having a diversified workforce is just plain, good old-fashioned business sense. After all, the span of customers, employees, shareholders and regulators boast diversified ranks, and

diversity of thought has to be reflected in how global 21st century businesses serve and engage their client base.

It is altogether too simplistic to only blame a company (or industry) for the state of affairs. Individuals must take on a larger role and become part of the solution. Specifically, women must take greater active control of managing their careers, and take more calculated risks.

It would seem there is no downside to a well-calculated risk. Either one gets the job, or one doesn't. If you don't, you have the opportunity to gather information about your career, and glean feedback for improvement.

Yet, too many women self-select themselves out to their detriment and, ultimately, to that of the organization. A case in point is in my own experience conducting a public search for a CEO where, despite scores of applicants, there was not a single female applicant. This is yet another obstacle to a woman ascending to the rank of CEO; the fact that many women self-select themselves out of competition even when they are eminently qualified, accomplished, and possibly of superior candidacy than their male counterparts. Unfortunately, as well as being a hobgoblin of the individual, self-selection is also a problem most companies struggle to address or remedy.

The onus for attracting, retaining, promoting and thus increasing the odds of a female CEO in the near future requires corporations go further than they might to find (male) candidates.

But success in ferreting out competent and competitive female candidates, and combating the problem of self-selection also rests in highlighting role models from *all* areas of professional success to boost the confidence of would-be female applicants.

With these and other factors, it should not be long before women more commonly grace the hallowed halls as CEOs and the coveted C-suite.

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