

Unlocking women's leadership through STEM skills programmes

Closing the STEM gender gap for women and world



DaringCircles Women4STEM

by the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society

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Executive Summary

Companies that need more STEM-based roles in the future could be neglecting a source of untapped potential – existing women employees with STEM skills. By offering these women more STEM skills training, companies could fill their need, and close a persistent gender divide in their STEM workforce and leadership.

Skill building can help companies fix their leaky STEM leadership pipeline, characterized by lower rates of retention and promotion for women than men in mid-level and higher STEM jobs. Women, and younger women in particular, value obtaining new skills as a path to promotions and job changes.

Companies must address the barriers that women in STEM see to retention and advancement in their organisations. One way to do that is by over-investing in helping women in STEM acquire relevant skills. But about half of women with existing STEM jobs believe that barriers to that exist at their organisations.

When organisations offer STEM skills training, they make themselves attractive not just to women but to all in-demand talent, as the vast majority of both men and women STEM professionals are eager to skill and learn.

To improve STEM skills and help women advance in STEM jobs, companies should determine the gap between their current gender diversity practices and goals, and then build a STEM curriculum that is grounded in real work and suited to women employees' needs and preferences. Companies must provide time for building skills, and use relevant channels to promote the opportunities.



Introduction

Closing the STEM Gender Gap for Women and World

Our world is undergoing rapid disruption. Everyone from lawyers to artists will need science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills to succeed in an increasingly digital economy. To remain competitive, too, organisations and countries need STEM skills; more than that, they need people with diverse and differentiated talents and abilities, exercising STEM skills, to innovate and thrive in the digital economy transition.

That means they need the skills and talents of women, who continue to be underrepresented in STEM roles. But existing initiatives to encourage girls and women to study STEM and embark on STEM careers are not delivering results at the pace and scale we all need. Meanwhile, the pipeline is leaking female talent and with it, investment in pro-diversity STEM initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the world urgently needs science, technology, engineering and mathematics skills to develop vaccines, solve thorny public health challenges, and transition to a low-carbon future. How can we create the conditions for women and girls to acquire and exercise STEM skills, advance in their careers, and in so doing, contribute to shaping and leading a better and more inclusive world?

Engaging our networks to inspire girls

Amplifying the voices of our STEMSISTER community

One of the Women4STEM Daring Circle's future ambitions is **STEMKEY** – a campaign to engage girls by creating a fun, cool brand around STEM skills. Our conviction is that creating a human connection between teenage girls and STEM women can help teens to unlock, and be authors of, their own futures.

In the past year, the Daring Circle has been inviting STEM women to join their **STEMSISTER Community** and inviting them to record short videos to help inspire the next generation, in partnership with [Inspiring Girls International](#). **More than 200** STEM women have signed up so far.

Click [here](#) to join them and [visit](#) the Inspiring Girls Video Hub to hear their careers stories and advice.

Supported by our Knowledge Partner Boston Consulting Group, the Women4STEM Daring Circle has been exploring the **STEM skills landscape** today for women, and how it may change across sectors and industries in the future.

This work includes identifying where **gaps and opportunities** exist for women in terms of STEM skills themselves and their delivery from schools to boardrooms. And, highlighting opportunities for women to drive positive impact through up-skilling, cross-skilling and re-skilling.

Definitions

Organisations' need for skills is shifting in the face of digital disruption and other external challenges. Closing the STEM skills gap through upskilling and cross-skilling enables women and the organisations that employ them to drive positive social impact in a digital future by:

- **Re-skilling** new entrants, women who work outside STEM.
Teaching new skills in growing areas to women with relevant existing skills in declining areas.
- **Up-skilling** of leaders, women managers and executives.
Equipping senior leaders to lead STEM projects and teams.
- **Cross-skilling** of women with technical jobs within STEM.
Teaching updated or advanced skills that allow women to take on jobs in emerging areas or with pathways to leadership.



Skills programmes can help close the STEM gender gap

The future of the workforce is digital, and companies can't hire people fast enough to fill roles that require digital and other STEM skills. At the same time, they're sitting on a potential talent goldmine – their existing women employees working in STEM jobs.

Although women make up 39% of the workforce and have held STEM jobs for decades, they represent only a quarter of STEM workforce, and only 9% of information technology company CEOs¹.

Women might not stay in STEM jobs because of the obstacles they say exist at their companies. About half of women in STEM jobs see obstacles to gender diversity where they work, double the number of their non-STEM peers. At the same time, the vast majority of women in STEM are eager to gain new skills that could help them advance in their careers.

Those are among the findings from approximately 10,000 employees in STEM and non-STEM jobs in a dozen G20 countries around the world who took part in a recent Boston Consulting Group survey.

We undertook the survey to determine what types of opportunities for building skills would be most successful in driving change and helping women in STEM advance in their careers, what barriers to obtaining new skills they face, and what their learning preferences and desired opportunities are.

Companies can take advantage of a period of rapid change that has been accelerated by the pandemic to build future skills within their workforce and help close the STEM gender divide and leaky STEM leadership pipeline.

To do that, they need to over-invest in helping women in STEM take advantage of skill-building opportunities. by determining what could be missing from their current practices, and building a STEM curriculum that is suited to women employees' needs and preferences. They also need to provide employees with time for learning, and use relevant channels to promote the opportunities.

Using skills to address the gender gap in STEM

The labour market is being reshaped by the changing nature of work. Low-wage jobs, often held by women, are being replaced by automation or wiped out by economic conditions created by the pandemic. At the same time, employers can't find enough people with in-demand digital skills. According to [previous research from BCG and the World Economic Forum](#), 40% of employers have difficulty finding people with the skills they need, and 60% say the skills gap in local labour markets prevent them from implementing desired technological advances.

The shifting labour market is likely to affect women disproportionately. According to one study, 11% of women's jobs will be lost to automation compared to 9% for men.

Despite the surfeit of jobs that require digital skills, women remain underrepresented in STEM roles, the lifeblood of the digital economy. Even though they make up 39% of the global workforce, women account for only 25% of STEM jobs.

One cause of the dearth of women in STEM is the field's leaky leadership pipeline. Far fewer women than men advance to management roles. Although 36% of STEM graduates are women, they represent only 14% of managers in STEM fields, and only 9% of STEM CEOs.

Women in STEM may not stay in the field because of the obstacles that they perceive at their companies. We found that about half of women in STEM jobs agree that obstacles to gender diversity exist where they work, double the number of their non-STEM peers (see Exhibit 1).

1. The Credit Suisse Gender 3000: Women in Senior Management, 2016

The share of women in STEM reporting obstacles to closing the gender gap is higher in China and India, where more than two-thirds report such barriers.

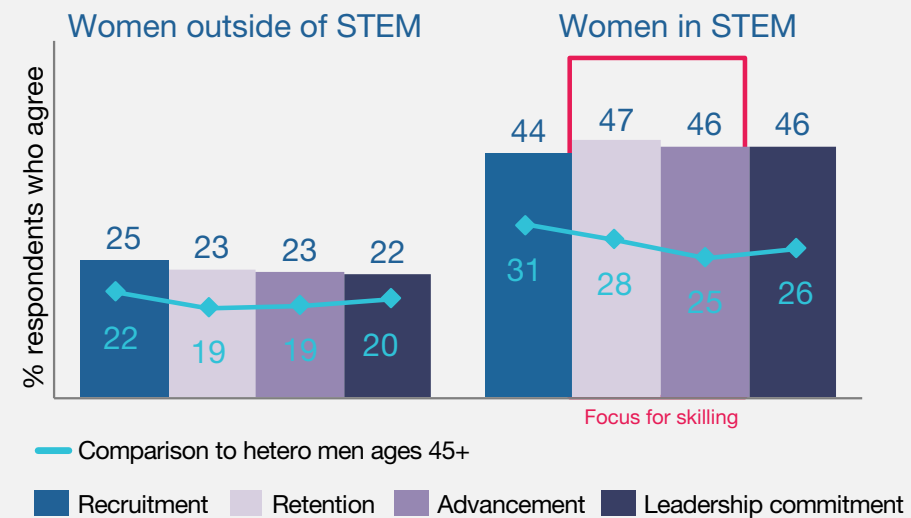
Men and STEM leaders are less likely to perceive barriers to diversity and inclusion where they work. Only about a quarter of hetero men ages 45 and older in STEM jobs perceive such barriers. This perspective is likely to represent the thinking of the majority of leadership. If leaders don't perceive barriers, it could lead to a misallocation of resources and programming for skills training.

At the same time that companies face a STEM gender gap, they have to build a workforce with the skills needed for the future. The rapid pace of change of work and competition for people with in-demand skills has put the onus on employers to develop those skills internally rather than rely on universities, schools, or other outside training programmes.

STEM skills programmes can rectify these issues. By over-investing in providing women in STEM with opportunities to learn new skills, companies can close the gender gap, seal up the leaky STEM leadership pipeline for women, and grow the size of their workforce with the skills needed for the future. By providing skills training, companies also can help women employees in STEM jobs be more successful in their careers, and potentially increase their job satisfaction. Offering skills sessions also opens the door for more women to advance into leadership positions.

Exhibit 1 Women in STEM Face Barriers to Advancing in Their Careers

'There are obstacles to gender diversity and inclusion in my company...'



Source: BCG 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Assessment for Leadership survey

Women are eager to learn STEM skills

Women in STEM are willing to learn new skills – in some countries more than men - and see it as a way to move into a new role or advance in their careers. But they struggle with inflexible schedules and other barriers that prevent them from taking advantage of skill-building opportunities.

As work changes, it requires new skills, including hard skills tied to technology, as well as soft skills. According to previous BCG research, [analytical skills](#) are among the top four capabilities that people believe will be important in the future. Other problem-solving capabilities are particularly relevant for specific roles that are increasing in demand, including roles in artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and cloud technology.

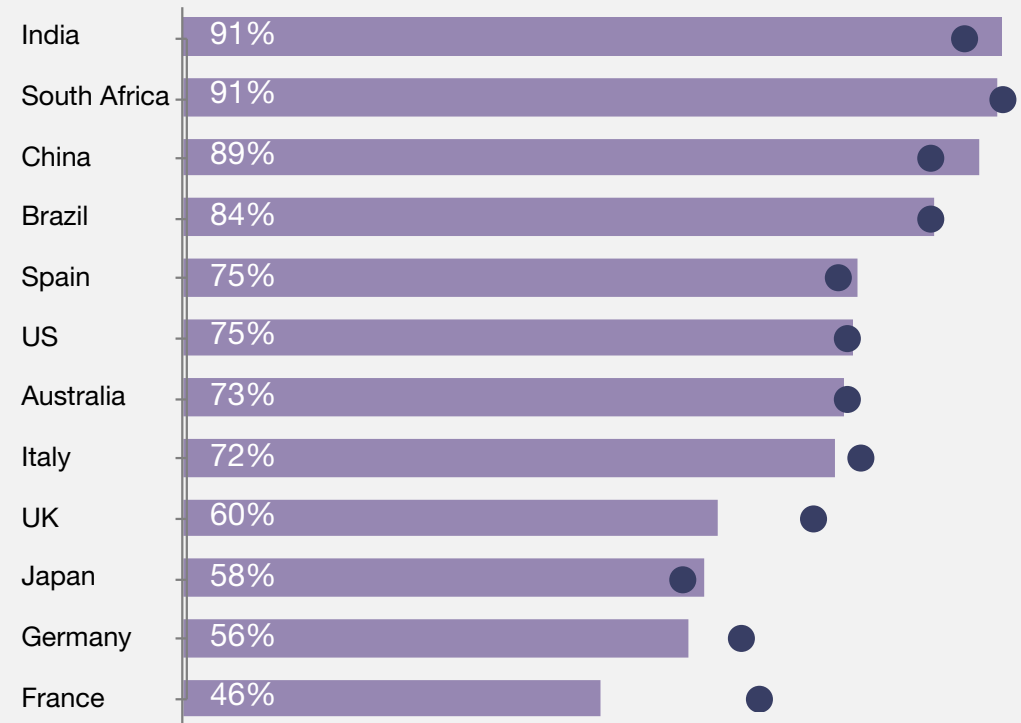
Technology skills are commonly associated with STEM, but soft or human-focused skills in communications, creativity, and leadership are increasing in importance. Successfully transitioning into a STEM management role may rely more on these human-centred skills, which is why employers may need to improve access to opportunities to learn both hard and soft skills.

Regardless of the type of skill, we found that the vast majority of STEM professionals are keen to learn, and in most countries, women are just as interested as men (see Exhibit 2.)

Exhibit 2 STEM professionals are eager to learn new skills, though women's interest varies by country

Interest in learning new STEM skills
(% of respondents)

■ Women in STEM ● Men in STEM



Source: BCG 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Assessment for Leadership survey

Women in STEM jobs in rapidly developing economies are especially interested in picking up new skills. This is especially the case in India, China, Brazil, and South Africa, where women in STEM roles are significantly more interested in opportunities to learn new skills than their peers in EU5 countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom), and US. In several of these developing economies, women in STEM are more interested in picking up new skills than their male counterparts.

Conversely, women in the UK, Germany, and France are quantifiably less interested in STEM skills opportunities than their male colleagues, which could be a signal to companies in those countries to increase their promotion of the opportunities and actively target their women employees.

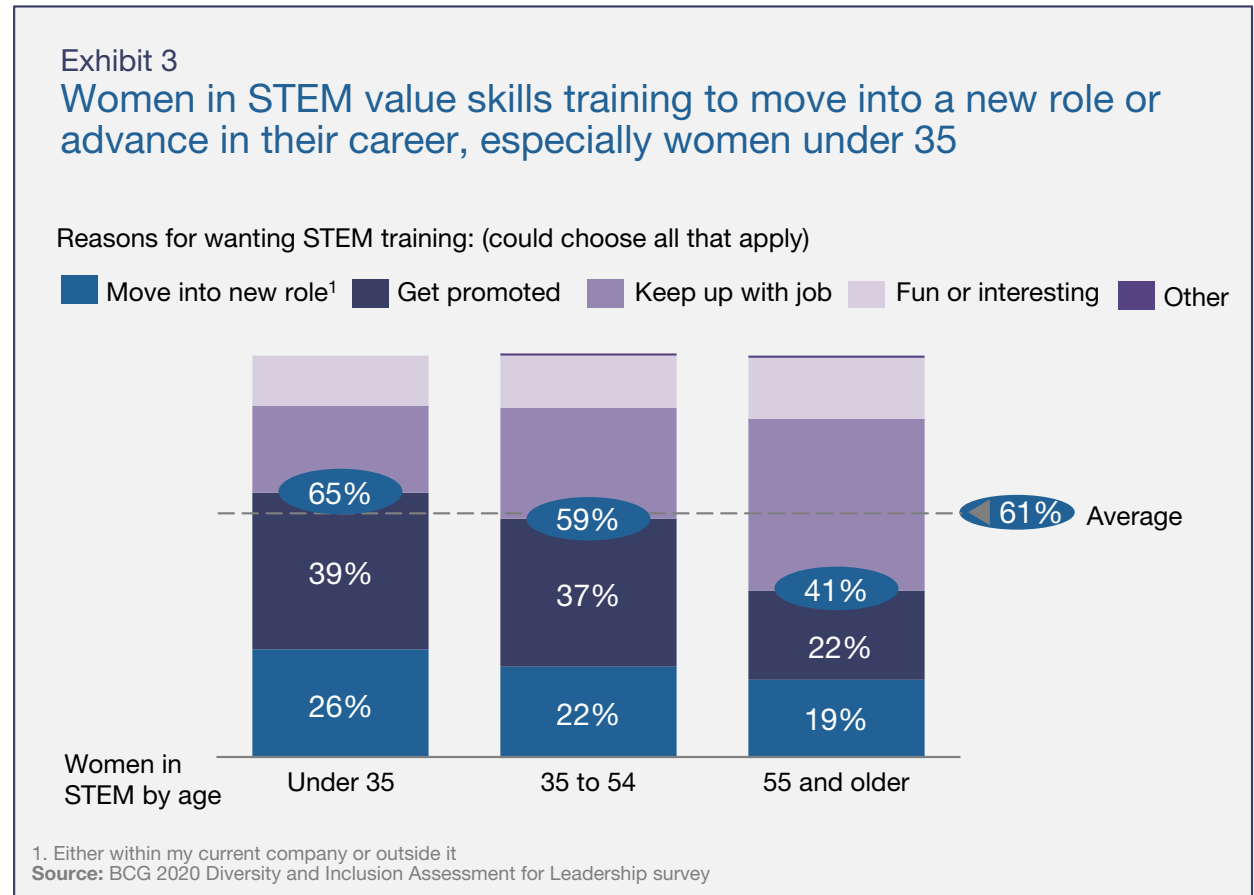
The majority of women in STEM value skills training as a way to move into a new role or advance in their career (see Exhibit 3.) Younger women in particular are interested in learning new skills as a path to advancement, with 65% of those under 35 saying they value it for getting a new job or promotion, compared with 59% of women 35 to 54, and 41% of women 55 and older.

Women in STEM are more likely to see improving their skills as a path to advancement than women in non-STEM roles. Only about half of that group cite wanting a job change or promotion as a reason for wanting to learn new skills. Men in STEM also are less likely to value learning new skills to advance in their jobs.

If companies give women in STEM the chance to learn new skills that many of them want, it could help those organisations close the gender gap in STEM leadership roles, especially since younger women in STEM in particular see skill building as a way to move into a new role or get promoted.

Beyond upskilling women who already work in STEM, organisations can address the leaky pipeline to STEM leadership by offering reskilling and cross-skilling opportunities to women in non-STEM roles. The interest is certainly there. More than a third of women (35%) not currently in STEM roles report an interest in learning new STEM skills, a number that is in line with their male peers (31%).

The majority of women not currently in STEM roles see obtaining STEM skills as important to their careers. More than 75% say they want STEM training to get promoted, move into a new role, or to keep their job.



Barriers block women in STEM from learning new skills

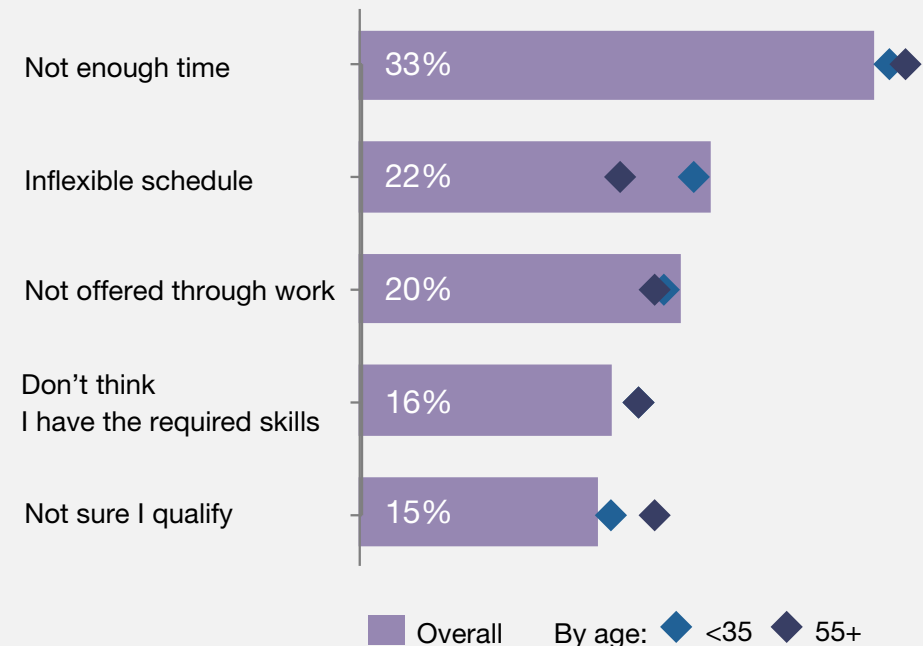
While the will to learn new skills is there, the way may not be. We found that women in STEM face multiple barriers to taking advantage of opportunities to learn new skills (see Exhibit 4.) The top barriers are lack of time and inflexible schedules, both of which are closely associated with the [disproportionate amount of time that women devote to child care](#) and other non-professional responsibilities. Inflexible schedules are an especially high barrier for younger women, who are more likely to have responsibilities related to having younger children living at home. We found that lack of time is by far the biggest barrier to taking advantage of skills opportunities for women in STEM in EU5 countries, US, Japan, Australia, and Brazil.

Globally, about 1 in 5 women in STEM is not offered STEM skills opportunities through work, limiting their growth to independent study or enrolling in classes or programmes outside of work. Women in STEM in India have the fewest opportunities, with 1 in 3 not offered STEM training at work.

Even when STEM skills programmes are offered, women's perceptions of their own abilities and readiness can impede them from taking advantage of the opportunities. In Asia-Pacific countries, we found that 1 of 4 women in STEM believe that they do not have the required skill level or qualifications for STEM skills training. In EU countries and the US, younger women in STEM, those under 35, are the most likely to cite lack of required skills as a barrier.

Exhibit 4 For women in STEM, lack of time, flexibility, or available offerings are main barriers to learning new skills

Percent of women in STEM who identified the barrier



Source: BCG 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Assessment for Leadership survey

Preferences of women in STEM

To encourage participation, organisations have to tailor skills programmes to what women want and need, including programmes that are tied to day-to-day work, and that make a meaningful difference. Companies also must offer skills sessions in the formats and settings that women in STEM prefer.

Women are pragmatic: they prefer skills that they can apply to their jobs. We found that more than half prefer building skills on the job over other options. In fact, in most countries we surveyed, learning on the job was the top preference of both women in STEM roles and women outside of STEM.

Such a practical mindset is likely related to the lack of time for learning new skills that employees have beyond their daily work. It also highlights the role that employers could play to provide more opportunities for development through skills programmes and on-the-job training, as well as by giving employees access to conferences and networking.

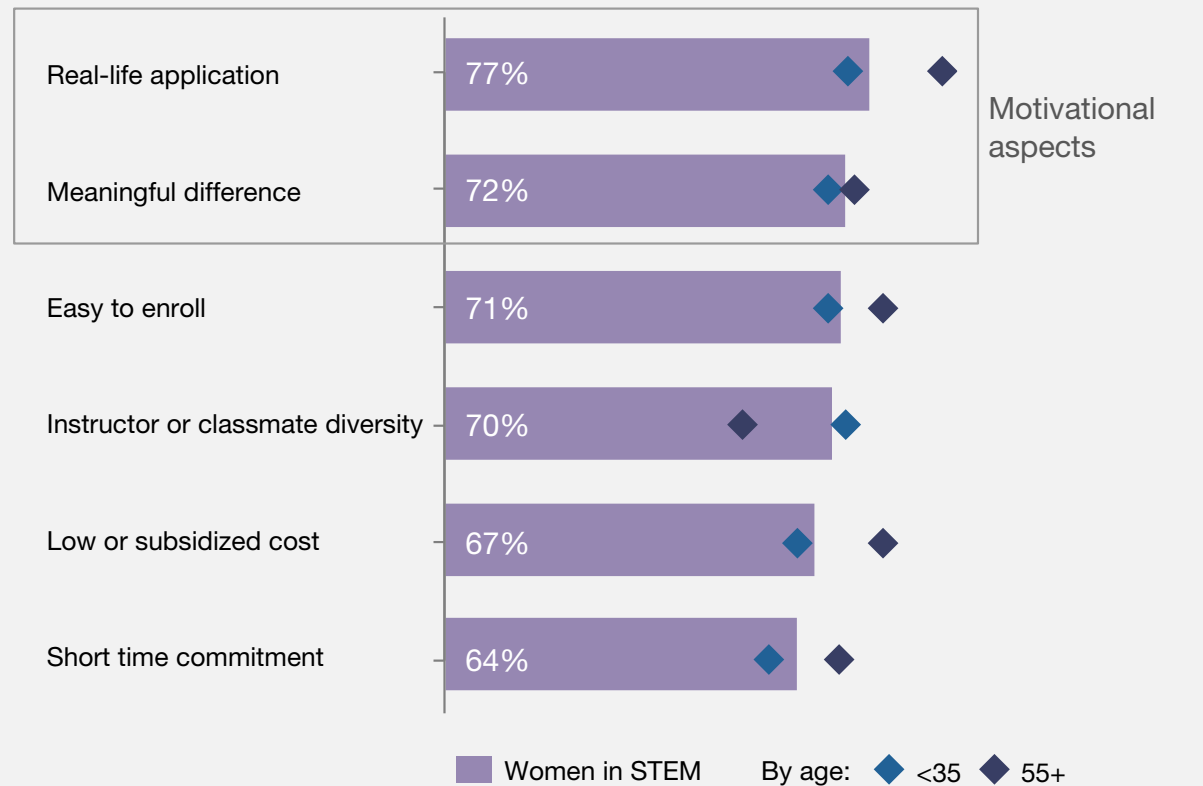
The women-led, company-wide hackathons run by one company we interviewed as part of our research are an example of STEM skills development programmes grounded in practical work. Over the course of the year-long programme, participants develop STEM and project management skills by applying them to solving real-world problems. Women who participate lead hackathon programme teams, which assures that they get management experience as part of the skill-building effort, which also includes formal mentoring and coaching, and leadership presentations.

To improve the impact of their skills programmes, organisations must understand what moves women in STEM to participate in the opportunities, and how they prefer to learn (see Exhibit 5.)

Exhibit 5

A majority of women in STEM believe motivational aspects of skill-building sessions outweigh other factors

Percent of women in STEM citing skills course design as “somewhat” or “very important”



Source: BCG 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Assessment for Leadership survey

For most, motivation is the biggest draw. In our research, 77% of women in STEM said skills programmes that have real-life applications are “somewhat” or “very important,” and 72% said the same about programmes that allow them to make a meaningful difference. Motivational factors associated with STEM skills training were more important to women in STEM than their male colleagues, evidenced by a 10-percentage point difference between the two.

Because motivation is so important, tying opportunities to learn new skills to the prospect of a tangible impact could be one way to get more women employees to participate. One employee of a large pharmaceutical manufacturer included in our research said the company attracted women to sessions on data-driven decision-making by showcasing relatable and relevant use cases on topics ranging from reproductive health to sustainability.

Skills training that is diverse in some way is attractive to younger women in STEM. About two-thirds of those under 35 said that they appreciate diversity in both classmates and instructors. Their preference, which was significantly higher than that of women in STEM over age 55, highlights the importance that a younger generation of workers attaches to diversity and representation.

More than two-thirds of women of all ages in STEM jobs found practical factors in skill-building opportunities to be important, including ease of enrolment, cost, and time commitment. (See Exhibit 6.)

Exhibit 6 Women in STEM prefer skills sessions that are on-demand, longer, and held in person in a group setting

Percent of women in STEM who prefer a specific format or setting

Format

On demand	38%	27%	Set schedule
Longer course	33%	26%	Independent, short modules
Fewer, longer sessions	39%	27%	Shorter, spread out sessions

Setting

In person	35%	30%	Online
Group sessions	35%	27%	Individual or on demand

Source: BCG 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Assessment for Leadership survey

We found that women generally prefer to attend fewer courses that are more concentrated rather than take shorter classes that are spread out over more sessions. About 40% of women in STEM prefer skills training that's offered on-demand over needing to stick to a set schedule.

Most women in STEM prefer group sessions to learning by themselves, and would rather attend sessions in person than get training online. These preferences are strongest among women in STEM under 35. Their proclivity for in-person learning could be a challenge to the success of a skills programme at a time when, worldwide, many workplace activities are happening remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. By contrast, women in STEM over 55 disproportionately prefer skills sessions that are shorter, take place on a set schedule, are spread out over multiple sessions, and that they can do online by themselves.

Methodology

As Knowledge Partner to the Women4STEM Daring Circle, Boston Consulting Group researched women in STEM as part of a larger 2020 Diversity and Inclusion Assessment for Leadership survey. The survey collected information from approximately 10,000 women and men, including 1,500 women in STEM jobs, and 4,000 women in non-STEM jobs. Respondents are employed by companies in 12 G20 countries: Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Africa, Spain, UK and US. In the overall statistics, the responses of women in STEM jobs from each country were equally weighted against each other. We supplemented survey results with qualitative research, workshops, and interviews with members of the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society's [Women4STEM Daring Circle](#).

Recommendations for organisations to support women in STEM through skills programmes

To help close the gender gap in STEM jobs, organisations can take the following actions:



Build a curriculum.

To reach skill-development targets, companies must tailor a programme to the specific needs and preferences of their women employees. That's as good an argument as any to develop a STEM curriculum in-house rather than outsource it to a third party. A STEM skills curriculum should include women employees' perspectives, which an organisation can get through employee surveys or other means.

Even though organisations should customize programmes for their workforce, the format design and structure can take into account our findings that women in STEM overall, and in particular the younger women who represent the leaders of tomorrow, prefer skill-building sessions that are concentrated, longer, in-person, and offered in a group setting. Employers may need to offer different formats to attract women who are not currently in STEM roles to the field, as they generally prefer sessions that are shorter and more spread out.



Understand what is needed.

Before organisations can plan skill-development targets, they must determine their employees' current skill base. They need to understand what employees think of current skill-building offerings, and how many take advantage of what is offered, in order to ascertain whether existing programmes are sufficient or should be revamped to be more appealing or better fit women's needs and interests. If an organisation did a programme assessment on a gender disaggregated basis, they could uncover possible gender-based disparities, and set targets to address them.



Prioritise flexibility.

Inflexible schedules are one of the main barriers preventing women in STEM from taking advantage of skill-building opportunities. Companies can fix that by building flexibility into skills programmes, for example, by offering short, opt-in or on-demand skill-building sessions for those who prefer them, or simply by giving women in STEM the time they need during work hours to participate in programmes.



Promote skills training opportunities.

That some women in STEM hold back from taking advantage of skill building because they don't think they're ready or have enough qualifications could be a signal to companies to present the opportunities in a way that showcases how accessible the programmes are. To counter that, companies could include testimonials from women with a range of backgrounds who have participated in skill-building programme in marketing materials for the sessions, to appeal to the widest possible group. Companies could also tap into existing women's networks to advertise skills sessions, to encourage the participation of group members who may otherwise be unlikely to put themselves forward for such opportunities.



Connect skills programmes to real work and to making a difference.

When designing a curriculum, it may be helpful to keep in mind that both women in STEM and women not currently in STEM roles are interested in skill-building opportunities that are grounded in practical applications and the work that they do every day. Women also are more interested in opportunities that tap into their desire to make a difference. Companies could, for example, build real-world cases into skills programme curriculum. They could offer opportunities for women to use their skills for positive impact, such as curing disease, unlocking sustainability or innovation, or even in disaster relief.



Show the path to leadership.

To attract greater numbers of women into STEM, companies can make it clear that gaining STEM skills is a path to leadership. One way to do that is through the design of skill-building opportunities that increase visibility and lead to assignments or roles that enable women to advance.



Make time.

The main barrier to learning new skills for all STEM employees is time. Organisations must help all employees—and women employees in particular—carve out time for skills programmes to boost participation. Our research found little difference in men's and women's preferences for skill building, which means both genders would benefit from the same types of training. However, to use it to close the STEM gender gap, organisations must actively advertise skill-building opportunities, through women's networks and women-only trainings.



Consider women's experiences at every stage in their path to leadership, and complement skills programmes with a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Skills programmes can address gender disparities and help fix leaks in companies' STEM talent pipeline. But the programmes should be just one of many activities that organisations embrace in their efforts to make their workforce more diverse and inclusive. Ideally, skill-building efforts will be part of broader initiatives that include recruiting, retention, advancement, and leadership, to increase women's representation in STEM fields.

The time for inclusive action is now

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that we all recognise the urgent role that women's STEM skills and leadership play in shaping a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable future. From health applications to climate solutions and beyond, STEM skills save lives and deliver meaningful livelihoods. Prioritising diversity and inclusion in, and through, STEM represents a real opportunity to unite power with purpose.

This report outlines some concrete actions that every organisation can take to bring more intention and impact into their STEM skilling and leadership strategies. Activating this vision and leadership is within reach: we must harness the potential for STEM skills to help close workforce gender gaps, drive innovation and inspiration, and ultimately create the conditions for women in STEM to thrive, from schools to boardrooms. The time for inclusive action is now.

Specific company examples



Digital training and leveraging tech to enable post-maternity return to work

- Google Japan commitment (in partnership with more than 1,000 other businesses) to provide digital training and re-training to 10 million people in Japan by 2022
- Part of this is 'Women Will', which runs a programme that helps new mothers return to the workforce by leveraging technologies, such as internet-enabled tools, that allow for a more flexible work style.



Opt-in digital fluency sessions for women employees

- Short, opt-in digital fluency sessions provided to women employees by region
- Offered through global and regional women's networks and direct emails to women employees
- Emphasis on approachable, tangible role models, accessible and flexible courses.



Women-led company-wide hackathon teams

- Global programme of team-based hackathons to implement solutions for pertinent industry or people issues, with requirement for mixed teams and women team leads
- Combination of 'on-the-job' learning of hackathon skills (especially upskilling on and leveraging the latest set of technologies), project management and leadership development
- Active engagement from senior company leadership, mentorship and coaching opportunities throughout the programme and visibility across the organisation.



On-demand training with tracking and rewards for participation

- Broad platform of on-demand trainings including for a range of specific STEM skills
- Awards given to employees who do the most classes in a time period
- Participation tracking by gender



Tracking and targets on participation in digital projects

- Tracking of assignment to digital projects by gender and region, and targets set to address discrepancies
- Focus on involving decision makers, setting targets, and addressing global regions with the largest gaps.

About the Women4STEM Daring Circle

The Women4STEM Daring Circle aims to increase the representation, leadership and impact of women with STEM skills at all stages of the pipeline from school to boardroom, and to highlight the strong connection between STEM skills, access to jobs and the potential for positive societal impact.

Led by Google, the Daring Circle's Strategic Members are AXA, Bayer, BNP Paribas, Microsoft, Publicis Groupe and P&G, in collaboration with Lenovo, L'Oréal and Syntec-Ingénierie as Partners and Shearman & Sterling as Insight Partner. The Circle is supported by Knowledge Partner Boston Consulting Group, with Politecnico di Milano and HEC as Academic Partners.

Acknowledgements

The work of this Daring Circle was made possible under the leadership of Managing Director Chiara Corazza, with the support of the Women's Forum team, including Matteo Cadenazzi, Sophie Lambin and Delphine Marçais.

We would like to acknowledge the following people from the Women's Forum Community whose contribution to the Daring Circle has been invaluable:

- Yas Banifatemi, Partner, Shearman & Sterling
- Maud le Boulaire, Creative Strategy Lead, the ZOO at Google
- Carole Colin, Senior Strategic Planner, Publicis Consultants
- Christine Dehnel, Global Accounts WW Sales Advocacy Manager, Lenovo
- Stefania Fabrizio, Deputy Unit Chief, Strategy, Policy and Review Department, IMF
- Liza Garay-De Vaubernier, Global Head of Women's Market, AXA
- Daniela Victoria Grohmann, Head Inclusion & Diversity Pharmaceuticals; Tugce Duzener, Senior Project Engineer; Nick Ribaud, Senior Process Engineer; Faidra Stavropoulou, Senior Data Scientist; Helena Yin Koepl, Global Head of Data Science and Analytics, Bayer
- Margaret Johnston Clarke, Head of Global Diversity & Inclusion, L'Oréal Group
- Nicolas Kerling, Associate Director, Europe Data & Analytics Leader and France / Benelux CIO at Procter & Gamble
- Benedicte de Kersauson, Group Communications, Partnerships and Events, BNP Paribas
- Eve Magnant, VP Corporate Social Responsibility Director, Publicis Groupe
- Hind Ouzzani, Head of Product Go-To-Market Strategy and Operations, Southern Europe, Google
- Mara Tanelli, Associate Professor of Automatic Control, Politecnico di Milano

- Paola Scarpa, Client Solutions, Data & Insights, Google
- Ersilia Vaudo Scarpetta, Chief Diversity Officer, European Space Agency
- Silvia Zucchini, Special Assistant to the Director, International Monetary Fund

The Women's Forum would like to thank the following people for their contribution to this research:

- Mojolaoluwa Aderemi-Makinde, Head of Brand and Reputation, Sub-Saharan Africa, Google
- Monika Buzasy, Vice President Talent, Procter & Gamble
- Jeanne Kehren, SVP Digital & Commercial Innovation & CIO, Bayer
- Beth Knight, Amazon in the Community Leader, Europe, Amazon
- Kameshwari Rao, Chief People Officer, Publicis Sapient
- Monica Hauser Wolff, Lenovo Foundation Director; Global Corporate Communications Manager, Lenovo
- Helena Yin Koepl, Global Head of Data Science and Analytics, Bayer

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- Matt Krentz, Managing Director & Senior Partner; Nadjia Yousif, Managing Director & Partner; Jenn Garcia-Alonso, Global Diversity & Inclusion Director; and Patricia Martin, Senior Associate, BCG
- Sophie Lambin, Editorial Partner of the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society and James Morris; Grace Chua, members of the Editorial team

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The Women4STEM Daring Circle is an initiative of the Women's Forum for the Economy & Society, bringing together an ecosystem of partners to advance solutions that increase the representation, leadership and impact of women with STEM skills at all stages of the pipeline from school to boardroom. Led by Google, the Daring Circle's strategic members are AXA, Bayer, BNP Paribas, Microsoft, Publicis Groupe and P&G in collaboration with Lenovo, L'Oréal and Syntec-Ingénierie as Partners and Shearman & Sterling as Insight Partner. The Circle is supported by Knowledge Partner Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Politecnico di Milano and HEC as Academic Partners.

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