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POSITION PAPER

Strategies for the Professional Development of Executive Women: Empirical Evidence in Latin America



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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the main strategies used by women in order to access executive positions and to increase their professional development using the Latin American case. The study was conducted with 20 women executives who work in large companies in Lima, Peru. The analysis in the Latin American context adds more empirical information with regard to the executive women in a context that is not studied in depth so far. It is important to analyze Latin America because there are inequities in the use of time by men and women, mainly in the case of the unpaid productive work, since the unpaid work activities are mainly designated to women.

The results show that the executive women seem to identify the development strategies that were proposed according to the theoretical basis of this study. The results also show that the main strategies that executive women use are: networking; the support of a leader who guides the development process and is considered as a reference; education; and the overall experience. In addition, other identified strategies were the development of specific skills and competences for the activity, the search for a challenging work, making important decisions with

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determination, the "hard work", and the passion for what they do. In all cases, the respondents' innate leadership prevailed and they were willing to accept personal and work challenges which would allow them to grow professionally during their personal and work experience.

KEY WORDS: *woman, executive woman, strategies, professional development*

Classification: Empirical study - Case study

Introduction

In the last decades, there have been a series of changes in regard to the integration of women in the economic activity at a global and regional level. The International Labour Organization [ILO] (2012) estimated that the female labor force³ was 1.3 trillion, about 39.9 per cent of the total labor force (3.3 billion). The ILO found that female labor force participation rates increased from 50.2% to 51.7%, while the male rates decreased from 82.0% to 77.7% from 1980 to 2008 (ILO, 2010); thus, in the last decades, there has been a gradual reduction of the gender gap. The ILO stated that the female participation rate for 2014 was 50.3%, while the men's rate was 76.7%, which represents a gap of almost 26% (ILO, 2014a). The decline in the participation rate compared to the previous years (for both men and women) is caused by cyclical factors, such as the recession and the slow recovery from the recent financial crisis, and structural factors such as the population ageing and the increase of the years spent in education (ILO, 2016).

In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, female participation in the labor force had a progressive and constant increase (43.5% in 1992, 49.6% in 2002, to 52.6% in 2012), while male participation decreased (82.5% in 1992, 80.3% in 2002, 79.5%) (ILO, 2012). This increase in female labor participation can be explained by the combined effect of the economic development, the higher level of education, the decline in fertility rates, the technological development that allows reducing the time spent on household chores, and the structural changes that reduce the transaction costs and the use of time (Goldin, 2006).

³ This refers to the total number of working-age people who are currently employed and those who are seeking employment (unemployed) (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies [INSEE], 2016).

The participation of women in business and executive leadership has increased globally, particularly during the last decade (Grant Thornton International, 2013). Despite this, their participation remains low in comparison with the male rates due to a series of factors that hinder the regular career development of women. Women must face and overcome several barriers to accessing managerial positions and obtaining fair wage compensations (Lopez, 2012, p. 21).

Although the statistics are scarce, in accordance with the information provided by Grant Thornton IBR (2016), the average percentage of women in business management positions in the world is 24%. Eastern Europe leads the global participation at a regional level with 35%, followed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations with 34%, the countries of the South of Europe with 28%, Africa with 27%, the European Union with 24%, the United States with 21%, and 18% in Latin America. In Latin America, the participation of women in managerial positions goes from 23% in Mexico to 16% in Argentina. In addition, 53% of the companies in the region do not have women in their leadership teams. This percentage is well above the world average (32%) (Grant Thornton IBR, 2015b). On the other hand, the Latin American country that reported the highest percentage of companies with women in top management positions is Venezuela (31%), while Chile reported only 5% (World Economic Forum, 2014).

In this context, the professional development of women and their evolution in leadership positions within the companies is a research topic in expansion, which is primarily oriented to study the relationship between the performance of a company and the number of female personnel (Grant Thornton International, 2012; YMCA, women on boards & ACOSS [Australian Council of Social Service], 2012). The literature related to the development of executive women provides valuable information to the business and government sectors in order to assess the potential factors that prevent women from having the same opportunities for educational and economic development as their male peers.

This study aims to identify the main strategies used by women in order to hold executive positions and to increase their professional development using the Latin American case. This knowledge would be considered as a base to encourage women empowerment within the organizations. Additionally, the study examines whether women have a career development plan and whether they receive the support of the companies for their development. The study was conducted taking into account executive

women who work in large companies in Lima, Peru. This analysis in the Latin American context adds more empirical data with regard to the executive women in a context that is not studied in depth so far. It is important to analyze Latin America because it presents inequities in the use of time by men and women, mainly in the case of the unpaid productive work (housekeeping, household chores, children, parents and handicap care). This inequity in the use of time, where the unpaid productive work are mainly designated to females, is a critical factor for female participation in the labor force (ILO, 2012).

Previous Studies

First, *strategy* is understood as a means to establish a purpose in terms of long-term objectives that follow a specific program which allocates the resources according to it (Hax and Majluf, cited by D'Alessio, 2008). The strategy implies, in addition, "to follow a consistent, unified and integrated pattern of decisions" (p. 6). This study uses the term strategy as a set of actions and decision-making processes—linked to a purpose—that will enable the achievement of the long-term objectives. These actions and decision-making processes are typically supported by the individual's past experiences.

The *management of an executive's professional career* includes all the tasks and positions held during the employment history (Werther & Davis, 2008). The management of the career is going to be directly related to the *professional development*, which is understood as "the sum of all the actions, experiences and opportunities that the individuals had in order to achieve their professional objectives" (Werther & Davis, 2008, p. 547). In addition, it includes "the aspects that a person enriches or improves to achieve the objectives within the organization" (Werther & Davis, p. 291). In summary, the strategies that executive women use to achieve their professional development shall be understood as the actions and decisions made to achieve the objectives mediated by a purpose; these are additional actions, apart from the jobs and tasks that executive women performed during their professional life.

Previous research studies have identified the following strategies for the career development and administration of executive women:

(i) Education: It is considered as one of the executives' main strategies to develop their skills and competencies within an organization. The

educational strategies are mainly related to post-graduate studies and specialization courses (Chen, Doherty, & Vinnicombe, 2012).

(ii) International experience: It guarantees the knowledge of foreign markets, international sales and general management skills. In the case of executive women, it is a determinant factor for their professional development. It enables them to develop a global vision, expand their networks, and cope with different places and cultures (Orser & Leck, 2010).

(iii) Networking: It is an invaluable tool for the executives' professional development since it gives the opportunity to interact with other professionals and to exchange knowledge and experiences. Most of the networking activities are focused on the development of the professional career and skills, in addition to the improvement of the communication between the staff and the management. It also provides information on the organizational systems and the promotions since it gives the opportunity to strengthen the relationships with potential sponsors (Knörr, 2011).

(iv) Online networking: It is a variant of the aforementioned strategy. It uses the new technologies, such as the Internet and multimedia programs, to network not only within the workplace, but outside from it. In accordance with Donelan, Herman, Kear and Kirkup (2009), online networking would enable women to work in fields that were previously dominated by men since online environments are more flexible and there are no gender restrictions.

(v) Mentoring: It is understood as the support, assistance or guidance provided by one person to another in order to achieve an objective or several objectives in a given period of time. It improves the chances of having more promotions, improved job satisfaction, better salary range, and a higher self-esteem (Woolnough, Davidson, & Fielden, 2005). Maxwell (2009) also considered that active mentoring programs can improve the development of the professional career, especially for executive women. In addition, it would be a vital strategy for a greater gender equality. However, given that this strategy involves social interaction processes—an area where women face more barriers than their male counterparts—its use takes on a greater relevance for the professional development of women (Knörr, 2011). Knörr (2011) also stated that the relationship with a mentor enhances the Executives' self confidence and reduces their levels of stress.

(vi) E-mentoring: Consists of making the most of the benefits offered by the Internet and multimedia technologies in order to have a mentor virtually. This overcomes the geographical barriers, optimizes the use of

resources and allows women to face the barriers encountered during their career. Müller (2009) described the e-mentoring as a relationship that uses the electronic communication tools so as to expand and improve an existing mentoring relationship or to create one where it might not been possible. Headlam-Wells, Gosland and Craig (2005) described it as a transformative tool for the professional development of executive women. It helps to overcome and go through the “glass ceiling.” In addition, it contributes to the perfection of the social skills.

(vii) Sponsorship. It is the existence of a sponsor that defends or mentions the one executive in front of other executives. The difference between the *mentoring* (mentors) and the *sponsorship* (sponsors) strategies is that the mentor is the one who supports the personal and professional development through advice or assistance, while the sponsor only actively defends or mentions the sponsored in front of other executives (Kram, cited in Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). Networking at senior levels of the organization helps to obtain a sponsor for the professional development. Hence, these two strategies would be directly related (Seibert, cited in Eddleston, Baldrige, & Veiga, 2004).

Previous studies identified the main barriers that executive women have to face during their professional career:

(i) Gender stereotype: The gender stereotype is defined as the characteristics of men and women translated into a group of tasks and activities assigned to them by every culture. Throughout life, in the family, at school, and in the social environment, we are told what is right and wrong in regard to the clothes, the manner of speaking, how to behave, in which kind of sports we can participate, etc. The fact of being a man or a woman involves a long process of acculturation, learning, and adaptation of the established roles (Berger & Luckman, 1968). Gender is a cultural representation that includes ideas, prejudices, interpretations, standards, duties, mandates, and prohibitions in the lives of women and men (Butler, 2007). Socially, it is considered that men and women are not equal, because each one has its own role in life.

A stereotype is an image or an idea that is commonly and immutably accepted by a group of society. It is a very simplified mental image with few details in regard to a group of people who share certain characteristics and abilities. The term is often used in a negative sense, since it is considered that stereotypes are illogical beliefs that can only be changed through education. It is a way to categorize the real world and to give meaning to a

specific aspect of this world instead of another. The stereotype is a “group” concept; it is something that is shared by a group and it has a uniform content. Its strength resides in the degree perceived by those who consider it a valid representation of the reality (RAE, 2015). Gender stereotypes are specific to each society and each culture establishes what is supposed to be “natural” for each sex, defining the gender within the dichotomy between what is “feminine” and “masculine”. Gender stereotypes are transmitted and perpetuated in the family, at school, in the media, etc. This socialization creates a gender identity, promotes certain and different ways of thinking, feeling and acting between the sexes, which establishes the basis for the imbalance of power that is transmitted to the private sphere. Hence, the framework to understand why different values are assigned to several actions related to women and men is provided so that the gender approach allows identifying the reasons of assigning a certain image that is reproduced again and again in the society and in some professions (Levi-Strauss, 1961). It is socially acceptable for women to be prepared for the household chores and for the men be prepared for work-related activities that confer prestige and power. These stereotypic beliefs contribute or might affirm that some activities are considered to be more appropriate for an specific gender (CEP, 2005).

(ii) Salary inequity: According to the report of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the female labor participation in Latin America currently represents 50% of the total (2013). This is an increase in the last decades caused by the significant economic growth in Latin America, the rapid urbanization of the cities, the free trade, among other factors (Atal, Ñopo & Winder, 2009). However, this increase of female participation did not lead to an improvement in the wages of women, despite the fact that the wage gap was reduced by 7% from 1992 to 2007 (Hoyos & Ñopo, 2010).

(iii) Vertical segregation: The vertical segregation barrier is defined and exists within the organizational structure of a company. This type of segregation shall be understood as the tendency of male managers to significantly identify the male characteristics in the attributes of a good manager. Women are not promoted to management positions due to the male tendency to see other men as more appropriate for such posts; thus, this vertical segregation is transferred to the hierarchy of an organization (Ellison, 2001).

(iv) Glass ceiling: Another factor that is present in the professional development of women is the *glass ceiling* concept. This term first appeared

in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1986 and it is defined as the invisible barriers that women face when approaching the highest levels of the organizational hierarchy (Wentling, 2003). Wentling (2004) identified three types of barriers: (a) organizational, which represent the lack of hiring, development and support for managerial positions, prejudices in performance assessments and hostile environments, including sexual harassment; (b) societal, which is understood as the source of the aforementioned organizational barriers that assume a lack of commitment among women in regard to their professional development; and (c) governmental, due to the lack of an effective governmental participation and an inadequate employment data collection.

(v) The Labyrinth: In accordance with McDonagh and Paris (2012), the glass ceiling concept does not constitute an impenetrable barrier anymore since many women have “broken” this ceiling to achieve high-level positions within a company; however, a labyrinth currently appears as the figure of the many obstacles that women must overcome throughout their professional life. This metaphor, which is “more complicated and vertiginous,” might be the reason why many women decide to abandon the goal to access executive leadership positions. Although, due to the “wild” nature of the labyrinth, this would be translated—at the end—in wisdom that would benefit women and the organization itself.

(vi) Maternity discrimination: The increasing number of women entering the labor market has exceeded the paradigms performed by women at home, in regard to a productive and unpaid work as part of their traditional role as women. This entrance helps to improve the self-esteem, to have a greater personal freedom and economic autonomy, and to have new social environments and relations which directly affect the family dynamics (Fawaz, 2012). The work has a significant meaning for women. It does not replace, but complements the family life as a guide. The meaning that women give to their work, although it makes reference to personal achievements, is closely linked to the contributions to the family. In the same way, the main reasons for not working outside home claimed by women who stay at home are related to the household chores, children or elderly care, and the refusal from their partners.

(vii) Cultural characteristics: There is a differentiation between the systems of symbols and the beliefs that each society has to represent the world. These cultural characteristics are shown through the societal institutions and organizations; we find the family within the scope of the

institutions. Culturally, there are different types of family structures that are correlated to the social characteristics of specific human groups, in which the different roles distributed among its members take precedence. The role played by a woman within the family might be considered as a barrier for her professional development if this lead to put the marital and maternal obligations ahead of any desire to access management positions (Jogulu & Wood, 2011).

(viii) Organizational culture and policies: There is a relationship between the methods of organizational socialization and the progress of women's careers in the organizations. These methods are important and influential because they have a potentially strong and lasting impact on the employee's behaviors, attitudes and commitment. It has been stated that the organizational socialization process can develop or destroy a career. Kwesiga and Bell (2004) stated that "researchers have little knowledge of whether there are certain organizational tactics that are more likely to favor a particular gender and thus promote the status of men or women within the organization." The women who accessed executive positions are more likely to use specific practices, such as flexible working hours, part-time work or hiring child care services. Women have been encouraged to climb the corporate ladder "and to break the glass ceiling"; however, the high level positions are still beyond reach. Some women leave their corporate careers to start their own business for the need for a greater flexibility, the experience with the glass ceiling, and the lack of opportunity in their jobs. As a first step toward gender equality and the promotion of female career development, the organizations can promote the recruitment, retention and promotion of women through the implementation of work/life policies (Guy, 2003).

(ix) Female leadership: Finally, the leadership factor in the literature indicates that women tend to exercise a transformational leadership and they could work on some aspects of the transactional leadership. On the other hand, men tend to exercise transactional leadership, in which corrective actions and disciplinary measures are more frequent; however, in spite of the fact that the modern organization should be led in transformational way, this does not exert a significant influence on the promotion of women to higher-level positions in the organization (Eagly & Carli, 2007). McDonagh and Paris (2012) stated that women seem to have an advantage in leadership based on their natural tendency toward a transformational leadership style, since their method provides the collaborators with the inspirational

motivation, intellectual stimulation, interpersonal orientation and a participative style that are needed to improve the competitive level of agents within the company. In summary, the transformational leaders earn the confidence and build a shared vision since they serve as role models.

Research Methodology

A case study qualitative approach was used to explore the strategies used by executive women for their professional development (Yin, 2013). The case studies were selected among executive women in large companies located in Peru. This rigorous selection aimed to reflect the diversity of the situations experienced by professional women, considering the following dimensions: age, marital status, education level, and industry (see Table 1). Mondy (2010) defined the executive positions as the high-level positions that report directly to the executive director of the corporation or to the head of a major division. The term "executive" is used in this study as the person who works in a company and holds a management or top executive position and, therefore, interferes in the decision-making process within the organization.

The information was collected mainly through in-depth interviews of approximately 90 minutes each. The study was conducted in Metropolitan Lima, since this area concentrates 29.7% of the total population of Peru and 30.2% of Peruvian female population (INEI, 2006). The sample was built using *purposeful sampling* (Maxwell, 2005) with a combination of *snowball* and *maximum variation* techniques. To answer the research questions adequately, 20 cases were selected, which made it possible to obtain enough information to carry out a transversal analysis of the cases and to answer the research questions. The number of cases was selected based on the theoretical saturation. The information was coded, categorized and analyzed using analytic induction (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Table 1 shows the profile of informants.

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Sector	Capital	Job position	Area	Children	Older than 40 years	Undergraduate degree	Postgraduate degree
Chemical	Foreign	Manager	Quality Assurance	No	No	Engineering	Master's degree
Financial agents	Foreign	Manager	Operations	Yes	Yes	Engineering	Master's degree
Financial agents	Domestic	Manager	Accounting	Yes	Yes	Accounting	Master's degree
Financial agents	Foreign	Manager	Development	Yes	No	Engineering	Master's degree
Financial agents	Domestic	Manager	Corporate assets	No	No	Psychology	Master's degree
Textiles	Foreign	Manager	Human Resources	No	No	Law	Master's degree
Financial agents	Domestic	Manager	Shared Services	Yes	No	Administration	Master's degree
Financial agents	Domestic	Manager	Human Resources Management	Yes	No	Administration	No
Chemical	Domestic	Manager	Business Unit	Yes	Yes	Engineering	Master's degree
Food Industry	Domestic	Manager	Operations	No	Yes	Administration	Master's degree
Telecommunications	Foreign	Manager	Regulatory Affairs	No	No	Law	Master's degree
Marketing agents	Foreign	Deputy manager	Human Resources	No	No	Administration	Postgraduate Studies
Marketing agents	Foreign	Manager	Regulatory Affairs	Yes	No	Pharmacy and Biochemistry	No
Fishing	Foreign	Manager	General Management	Yes	Yes	Law	Postgraduate Studies
Beverages	Foreign	Manager	Internal Audit	Yes	No	Accounting	Master's degree
Consulting and Services	Foreign	Manager	Talent management for the Americas	Yes	No	Communication	Master's degree
Marketing agents	Foreign	Director	Talent for Latin America	No	Yes	Administration	Master's degree
Marketing agents	Foreign	Manager	Brand & Trade Manager	No	No	Administration	No
Marketing agents	Foreign	Manager	Information Technologies (Andean Region)	Yes	No	Engineering	Master's degree
Consulting and Services	Foreign	Director	Administration and Finance	No	Yes	Accounting	Master's degree

Strategies Used by Women to Access Executive Positions

The study identified four key strategies used by executive women to achieve their professional development: (i) Networking, (ii) support of a leader, (iii) education as the basis for professional development, (iv) international experience. In addition, other identified strategies are: the development of specific skills, the search for a challenging work, making important decisions with determination, the “hard work”, and the passion for their work (See Table 2). The findings of the study are described below.

Networking: 18 of the respondents stated that networking is a fundamental element to identify job opportunities, to recognize the

performed work, and to obtain the necessary tools to adequately execute their activities:

I believe that it is important to maintain relationships with people who might contact you someday. When you apply for a job, and if you have maintained a good relation and people saw your work, when they call them, they are going to speak very well of you (E02).

Support given by a leader: 12 of the informants mentioned that the support received by a leader was the base for their development. This means to have a person, an immediate superior, who teaches, guides, advocates, challenges, instructs and, in general, supports the development of professional skills through his/her guide and trust. The mentor is not necessarily formally selected and, according to the respondents, they are responsible for identifying their mentor:

You have to find it; you need to know how to choose the person that will help you, someone who you would like to become by virtue of his/her experience or capabilities (E13).

I was on probation approximately one year and, finally, my boss assigned me an important project. He said: "I think you can do it." He made me to take the plunge and it was one of my best experiences (E4).

Education as the basis of professional development: The study found that, in all cases, women had continuous training and support to strengthen their capacities and to achieve their objectives. Although the educational level and the specialization areas were varied, they all had a specialized education in their fields, either by experience or continuous improvement. In addition, they considered that a continuous education is critical for their professional development, since they become more competitive with respect to their peers and complement their work experience and the personal growth:

The fact of holding a master's degree gives you some professional maturity. Education is a very important thing and you definitely need that kind of experience in order to have greater responsibilities (E19).

It was clear that I wanted a management position, then I pursued a Master's degree to complement my experience (E20).

International experience: Ten respondents had some kind of international experience related to their studies, meetings, travel, etc. This allowed them to know different cultures and behaviors in order to increase their professional skills.

Having international experience influences the development of your professional skills... In general, it is useful to achieve a better professional experience (E20).

Development of skills and competencies: Thirteen respondents considered that the development of leadership, communication skills and specific job-related competences obtained through the professional experience is essential for the professional development of women.

I identified the opportunities for improvement, i.e. those skills that I had to develop and I worked with my leaders and a coach, which allowed me to somehow build up my position (E18).

Challenging jobs: Another strategy identified by ten respondents is the importance of having stimulating jobs with constant challenges for the professional development. What stands out most among executive women is the ability to cope with new experiences and to be able to say “I did it”.

I had to cover the position of a person who quit the company and didn't leave reference documents. I learned a lot, a lot, a lot. I started from scratch with all the pending tasks. I had a hard time but it was very challenging. That made me grow professionally (E08).

Ability to firmly make important decisions: Ten respondents mentioned that they had to make difficult decisions for their professional development. These involved sacrifices that finally led them to fulfill their career development plan.

Obviously, I had to make decisions and, in many cases, give up some other things (E17). This has always been the case and I have made my decisions and taken my own risks. I believe that this is one of the keys to success. You might lose but but you have to take risks (E19).

Hard work: The “hard work” is also considered a key strategy to grow professionally, as part of the self-learning and experience maturity process.

My only strategy was to work hard and always give 100% or 200%. It didn't matter where I was, I worked on Saturdays and Sundays. The other strategy was to earn my boss's confidence (E11). I worked until 9:00 or 9:30 pm. I worked really hard on the project until midnight. I left home at 5 am and went to work on the project. I really made an effort, didn't I? If someone wants to grow, he or she must make efforts. Once I saw a sign that said: “Nothing will come out of nowhere”, which means that things do not come alone [smiles] (E8).

Passion for the professional work: Finally, just as the intense and determined work is essential, being passionate about the work that women do is also considered important.

If someone wants to grow, he or she must make efforts because things do not come out of nowhere (E8). The key is to love what you do; if you don't like what you do, you are not going to make an effort and persevere (E12). (...) It was excellent. You say: I studied for this and you feel so happy. I always tell my college students: you have to be happy with what you are doing. If you are not happy, you are not going to see it (...) You have to enjoy what you do! (E19).

Table 2: Strategies that Executive Women use for their professional development

Strategies	Cases	Frequency
Networking	E01, E02, E03, E04, E05, E06, E07, E08, E09, E11, E13, E14, E15, E16, E17, E18, E19, E20	18
Education	E01, E02, E03, E04, E05, E06, E07, E09, E10, E11, E12, E14, E15, E16, E17, E19, E20	17
International experience	E04, E05, E06, E08, E09, E10, E13, E15, E16, E19, E21	10
Support given by the leader	E03, E05, E06, E08, E10, E11, E12, E13, E15, E16, E17, E18	12
Development of skills and competencies	E01, E02, E05, E06, E08, E11, E12, E13, E14, E15, E16, E18, E19, E20	13
Search for challenging work	E01, E02, E08, E10, E11, E12, E13, E16, E19, E20	10
Make important decisions	E02, E03, E08, E12, E13, E14, E16, E19, E20	10
Hard work	E01, E03, E08, E09, E10, E11, E12, E13, E15	9
Passion for what you do	E12, E13, E19	3

Note. The cases can be classified in several alternatives.

Use of Professional Development Plans

The study analyzed whether executive women have established a professional development plan (PDP) with regard to five areas: Professional goals, gap analysis, PDP management, career development, and the dependence on professional development.

With regard to the professional goals, the respondents identified two types: work and academic-related goals. The work goals were related to the professional promotion, i.e. Accessing a management position, a top executive position, or changing to another company. With regard to the education, the postgraduate studies—master's degrees or specialization studies—were the most frequently mentioned goals:

I never set my mind on A particular position. What I always wanted to do is to be in a level where I can influence, create, and design business solutions (E17).

With regard to the gap analysis, 15 respondents did this analysis. It was mainly oriented to their level of knowledge and/or experience. Five of them didn't do the analysis.

When I was promoted to the management, I identified the issues that I had to address. I did a self-assessment: what we have now versus the leadership model of the companyand I worked on them (E15).

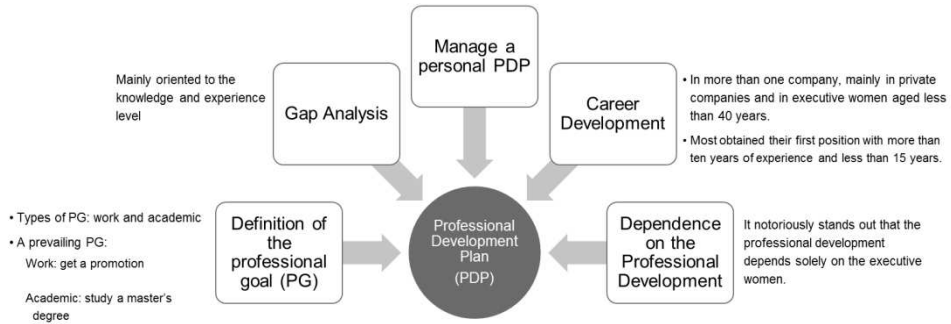
The results of the PDP showed that only nine women developed an explicit plan which was aimed to achieve the career goals related to the search of a managerial position and to the pursue of postgraduate studies:

Of course, I did a strategic planning. I was not going to be able to become a Human Resources Manager if I was a simple lawyer. I had to work on other competencies. (E6). Five years ago I quit a company... I knew I wanted to work at a corporate business. The other thing that was clear to me was that I wanted to hold a management position. Therefore, I started to study an MBA (E20).

With regard to the professional career, ten respondents had the opportunity to develop professionally at various companies (10 respondents), both local and international. They got their first executive position after working from 10 to 15 years in various positions. No respondent obtained their first executive position with less than five years of experience. Finally, women felt that their professional development depended primarily on them (13 respondents) and very few (4 respondents) considered that it also depends on the companies for which they work:

The company gives you the tools or it can open you the doors. Somehow it makes it simple for you or your development, but I think that in the end it all depends on us, and if you are not satisfied with what the company gives you, then you have to make a decision and quit (E1). Depends on oneself. It depends whether we want to get out our comfort zone. The company can give you the tools, but you have to have the attitude to do so. If you do not have the desire to do it, then you won't succeed (E15).

Figure 1: Use of the Career Development Plan - Executive Women



The Company's Support for Their Professional Development

The study evaluated the support that the companies provide to women in regard to their professional development, considering the following aspects: assign a professional development plan (PDP), possibility of promotions and/or transfers, training courses, collaboration among colleagues (internal networking, mentoring or coaching experiences, experiences abroad, and the differences between national and international companies).

In regard to the PDP, only in four cases the companies assigned a PDP and it basically depended on the individual rather than the company. The companies that had a PDP for their female employees were foreign capital businesses since the local companies do not consider its implementation. The PDP were mainly oriented to training, distribution of responsibilities, and career path. In regard to the possibilities of promotion, 15 women considered to have some kind of possibility to get a promotion and/or to be transferred within their companies. The promotion of training courses is also a frequent activity (18 respondents), either by the initiative of the company or of the women themselves. As to the foster of internal networks, collaboration or mentoring, nine respondents stated that the company promotes them and ten informed that they are not encouraged. The experiences abroad, as well as the skills, are frequent in foreign capital companies and they are scarcer in local companies.

Figure 2: Support given by companies for the Professional Development of Women

Support from the companies

Internal networking	Most companies do not encourage it
Mentoring experiences	Practically do not encourage it
Sponsor experiences	Practically do not encourage it
Possibility of promotion and transfers	Many companies foster opportunities for promotion, transfers, and both possibilities, from which the majority are foreign.
Experiences abroad	Predominantly promotes temporary experiences
Training	Minority, does not encourage training. And, not all the executives have received training
Assign a PDP	The majority does not assign a PDP

Discussion

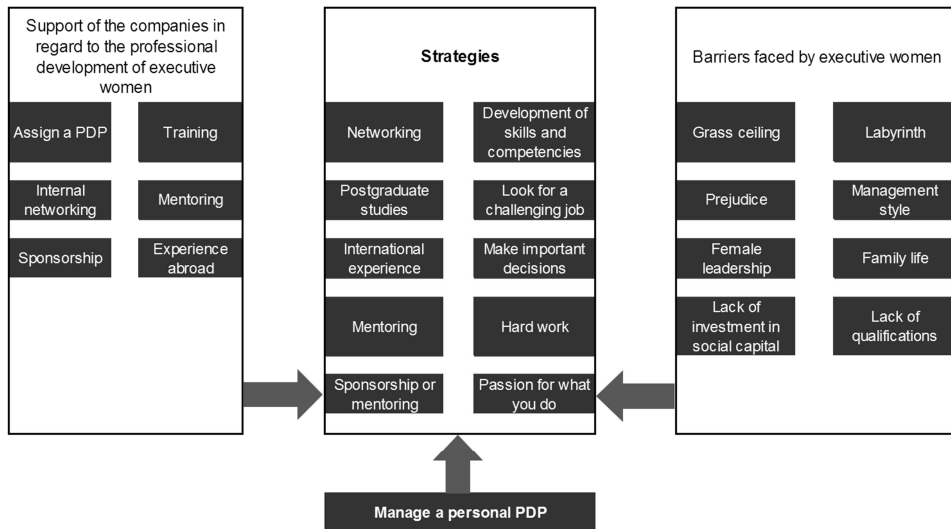
This study has identified strategies—in addition to those identified in the literature—that are used by the executive women in their professional development, and that aim to address the specific barriers faced by women during their professional development: Development of specific skills and competences for the activity, the search for a challenging job, making important decisions with determination, the “hard work”, and the passion for what they do. Figure 3 presents the schema identified in this study.

With regard to the support of the companies for the professional development, women felt that this depends on themselves and not on the company for which they work. However, they considered that the companies for which they work should provide the necessary conditions and resources to complement such development. The probability of having a PDP assigned by the company is higher in foreign capital companies than in national companies.

In regard to the management of a PDP, the study reveals that it is common for women executives to have an outlined PDP although this is not expressly formalized, and it will be developed according to the challenges and projects taken during their career. For a group of women executives, their professional goals are also linked with their personal objectives. The results identified the different factors that motivate executive women: motivation driven by personal or work challenges to achieve the life

objectives; guides or models, such as family members who throughout their education demanded them to be the best and excel at what they do; supervisors as mentors, who allowed accepting work challenges to develop their abilities. In all cases, the respondents' innate leadership prevailed and they were willing to accept personal and work challenges which would allow them to grow professionally during their personal and work experience.

Figure 3: Strategies for the Professional Development of Women



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