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INTRODUCTION

How to manage high-potential employees (HIPOs), the future leaders of their companies, is a significant concern to most major U.S. corporations. Fortune, in a recent article, noted that the CEOs of the 50 largest U.S. industrial corporations have typically spent their entire careers with one company, working their way up step-by-step to the corner office (Pare and Woods, 1987). This pattern of career-long training to advance to the executive suite corroborates the common perception that many companies identify high-potential employees early in their career and carefully plan their development and advancement.

Numerous studies have been conducted and numerous articles written on succession planning and on the selection of high-potential employees. These studies have focused, for the most part, on measuring potential to assure a pool of candidates entering the HIPO pipeline and on final succession to top-executive rank, such as COO or CEO. A question which has seldom been asked or answered is how individuals once selected and before they reach the top are trained and developed to move up the corporate ladder and eventually assume a top-leadership position. The results of our survey indicate that many large U.S. companies have long-term programs for developing and fine-grooming high-potential employees, expecting that some amongst them will eventually occupy the top dozen positions in the firm.

THE STUDY

This article presents the results of a survey we conducted between January–June, 1987, on how 33 major U.S. corporations manage...
high-potential employees. We derive from the study a definition of the "high-potential" employee, describe how a three-stage process sorts, identifies, and develops HIPOs; and point out which group of employees plateau most frequently in the large corporations we studied.

The thirty-three companies represented in the study are a convenience sample. Fifty-nine percent are Fortune 100 companies. They range in size from 10,000 to 400,000 employees, although the average size is 52,000 employees. The mean financial volume for the various firms in 1986 was $4.2 billion. A variety of industries are represented, including banking, computers, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, consumer products, and retailing. The sample is also diverse in terms of age, from the recently formed to the old-and-established organizations.

Given such a sample and its small size, it is not possible to make across-industry comparisons nor to generalize about the practices of all U.S. corporations. The study is nevertheless important because it is based on lengthy interviews with knowledgeable respondents in large and well-known American corporations. The interview schedule allowed trained researchers to explore and probe the subject matter. Such a methodology also permitted us, as we analyzed the data, to perceive some general patterns and trends amongst these companies. The paper, therefore, puts forth concepts and a descriptive model based on the practices in this diverse subset of important companies—ideas which might be considered and explored in future research.

We first conducted telephone interviews with persons responsible for directing in their firms the management of high-potential programs. Each respondent was asked a series of ten questions relating to the development of HIPOs. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and some follow-up interviews were conducted to further explore certain subjects. After the telephone interview, the respondent also completed a Likert-type questionnaire with 20 questions which were designed to corroborate and focus on the information collected in the interview.

It would have been informative to have explored in each company the same questions with high-level general managers and with individuals considered as HIPOs. This would have permitted a cross-perception reality check and a richer data base. Another limitation of the study, therefore, is that the findings represent only the perspectives of managers of high-potential programs, some of whom are human resource professionals and some former line managers now in charge of HIPO programs in their company.

How do these companies view the high-potential concept? When asked, "does your company especially designate some employees as high-potential and, if so, what does your company mean by the term "high-potential," all of the companies surveyed affirmed that they had HIPO programs. Most of the respondents stated that his or her company had several levels of HIPOs (usually between two and four) and that the definition depends on the particular stage of development. Usually, such an employee at stage one is defined as "new" and capable of handling a position two, three, or four levels above his or her current position. A high-potential employee at the second stage is most often a manager viewed as important to the corporation, one seen as a corporate-wide resource. A HIPO at the highest stage has the potential to become an important general manager (e.g., the head of a strategic business unit or geographical region) or the director of a major function such as marketing. For most companies, a HIPO at this third stage has the ultimate potential of attaining the most senior positions in the company, even to become the Chief Executive Officer.

In the corporations we surveyed, a common element in all the respondent definitions was that an employee with ultimate potential will move up the hierarchy into increasingly important management positions and eventually reach a position close to the top. Indeed, "potential" was operationally defined as the ability to move up into specific managerial positions to which the corporation attaches value.

Some additional elements of the respondents' definition of HIPOs were: (1) they advance and change roles faster than their peers; (2) their careers are carefully monitored and managed (especially during the later stages of development) by senior line executives, human resource professionals and management review committees; (3) because of such close scrutiny and career management, HIPOs are a small and elite group; (4) HIPOs are those on a secret list, secret so that they can be moved on and off according to the list-keepers' judgement; and (5) HIPOs are healthy and dedicated, and the company can count on their stamina and their willingness to make the necessary personal sacrifices to continue in their fast-paced career paths.

There is some disagreement on the extent to which the organizations in our survey carefully manage the careers of their high potentials. In our Likert-type questionnaire, we asked our respondents to evaluate how closely the following statement matched their com-
STAGES OF HIGH-POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT

Various scholars have used the concept of developmental stages to explain career dynamics across the span of a long-term work history. For individual careerists, the idea is often linked to adult life stage development (Levinson et al., 1978) or to the various issues and tasks associated with progressing during each career and life transition (Schein, 1978, pp. 39-46; Hall, 1976). Career stages is also a fork way for companies to frame human resource management issues at various developmental periods. The work of Dalton and Thompson (1986) and Dalton et al. (1977) is most notable for its focus on managing the careers of professionals across four career stages, each stage representing a more appropriate set of knowledge and skills for the particular experience level, hence an increased productive effort on behalf of the organization.

We were interested to learn from our study that most companies representatives with whom we spoke also conceived of managing HIPOs according to their developmental stages. The three most clearly identified phases of HIPO management consist of identifying candidates and sorting them out from their peers (Stage I), developing them (Stage II), and then actually going through the leadership succession process (Stage III).

The work of Stage I is to generate a pool of newly selected HIPOs. This group may include those just out of elite academic programs or those with 3-8 years experience who, formally or informally, have been identified as high performers and have been culled from their peers and targeted for future development. At Stage II, HIPOs who have performed well in their first few assignments and are now considered solid prospects for future leadership are provided a variety of training and development experiences. They are often known as “comers” in that they are being groomed over a 10-15 year period for important positions in the firm. However, the organizational pyramid gets very narrow at the top. Many of those who did well in their mid-career will not achieve top management positions. Some of them will voluntarily plateau because of the stress of long hours, corporate politics, or, quite often, because such a pattern is incongruent with their non-work and family life. HIPOs in Stage III are, therefore, those heir apparents who have been developed by the company, who are unambivalent about wanting a significant position of leadership and willing to sacrifice to get it, and those who clearly qualify as high-level leaders. They are the group poised to succeed to the six to twelve positions at the top of the hierarchy.

Figure 1 may be instructive, as an overview, in terms of what we found in our survey to occur in high-potential development at each stage.

HIPO development in most large corporations, as illustrated in Figure 1, resembles an inverted funnel in which a larger pool of qualified candidates is selected and must then filter up to the top. Moreover, Stage II is the most lengthy developmental period in the cycle of selecting, training, and fine-grooming the future leadership of the firm. Many management developers in our study contended that HIPOs had to be ready to assume lower-level Stage III leadership positions by their mid-forties. This being the case, it is possible to estimate that in most instances, Stage I selection and culling typically occurs from ages 22-27 and Stage II development usually takes place between ages 28-43 or over a 15 year period.

While this conceptual framework is of our own making based on our analysis of the data, it is derived from the respondents’ descriptions about the dynamics of HIPO development and management.
As stated above, we were surprised to discover that the definitions provided of the high-potential concept were contingent on the particular stage of development. Below, each of the three developmental stages are more carefully defined.

**Stage I**

Selection takes place quite early in the career—for some at entry. However, only 19 percent of the companies surveyed attempted to select HIPOs during the recruiting and hiring phase of employment, usually on the basis of elite education (e.g., Harvard, Stanford), grades, references from professors, and previous employers. Within the first two to five years, however, most companies begin sorting out their HIPOs according to their performance reviews, boss recommendations, and other screening devices (e.g., assessment center performance). Supervisors often try, at this stage, to identify candidates who have the ability to move up the hierarchy three to five levels above their current assignments. Much of HIPO selection and training in this early phase is handled by the human resource staff.

Outstanding job performance is the critical criterion used in the initial identification of high potentials. For most companies, esti-mating potential by accomplishments is less political (and less controversial) than measuring candidates against a magic list of attributes or evaluating future potential. Because of this desire to have a valid, “non-subjective” form of evaluation, direct supervisors (usually first or second-level supervisors) in 58 percent of the companies we surveyed were the ones to tag their direct reports as “high potential,” depending on job performance.

These Stage I HIPOs are considered feeder groups from which the next level is selected. If an individual in this stage is judged successful in the next few assignments after being selected into this group, that person will be allowed to proceed to Stage II, where closer scrutiny prevails, one participates in special training and development programs, and one’s personal life is often subordinated to the needs of the company. Some companies explained that it was their policy to allow somewhat easy access into the larger feeder group at Stage I. This was seen as a way to be fair and give many people a chance at making it to the top. Other firms are very restrictive throughout, even at Stage I.

Typically, local or divisional managers select the Stage I candidates, who are then “tested” in demanding assignments designed to narrow the field. For example, some employees may be given important projects based on their technical expertise, while others are tested as first-line supervisors or junior members of project teams. The HIPOs who meet the expectations of more senior managers in these various tests enter into what is often a “tournament model” of advancement (Rosenbaum, 1979). This means that they are given an opportunity to be part of the next series of events or the next “game” rather than be eliminated from the contest. Thus, while many are initially considered in the HIPO pool, only a select number of proven candidates advance to Stage II.

Some selected as HIPOs voluntarily drop out during Stage I. They perceive what it will require to achieve top management status and choose not to make the necessary personal sacrifices that are required, such as relocating every two to four years, working long hours, extensive travel away from home, and constant pressure and stress.

**Stage II**

Once the field is narrowed and candidates have either failed to qualify in the initial rounds of the tournament or have dropped out voluntarily, those responsible for managing this function in their company make a concerted effort to train and develop the HIPOs who remain.

However, a further screen for Stage II HIPOs in a number of the
companies we surveyed consists of continuous review and approval by one or more management review committees (MRCs) at the functional, division, and/or corporate level. This step occurs at the end of Stage I and continues on through Stage II. As the HIPO progresses through Stage II, however, the overseeing MRC becomes less local and more corporate. On these committees sit senior general and human resource managers at each level within the corporation. Some companies require the complete consensus of the members of the MRC before an individual can continue on the HIPO list and move onto another round of planned promotions and training experiences. By requiring consensus, everyone who needs to follow through and help in the high potential's development has agreed on both the individual's potential and on the areas that need to be developed.

The corporate human resources staff during Stage II HIPO development most frequently performs maintenance and coordination functions: monitoring training and development plans for the HIPOs, collecting performance information from various sources, maintaining the HIPO list, and tracking the candidates across critical career positions (which were as few as 30 in one company and as many as 350 in another very large firm). The HR person(s) in charge of management development also help to integrate and coordinate the programs of the local divisions of the company.

The actual training and development is continuous and often individually tailored during Stage II. In general, however, as HIPOs begin Stage II, they have probably been with the company from three to eight years and they enter a planned training phase, although the amount of information they have may vary. They may know, for instance, that they are being considered for a position at the next level of management and, perhaps, that they may be in line for future promotions. They do not often know that they are going to occupy a crucial assignment that will qualify them to be considered for a track leading to top management ranks. Some companies are more purposeful than others and carefully move their HIPOs along a conveyor belt of developmental positions. Others believe in broad-based training of a certain kind but the actual experiences differ according to circumstance (e.g., the position available at the time) and person.

These training programs are designed to give future leaders a working knowledge of the functional areas in the company and an understanding of the corporation as a whole. Generally they include a two-pronged approach: on-the-job training and classroom instruction.

On-the-job Training. The most important element of on-the-job training is job rotations. Carefully planned and monitored rotations through key positions are, for 84 percent of the companies we surveyed, the most critical and commonly used method of training. For example, in one company in the chemical industry, a HIPO on this level would receive assignments of two to three years in such functions as manufacturing, finance, human resources, and marketing. It was assumed that the HIPOs would perform well, learn the critical aspects of the job quickly, receive special coaching, and move on rapidly.

HIPOs at late-Stage II also receive special assignments to develop particular skills, such as making presentations, and are often asked to be part of special ad hoc committees and task forces. Less formal but equally important phases of on-the-job training include coaching and counseling from bosses, mentors, and sponsors. These mentoring experiences often take place in conjunction with assignments at headquarters or main regional offices. Here the HIPO comes to know better the inner workings of the firm, becomes personally acquainted with some of the key players, gains a more corporate-wide perspective, and is part of some "deep culture" experiences. Just as important as mentors is exposing HIPOs to one another and forging strong peer networks. These groups become colleagues and peers and learn to work together and share important information.

Classroom Instruction. The second prong of this training, classroom instruction, includes both company-sponsored courses and programs taught by universities or professional associations. Sixty-three percent of the corporations we surveyed had developed internal seminars to train their managers, the second most-frequently mentioned method after job rotations. A recent Wall Street Journal article points out that a number of companies have their own campus-like training facilities used for teaching future leaders the company's management philosophy. More importantly, this setting allows the CEO to articulate his or her vision to all of the key managers, thus helping to mold a common corporate culture (Guyon, 1987).

Only three of our companies provided such extensive internal training. Most of them used in-house training programs to teach basic management skills to HIPOs in Stage I and early-Stage II. However, 30 percent of those we surveyed during late-Stage II created special in-house HIPO courses for intensive socialization and exposure to upper-level managers at, typically, a lavish resort hotel where the company combined a tailor-made program taught by external consultants with one taught by senior managers. The intensive interaction with both peers and senior managers was seen as an important part of this course.

Fifty-three percent of our companies cited external classroom instruction as one of their important training methods. These "executive development" courses, custom-designed for relevance, intensive interaction with HIPOs from different settings, and state-of-the-art management skills, are often taught at high-status universities such as...
By the latter phases of Stage II, the candidates have all become "corporate resources" (Schein, 1986) and their careers are closely monitored by the corporate staff—most commonly, according to the companies we surveyed, a corporate management review committee, often chaired by the CEO or another very senior executive, and on which sit influential line managers as well as the director of human resources.

**Stage III**

At the beginning of Stage III, there is normally a group of 25 HIPOs who are logical candidates for the coveted top management jobs.

Much has been written about succession at the top and succession planning (Friedman, 1986; Hall, 1986; Carroll, 1984). Sonnenfeld (1987) has described four departure styles among CEOs in the succession phase: (1) "monarchs" who refuse to leave voluntarily, (2) "generals" who find a way to subvert the process of succession, (3) "ambassadors" who sincerely look for the next generation of leadership, and (4) "governors" who seek a new term of office in a different company.

We did not attempt to focus on the succession process or classify succession styles, but several aspects of Stage III succession became apparent in the course of our survey. First, in 54 percent of the organizations we studied, the CEO is extensively involved in selecting and developing high-potential employees at Stage III. Some CEOs are involved much sooner.

Friedman (1986), in his study of succession systems in large corporations, corroborates the critical role that the CEO plays in this third stage of managing high-potential employees. He points to the percentage of the CEO's time that is spent on succession issues and in the influence the CEO has on various stages of succession events. The involvement and commitment of the CEO is a prerequisite for successful high-potential management at this stage of development. And as Lester B. Korn, CEO of Korn/Ferry acknowledges, corporate board members are now becoming increasingly involved in top-management succession (Cowherd, 1986, p. 338). Korn states, "succession planning is not the responsibility of management alone. The board has to protect the balance sheet of the corporation for the shareholders, and has the same obligation to protect the human resource asset base for the shareholders. . . . Boards have to deal with the top five to seven executive positions."

Many of the respondents in our study were high-level human resource professionals working on Stage I and Stage II activities, but on five different occasions it was implied to us that to find out information about top-level succession, we would have to get access to another respondent, one very close to the top and probably a senior line manager monitoring the top-executive succession process. In fact, two companies let us know that at the Stage III level of high-potential management, the process was directed by a very senior-level line manager who worked closely with the CEO. In 50 percent of the firms, however, the top-level MRC also includes a human resource professional. We did not encounter any organizations in which human resource professionals took primary responsibility for Stage III HIPO development (as is reputed to be the case in many large Japanese corporations).

**HIPOs: WHO PLATEAU?**

HIPOs who make it to the top are visible advertisements of the succession process. But what happens to those employees, some of them former HIPOs, who do not receive the positions for which they were being groomed? We asked our respondents: "Which group of employees, while talented, seem the most plateaued in your firm?"

Not surprisingly, the most frequent responses were middle managers and technical/professional staff. For some companies, plateauing is a function of the ever-narrowing pyramid. No one group, division, or business has a concentration of plateaued people. Rather, the crucial variable is the managerial level. For example, a large corporation in the chemical and technology-transfer industries, reported 300 positions at the Stage I level but only 22 slots at the Stage III level. Clearly, 93 percent of the potential internal candidates could not be promoted to the next logical position.

For other companies, recent downsizings, mergers, and restructuring exacerbate the plateauing problem. Fewer layers of management mean less opportunity. Three of our respondents reported using the strategy of lateral moves and transfers to cope with this problem, but as one respondent of a major company in the pharmaceutical industry who used this strategy admitted, "it doesn't always deal with the employee's expectations and which or how many opportunities to give."

Some respondents also identified their companies as "mature"—no longer growing rapidly but at about the correct size for their markets. In such slow-growth situations, they found that motivating and managing their HIPOs was becoming a problem. This is because they had numerous dissatisfied HIPOs who had been groomed but...
had no positions open for them. These high potentials were frustrated, restless, and often unpleasant and demoralized employees.

Many technical/professional staff members also were reported to reach a certain level beyond which they cannot move. While 77 percent of the companies stated that they offer dual career tracks, more detailed discussions revealed that only 50 percent offered technical career ladders that genuinely led to significant influence, respect, and pay comparable to the managerial track. Most company technical ladders stopped at senior researcher positions with influence in one’s functional area only, but not much more. Others had created a “Fellows Program” which allowed a technical/professional careerist to achieve senior expert status; these individuals have a great deal of input into all research areas and overall influence on structuring and policy-making of the whole unit. However, such influence did not often extend beyond the Fellow’s organizational unit or area of expertise.

Sixteen percent of the companies defined plateauing as the employee’s choice. Respondents would say things like: “We constantly offer opportunities for advancement. It’s up to the individual to take advantage of these opportunities.” These sixteen percent are characterized by their strong marketing orientations and have had years of significant growth and opportunity.

CONCLUSION

The practices associated with managing high-potential employees in 33 large, diverse, and well-known U.S. corporations have been described. These descriptions, based on the responses of persons who manage HIPO programs within their companies, have led us to conceive a three-stage model of high-potential management. While not generalizable to all situations, the model provides a descriptive framework for further exploration and research.

At the first stage of the model, identification and selection, the company creates a pool of top performers who then receive significant “test” experiences. The hundred or so HIPOs who emerge from this process committed to the company and ambitious enough to remain in consideration, then progress on to the development period, Stage II. Here they undergo more specific development, including planned job rotations, special assignments, and unique educational experiences. Starting in late-Stage II and extending into the third stage, succession, the top HIPOs or Heir Apparant are personally monitored by a high-level management review committee often headed by the CEO. They are exposed to key personnel and taught the company’s deep culture. From this “short list,” the top level leadership of the firm will frequently be chosen.

Plateauing in our survey was most common in middle-management when, for a variety of reasons, promotion opportunities dried up and levels of management were trimmed. The technical/professional staff were also viewed as likely to plateau due to the cutting of corporate staffs. Even where parallel technical career paths existed, they did not, in most cases, lead to equal amounts of power, opportunity, and rewards as did the managerial track.

For all practical purposes, a high-potential employee is synonymous with one who will eventually reach a top-management position. Dalton and Thompson (1986, Chapter 6) found that in R&D and other professional organizations, only 75 percent of the leadership group were managers. The other 25 percent were idea innovators, product champions, and technical gurus. This raises a question about the composition of the next generation of top leadership given the importance of technology-based businesses in the future U.S. economy. Should HIPOs now being selected for future leadership only be managers or should they also include some internal entrepreneurs and professional geniuses?

Another issue raised in the study is the importance of physical stamina (i.e., the ability to work long and hard and be sharp given very demanding pressures) and willpower or putting the job before everything else. While it is clear that top-level managers work very hard and have demanding lifestyles (See Kotter, 1982, Chapter 4), it is appropriate to also question this practice. First, a different generation of leaders, both male and female, may espouse new values concerning the balance between personal and professional life (see Derr, 1986). In the future, the best and the brightest may not be those who work the hardest and sacrifice the most. Moreover, better balance may, in fact, make for more effective long-term leadership behavior (see Bailyn, 1978, 1982). Further, while stamina and dedication are important given the nature of executive work, it is important to question whether, if overemphasized, they are sufficient. Do we want future leaders in American industry known mostly as hard workers? How about creativity and working smart?

A related problem from an organizational effectiveness perspective is the tournament model. Not only does it encourage a short-term orientation, but it excludes from the leadership pool some who may have ultimate potential but may not necessarily progress at the same pace as the rest of the HIPO cohort. A more flexible model of high-potential development needs to be considered, one which accommodates late-entry points for “newcomers,” such as women who may be entering the workforce late, for “drop outs” who take a detour from their careers but learn a lot in the process, for “late bloomers” who are extremely talented even though they did not show potential early on, and for careerists who are simply “out of sync” for some
good reason. This point is especially important as we consider the "baby bust" population demographics of the emerging workforce.

Finally, the practices of these 33 diverse companies in managing high potentials, while not conclusive, raise a strategic issue about how to train and develop future leadership when the future is so unpredictable. Should a HIPO system, for example, be based on asking the HIPO to occupy a fixed number of current positions which are thought to give the right experience mix in order to run the company, or should the development be more general? Should future HIPOs be the "look-alikes" of this generation of top management, or should they look very different? If different, how should they look? Should the careers of HIPOs, especially from Stage II onward, be carefully managed, or should the individual HIPO be more proactive in managing his or her own learning? Should some provision be made for measuring potential, including the propensity to take risks and learn from failures, or should those who make it to the top be lower risk high performers? These are some of the issues raised in the study which every company designing or revising its high-potential program must consider.

Managing high potentials is more than implementing another human resource management program. As Dalton and Thompson point out (1986, Chapter 6), developing future leadership is one of four key functions of top management. (The other three are providing vision or a sense of direction, exercising power responsibly on behalf of the enterprise, and representing the organization both internally and externally.) From the perspective of both the individual HIPO and the company, managing high potentials operationalizes the carrying out of this important top-leadership task. High-potential management also goes to the heart of basic assumptions of a company’s culture by exposing how firms define the corporate "right stuff." It is similar to what Wolfe (1980, p. 19) says about the military and astronaut programs,

... and the idea was to prove at every foot of the way up the pyramid that you were one of the elected and anointed ones who had the right stuff and could move higher and higher and even - ultimately, God willing, one day - that you might be able to join the special few at the very top, that elite who had the capacity to bring tears to men's eyes, the very Brotherhood of the Right Stuff itself.

How the company defines the "right stuff" and the qualities and complexion of its future leadership may be synonymous with how it sees itself 20 years hence.

C. Brooklyn Derr is currently Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Graduate School of Business, the University of Utah. He is also the Director of the Institute for Human Resource Management at the University and a Fellow of the Institute for Arts Administration. He is currently a Visiting Professor at the International Management Institute (IMI) in Geneva, Switzerland. Dr. Derr has formerly been on the faculty of the following institutions: The European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD), Harvard University, UCLA, and the Naval Postgraduate School. His most recent book is Managing The New Careerists: The Diverse Career Success Orientation of Today's Workers (Jossey-Bass, 1986).

Candace Jones is presently a doctoral candidate in the Management Department at the College of Business, University of Utah. She recently received her Masters of Human Resource Management, also from the University of Utah, and her B.A. degree is from Smith College. Her research interests include organizational development, careers, innovation, entrepreneurship and family business. She has been the Director of Human Resources and merchandising in her family’s retail corporation for the last five years. Her responsibilities have included: implementing a performance appraisal system; training and developing both management and staff personnel; selecting and merchandising goods; designing retail outlets; overseeing and performing marketing analysis and advertising.

Edmund L. Toomey is a Consultant with the Organization Consulting Group at Digital Equipment Corporation. He has worked at Digital since 1976 in a variety of positions in Human Resources Management. His education includes a Bachelor of Arts from Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts, and a Master of Science in Human Resources Management from the University of Utah. Additionally, he recently completed two years of post graduate work in Business Administration at the University of Utah while on a leave of absence from Digital Equipment Corporation.

REFERENCES


Chinese Women Managers: A Comparison with Their U.S. and Asian Counterparts

Herbert W. Hildebrandt and Jinyun Liu

Questionnaire and interview data were gathered on 150 People's Republic of China female managers who were contrasted with their counterparts in the U.S. and Southeast Asia. Chinese female managers have little job mobility, pursue careers appraised by the Party and influenced by central government planning, work the most hours per week, and recommend the political/ideology path as the fastest route to the top. They are comparatively less educated, progress under a patrilineal tradition, recommend business courses as a means of preparation for managerial responsibilities, and slowly are gaining opportunities in job selection.

The role of women in the workplace continues to receive recognition in both scholarly journals and the popular press. This is all to the good for profiling the significant and increasing human resource role women can play in managerial and executive positions.

For U.S. women, corridors of power are populated with males who predominate at the pinnacle of influence as executives and managers. But for Chinese women, central to any discussion is the powerful but slowly diminishing influence of central government planning on recruitment, training, appraisal, mobility, and variations in working arrangements.

Only recently has momentum increased to view the foreign female managerial woman as, for example, in diverse countries as Japan, Singapore, The Pacific Basin, Britain, Indonesia, Philippines, India, Germany, Russia, Italy, Israel, France and Canada, and Guatemala.

Additionally, there have been more finite studies of women managers in specific industries such as hotel management (Christensen, 1987); insurance (Longo, 1986); investments, (Schmerken, 1983); and others. Mega-overviews of Asian and Southeast Asian managers have also been completed, including information on comments about women in leadership positions.

Hence the focus of this statement adds to the enlarging core of research on women's roles in management.