

Barriers to women in the workplace and how an organisation can evolve it's culture to address them



ALLEGROFT ASSOCIATES
EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Welcome, and thank you for your interest

Meet the Headhunter – Barriers to Progression and How Culture Can Evolve

I originally gave this presentation as a lecture back in 2021 during the COVID Pandemic. I wanted to revisit the topic. A lot has changed since then, and it felt like the right time to take another look.

Barriers to Progression for Women

Family Choices and Societal Pressure -

Let's start with the obvious—women still face the double burden of balancing career and family. That hasn't changed. But many organisations are starting to recognise the risk of losing talented women who step out of the workforce and don't return. The smart ones are becoming more family-friendly as a result.

In my early career—late 20s into my 30s—I worked in large PLC-type organisations where the culture was dominated by presenteeism. You stayed at your desk late, often past 6pm, and if you dared to leave early, someone noticed. The boardrooms were overwhelmingly male—90% or more—and this kind of environment made it incredibly hard for women to balance a senior career with family life.

Flexible Work: The Box-Ticking Era -

Flexible working may have existed on paper, but no one really felt comfortable asking for it. Women returning from maternity leave might go part-time, but those who did were routinely overlooked for promotion. These arrangements were often stigmatised. Thankfully, we've seen some real change here in the past few years.

Jim Allcroft - Founder and MD

Jim is a seasoned search consultant with deep expertise in Housing, Higher Education, Regeneration, Economic Development and the Third Sector. Well connected across leadership and professional networks UK-wide, his early career included serving as a Commissioned Fighter Controller in the RAF and working as a Finance Manager at Procter & Gamble. Jim has successfully placed executive and non-executive leaders across the UK, drawing talent from both target sectors and the FTSE 100.



Barriers to women in the workplace and how an organisation can evolve it's culture to address them



ALLCROFT ASSOCIATES
EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Individual Mindsets: A Gendered View

Confidence and Self-Perception

After interviewing hundreds of candidates—men and women—I've noticed distinct patterns. Men are often overconfident, brushing over their weaknesses. Women tend to do the opposite: they downplay their strengths and focus on what they haven't done.

If a role has ten essential criteria, a man will apply having ticked four or five. A woman, even if she meets eight or nine, will fixate on the one or two she doesn't. I always tell candidates: don't apply for a job you've already done. Growth roles should involve stretch.

Self-Selection Out of Progression

Many highly capable women pull themselves out of the process—concerned about travel, workload, or the impact on family. It's frustrating, because the talent is there. But the demands of executive roles often coincide with life stages involving young children. As a result, many women peak in senior middle management and don't push through to the top.

Minimising Contributions

Another trend: men will say they led a project, while women—who often did lead—describe themselves as “part of the team.” They're far more empathetic and generous in crediting colleagues, which is admirable in leadership but can work against them in interviews.

Institutional Barriers

Unconscious Bias

Most medium-to-large organisations have delivered unconscious bias training by now. We're getting better at understanding how it works. I try to balance panels wherever possible—male and female, diverse in age and experience. More organisations are also involving junior team members and service users in recruitment processes, which is a positive step.

Barriers to women in the workplace and how an organisation can evolve it's culture to address them



ALLCROFT ASSOCIATES
EXECUTIVE SEARCH

The "Queen Bee" Phenomenon

When women reach the executive level—often in male-dominated environments—they can start to model the behaviours that got them there: long hours, assertiveness, detachment. Some even become critical of other women's work-life commitments. It's a survival strategy, but one that perpetuates exclusion, rather than solving it.

Mentors vs Sponsors

There's a useful distinction to make here—one highlighted by a Harvard Business School study.

Mentors offer guidance, advice, and exposure to different situations.

Sponsors are the real game-changers. They're senior decision-makers who know you, believe in you, and advocate for you when it matters—like in a promotion meeting.

Many women have mentors but lack sponsors. One participant in the Harvard study put it perfectly: "I was mentored to death, but still didn't have a sponsor."

Post-Covid Shifts in Culture

Covid was brutal, but it forced a rethink on how we work. Remote working became the norm overnight. Presenteeism lost its grip. We began valuing outputs over office time.

I've seen a noticeable change in leadership tone, especially over the last five to seven years. The old-school alpha male CEO is giving way to a more thoughtful, empathetic leadership style. Ideas like servant leadership—leading from the back—are being embraced.

We're also seeing more women in top roles, and that's had a positive knock-on effect on organisational culture.

Barriers to women in the workplace and how an organisation can evolve it's culture to address them



ALLCROFT ASSOCIATES
EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Hybrid Working and Generational Impact

The genie's out of the bottle: we're not going back to five days in the office. And when organisations try, people leave.

A balanced hybrid approach—two or three office days per week—seems to work well. It allows collaboration, while recognising people's need for flexibility.

But there's another reason office presence still matters. Many junior staff began their careers during lockdown, working from their bedrooms. They missed out on observing how others behave at work—how meetings run, how people lead, how culture is expressed day to day. That kind of learning by osmosis is essential, and it's hard to replicate remotely.

The Rooney Rule (Applied to Gender and Ethnicity)

Some of my clients are now formally adopting the Rooney Rule—originally introduced by the NFL in 2002 to tackle racial imbalance in coaching roles. In the UK, it's being used to mandate balanced shortlists: 50/50 gender representation and inclusive of multicultural candidates for every senior role.

It's a great step forward. Because the truth is, this change won't happen by accident. You can't wait for your organisation to become diverse and inclusive—you have to design it that way.

Final Thoughts

We've come a long way, but we've still got work to do. Cultural change doesn't happen overnight. It takes conscious effort—from individuals, teams, and boards.

If there's one thing I've learned from my years in executive search, it's this: the organisations that thrive are those that value difference, challenge old norms, and invest in future leaders—regardless of gender, background, or working pattern.

Video Lecture - A more detailed version of this report is available in lecture format at the following address.

<https://allcrofta.com/meettheheadhunter>

Barriers to women in the workplace and how an organisation can evolve it's culture to address them

Our approach at Allcroft Associates

We're an executive search firm with deep roots in the North East business community. Our model is based on:

- **Collaboration** – we embed ourselves into your team, working as partners, not just providers.
- **Business Literacy** – we understand the environment, challenges, and political context you operate in.
- **Results** – we don't just produce shortlists—we deliver outcomes.
- **Niche Roles** - We operate at Head of roles and above (typically £60k+) and non-executive, sometimes the niche roles are the hardest.

We're here to help you compete more effectively for the talent your organisation needs to succeed.

Final thoughts: competing—and winning—in 2025

Securing specialist talent is no longer about advertising and hoping for the best. It takes strategic foresight, candidate empathy, and a compelling offer—delivered through a robust and respectful process. At Allcroft Associates, we understand what high-performing leaders are looking for—and how to help you attract them. Whether you're planning your next senior appointment or rethinking your long-term talent strategy, we're here to help. Let's talk about how we can support your next critical hire—confidently, discreetly, and with purpose.

Allcroft Associates - e. Jim@allcrofta.com t. 07783 701 922 w. www.allcrofta.com

Allcroft Associates adheres to the General Data Protection Regulations. Registered at Georgian House, 3-5 Hotspur St, Alwick, NE66 1QE, company 15913050. www.allcrofta.com

ridi
Recruitment Industry
Disability Initiative



ALLCROFT ASSOCIATES
EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Appointment of the UK Enterprise Account Director, AICO AI

Allcroft Associates, led by Jim Allcroft, ran a highly efficient national search for our UK Enterprise Account Director, delivering exceptional candidates in a short timeframe. This was a critical hire for Aico.ai, as we needed someone not only with a strong background in enterprise sales but also the drive and vision to break new ground and open up a new market for us in the UK. Jim took the time to understand our business, our goals, and the challenges of entering a competitive landscape. They identified high-calibre professionals with the right mix of commercial acumen, strategic thinking, and the ability to build strong relationships from the ground up. Their structured and proactive approach meant we had access to outstanding candidates quickly, without compromising on quality. Thanks to Allcroft Associates, we secured an exceptional leader who will play a pivotal role in Aico.ai's expansion. The professionalism, insight, and dedication Jim brought to the process were outstanding, and we wouldn't hesitate to work with them again in the future." **Jon Craven, Chief Revenue Officer, AICO AI**

Appointment of the Chief Executive – Thirteen

When we were looking to fill our CEO Jim helped us to make a terrific appointment. His deep local connections, combined with a strong national reach, meant he was able to attract new, high-calibre candidates in under a month—three of whom progressed to the final interviews. Jim worked tirelessly, meeting tight deadlines to ensure our CEO was appointed on schedule. I wouldn't hesitate to recommend him. **Jane Earl, Chair, Thirteen Housing**

Appointment of the Chief Executive, North Star

We were impressed with his highly professional and respectful dealings with both prospective persons expressing interest in the role as well as the ultimate candidates. As a result of the detailed and careful planning process, the access to great candidates and exceptionally good working relationship we were very pleased with the final outcome. As the Chair responsible for leading this process, I would have no hesitation in recommending Jim Allcroft as a recruitment partner. **Anna Urbanowicz, Chair, North Star**

Appointment of Four Non-Executives - Veteran's Launchpad

Jim's extensive local connections and national reach allowed us to engage with an impressive range of qualified and passionate candidates. He expertly guided us through long and shortlisting, and facilitated final interviews with great professionalism. His respect and care in working with all prospective trustees were evident throughout. I would wholeheartedly recommend Jim Allcroft as a recruitment partner. **Jill Murray, CEO, Veterans' Launchpad**

