

# LIFE & LEADERSHIP AFTER HBS

A Preview of Findings



From Harvard Business School's Alumni  
Survey on the experiences of its alumni  
across career, family, and life paths.

APRIL 2013



## CONTENTS:

|  |    |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION : CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY        | 4  |
| WHO ARE OUR ALUMNI?                                    | 5  |
| WHAT ARE OUR ALUMNI DOING?                             | 6  |
| WHAT DO OUR ALUMNI VALUE?                              | 8  |
| WHAT FACTORS IMPEDE WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT?               | 9  |
| WHAT FACTORS HELP MEN AND WOMEN ADVANCE THEIR CAREERS? | 10 |
| BRIEF METHODOLOGY                                      | 11 |
| FINAL NOTES AND CONTACT INFORMATION                    | 12 |

# Introduction: Context and Purpose of the Study

Fifty years ago, the Harvard Business School faculty voted to admit women into the two-year MBA Program. Since then, about 12,000 women have graduated from our MBA, Doctoral, and Executive Education programs. Today, women make up 40% of the MBA class. To commemorate the 50th anniversary of women’s admission, the School developed an idea for an ambitious project: an extensive and innovative survey to capture the arc of the careers and lives of our alumni. Through this research, we hope to make a unique contribution to the conversation about gender and work and to gain a new understanding of the aspirations of alumni, the realities they face, and the decisions and tradeoffs they confront.

The *Life and Leadership After HBS* survey aimed to open a dialogue with our 79,000 alumni about the views they hold, the challenges and opportunities they have encountered, and the choices they have made. We hope that this preview of findings will spark conversations that will extend and deepen as we delve more deeply into the data and develop a comprehensive report to be released later this year. One challenge for our research team was to balance dual goals—better understanding the complexities of our alumni population as a whole, while also closely examining gendered dimensions of life and career that we believe are crucial to advancing women leaders. This preview highlights key findings around gender, but the full report will include further results that are broader in nature.

We launched the *Life and Leadership After HBS* survey in late 2012. Researchers from HBS collaborated with Abt SRBI, a leading survey research firm, to conduct the study, which included a census of the 12,000 women and a stratified random sample of about 14,000 men (25,810 women and men were invited to take the survey).<sup>1</sup> Of those alumni contacted, 6,458 completed the survey and shared their life experiences and perspectives with us, a response rate of 25% (3,786 women; 2,655 men; and 17 who did not specify their gender). The data about our alumni population presented in this report have been properly weighted using standard methods; and in accordance with standard reporting procedures, all percentages noted in the text of this report are weighted.

The alumni who completed the survey attended the MBA or a Doctoral Program, a Comprehensive Leadership Program in Executive Education, or early offerings such as the Harvard-Radcliffe Program in Business Administration. We feel grateful and privileged that these respondents took the time to give us a glimpse into their unique life paths and the choices and decisions they have made since leaving HBS. Without their cooperation, we could not open the door to this conversation.

<sup>1</sup> See the Brief Methodology at the end of this report for more information about the survey design, method, and weighting.

# Who Are Our Alumni?

In our alumni population, men outnumber women more than five to one, an indication of women’s more recent entry into the School. Men are also significantly older than women, with half of them ages 60 or older. Alumnae are most likely to belong to the Baby Boom Generation (ages 48 to 66) and Generation X (ages 31 to 47). Most (66%) HBS alumni earned MBA degrees, one-third (32%) attended Executive Education programs, and a small proportion (1%) received doctoral degrees.

HBS alumni encounter many different opportunities and challenges after their time at the School, including family roles and personal responsibilities. About nine out of ten (87%) alumni are married or partnered and about the same proportion have children.<sup>2</sup> About one-third (31%) have children under age 18 living at home. In all generations but Generation Y (ages 25 to 30), men are more likely than women to have children. One-tenth of alumni expect to have their first or another child in the future.

**Figure 1: Generations by Total and Gender**



<sup>2</sup> Includes those who have had children, as well as those who have adopted children.

# What Are Our Alumni Doing?

**PRIMARY ROLES** Most (70%) alumni are in the paid workforce. The majority (56%) work full time, while fewer (14%) work part time. A significant proportion (24%) are retired, a proportion that increases in older generations, as one would expect. Ten percent of Gen X and Baby Boom alumnae are caring for children full time. Alumni who are employed full time work, on

average, 52 hours in a typical week. Those who are employed part time average 25 hours in a typical week. Figure 2 below provides a snapshot of the current primary roles of our alumni by generation and gender. Figure 3 shows a close-up of Gen X women's current primary roles.

**Figure 2:** Primary Roles by Total and Generation by Gender

|                               | TOTAL | Gen Y |      | Gen X |      | Baby Boomer |      | Older Generations |      |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|------|-------|------|-------------|------|-------------------|------|
|                               |       | Women | Men  | Women | Men  | Women       | Men  | Women             | Men  |
| Employed Full Time            | 56%   | 94%   | 96%  | 74%   | 95%  | 57%         | 72%  | 11%               | 17%  |
| Mean Hours                    | 51.9  | 56.7  | 59.7 | 52.9  | 56.0 | 51.0        | 50.6 | 43.4              | 41.6 |
| Employed Part Time            | 14%   | 2%    | 2%   | 13%   | 2%   | 20%         | 16%  | 15%               | 20%  |
| Mean Hours                    | 25.0  | *     | *    | 26.3  | *    | 25.0        | 26.3 | 17.1              | 23.0 |
| Retired                       | 24%   | 0%    | 0%   | 0%    | 0%   | 7%          | 7%   | 66%               | 57%  |
| Caring for Children Full Time | 1%    | 0%    | 0%   | 10%   | 0%   | 9%          | 0%   | 1%                | 0%   |
| Caring for Adults Full Time   | 1%    | 0%    | 0%   | 0%    | 0%   | 1%          | 0%   | 2%                | 2%   |
| Other                         | 3%    | 3%    | 2%   | 3%    | 2%   | 6%          | 5%   | 5%                | 5%   |
| Total                         | 100%  | 100%  | 100% | 100%  | 100% | 100%        | 100% | 100%              | 100% |

\*Sample size < 30.

The intersection of caregiving and paid work roles is an issue of particular relevance for women. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between our alumnae's primary roles and their parenthood status, we looked at the primary roles of Gen X women (ages 31 to 47). Most of these women have at least one child under age 18 living at home: 18% have one child at home and 53% have two or more children at home. Two-thirds

of Gen X mothers are in the paid workforce full time, 17% are employed part time, and 16% are out of the paid workforce and caring for children full time. The proportion of Gen X mothers caring for children full time increases with more than one child—17% of mothers with two or more children are out of the paid workforce, compared with 7% of mothers with one child.

**Figure 3:** Gen X Women and Presence of Children under Age 18 Living at Home

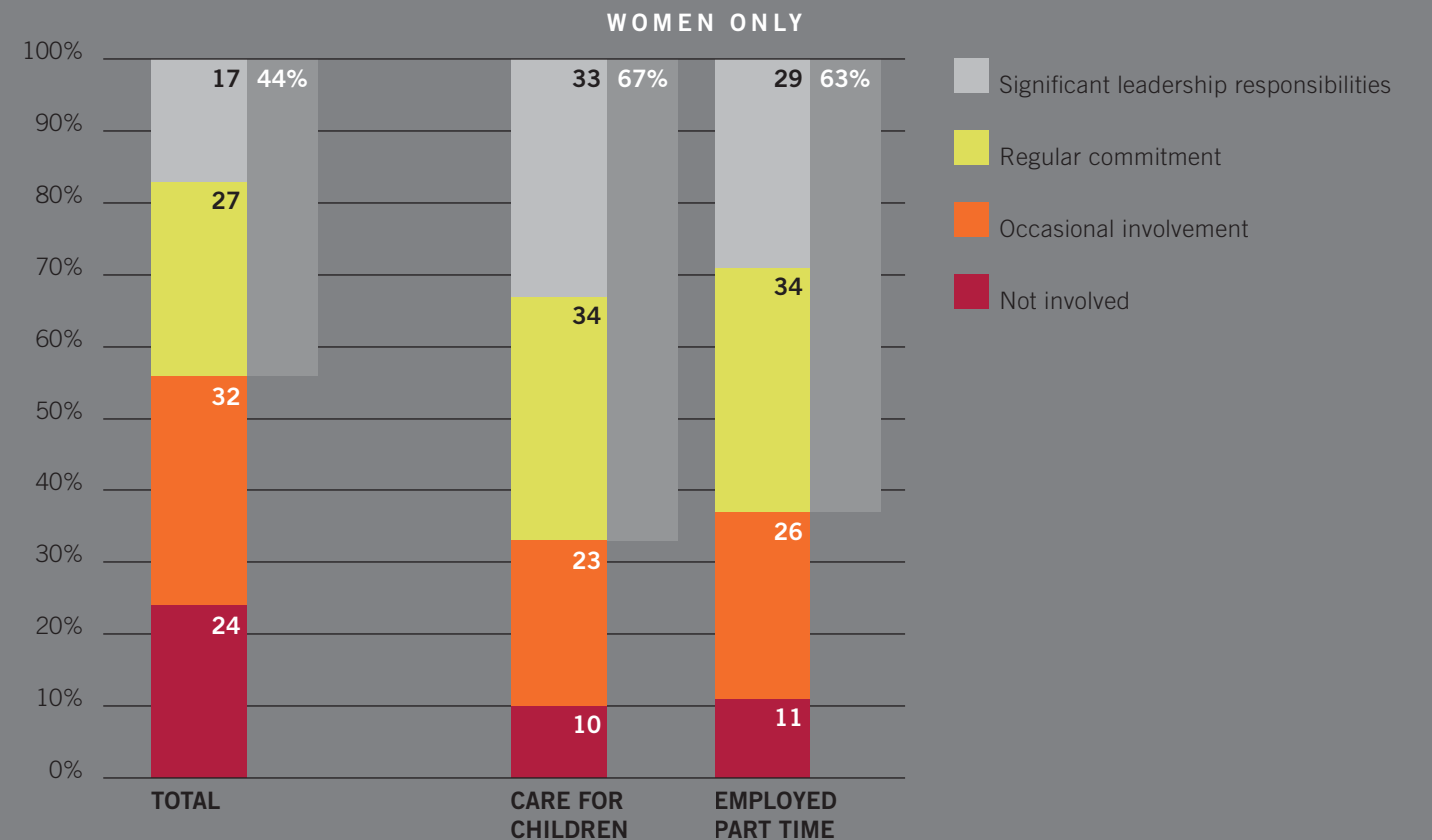
|                               | Gen X Women | No Children (29%) | One Child (18%) | Two or More Children (53%) |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Employed Full Time            | 74%         | 91%               | 79%             | 63%                        |
| Employed Part Time            | 13%         | 3%                | 12%             | 18%                        |
| Caring for Children Full Time | 10%         | 0%                | 7%              | 17%                        |
| Other                         | 3%          | 6%                | 2%              | 2%                         |
| Total                         | 100%        | 100%              | 100%            | 100%                       |

# What Are Our Alumni Doing?

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT** In addition to examining primary life roles, we wanted to understand how our alumni contribute to their communities and the world around them. We asked about their pro bono and volunteer efforts, which might include involvement in community or professional associations, educational causes, cultural institutions, or other nonprofit organizations. Three-fourths of our alumni are engaged in such work to varying degrees of involvement.

Mothers who care for children full time have higher levels of community engagement than alumni overall; they are also more likely to hold leadership positions in charitable or nonprofit work. Of alumnae who care for children full time, two-thirds have a regular commitment to or significant leadership responsibilities in such work.

**Figure 4:** Pro Bono and Volunteer Efforts by Total, Women Caring for Children Full Time, and Women Working Part Time

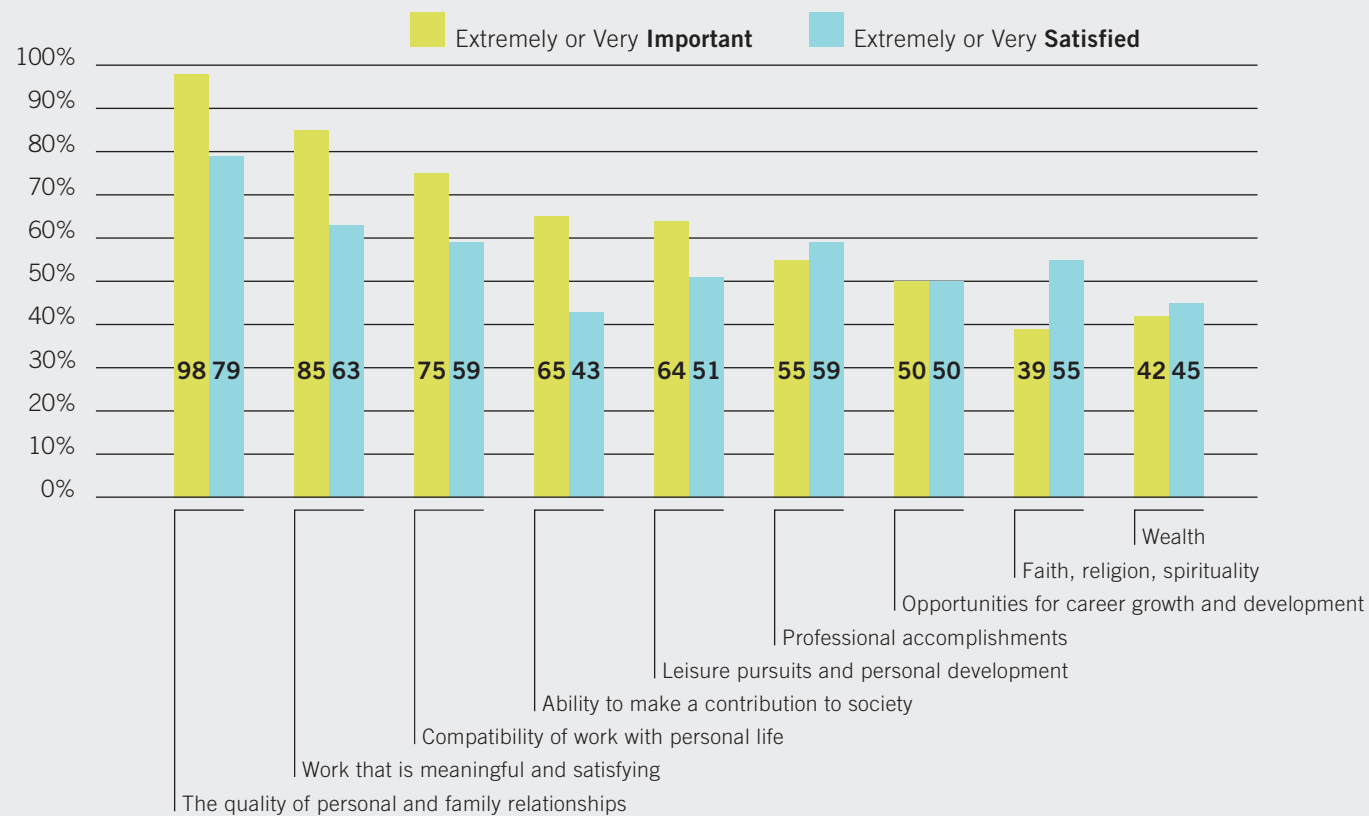


# What Do Our Alumni Value?

We wanted to understand what matters to our alumni. What experiences are most significant to them? What interests and concerns are important? How do they feel about these aspects of their lives? We asked alumni about the value they place on various personal and professional pursuits and about their level of satisfaction with each.

**The quality of personal and family relationships is most important to our alumni—both men and women.** Not only did nearly all (98%) rate it either “very important” or “extremely important,” 78% gave it the highest rating (“extremely important”). This latter figure is especially striking—no other item was rated “extremely important” by greater than 40% of respondents.

**Figure 5:** Importance and Satisfaction with Personal and Professional Pursuits



The high importance placed on personal and family relationships holds true across generation and gender, but when it comes to key aspects of professional life, we discovered some differences between men and women of typical career age. **Focusing on men and women younger than 67, we found that although**

**they place equal importance on meaningful and satisfying work, professional accomplishments, and opportunities for career growth and development, women report significantly less satisfaction than men with each of these aspects of their lives.**

**Figure 6:** Satisfaction with Professional Pursuits among Alumni under 67 Years Old\*

|   | TOTAL <67 | Women <67 | Men <67 |
|---|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Work that is meaningful and satisfying          | 60%       | 50%       | < 62%   |
| Professional accomplishments                    | 55%       | 46%       | < 57%   |
| Opportunities for career growth and development | 50%       | 41%       | < 52%   |

\*Percentage “extremely” or “very satisfied”

# What Factors Impede Women’s Advancement?

While profound changes have occurred in the workplace over the past fifty years, we know that women have not achieved parity in corporate, governmental, or other institutional leadership positions. We wanted to capture the thoughts of our alumni about why women’s career advancement differs from men’s. We asked alumni, both men and women, about a variety of factors proposed in the popular or scholarly literature as explanations for women’s lagged career advancement. Four of these explanations are considered “internal” and ten “structural.”

Internal factors (see bold items in Figure 7) are those that women themselves have more influence over—decisions they make or talent they develop personally. **Alumni—women and men—believe that prioritizing family over work, an internal factor, is the top barrier to women’s career advancement.**

We also asked about structural factors, which are dimensions of the paid work environment rather than characteristics of individuals.

Structural factors include features that pertain directly to gender inequality in the workplace. **Findings indicate that women’s and men’s perceptions of structural barriers differ substantially, with women much more likely to agree that such barriers have limited women’s career advancement.** Women’s and men’s agreement diverges most sharply in their perception of women’s exclusion from informal networks and lack of influential mentors and sponsors. Three-fourths of women agree that these factors are barriers to women’s advancement, while half of men agree. Similarly, three-fourths of women agree that the lack of a supportive work environment and an inhospitable organizational culture serve as barriers, while just over half of men share this assessment. These findings suggest that women and men hold different views about women’s experiences in the workplace and the extent to which biases and inequalities within organizations hinder women’s careers.

**Figure 7:** Perceptions of Internal and Structural Barriers to Women’s Advancement by Total and Gender\*

|   | TOTAL | Women | Men   | Difference |
|---|-------|-------|-------|------------|
| <b>Prioritizing family over work</b>  | 75%   | 82%   | > 74% | -8         |
| <b>Taking leaves or reducing work hours</b>                                   | 68%   | 84%   | > 65% | -19        |
| Lack of senior women role models  | 66%   | 74%   | > 65% | -9         |
| Inhospitable culture, such as dismissive behaviors and biased preconceptions  | 58%   | 75%   | > 54% | -21        |
| Lack of a supportive work environment   | 56%   | 74%   | > 52% | -22        |
| Exclusion from informal networks  | 54%   | 77%   | > 49% | -28        |
| Failure of senior leadership to assume responsibility for women’s advancement | 54%   | 68%   | > 52% | -16        |
| Lack of influential mentors and sponsors                                      | 53%   | 73%   | > 49% | -24        |
| Lack of supportive supervisors  | 52%   | 67%   | > 49% | -18        |
| Lack of spouse/partner who supports career decisions                          | 52%   | 60%   | > 50% | -10        |
| Lack of significant general or line management experience                     | 45%   | 49%   | > 44% | -5         |
| Lack of opportunities for developmental or visible job assignments            | 38%   | 52%   | > 35% | -17        |
| <b>Having an ineffective leadership style</b>                                 | 35%   | 47%   | > 33% | -14        |
| <b>Unwillingness to change companies/firms</b>                                | 30%   | 38%   | > 29% | -9         |

\*Percentage “strongly” or “slightly agree”

# What Factors Help Men and Women Advance Their Careers?

We looked at the career progression of our alumni, identifying factors that have been important to their success. We asked alumni about various strategies and supports and the extent to which these factors contributed to their career advancement. Of the eleven factors, seven were rated “extremely important” or “very important” by two-thirds or more alumni (see Figure 8).

**Two factors, developing effective leadership skills and having a spouse/partner who is supportive of my career decisions, are the most important factors to alumni overall and**

**are equally important to women and men.** Looking beyond these two top-rated factors, some gender and generational variations are evident. Men and women in Gen Y are more similar to one another than are older men and women when it comes to their assessment of important career strategies and supports. **Turning to gender differences, we noted that women are more likely than men to cite structural supports as important to their career advancement,** such as having supportive supervisors and an overall supportive work environment.

**Figure 8:** Importance to Career Advancement by Total and Gender\*

|   | TOTAL | Women | Men   |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 Developing effective leadership skills                    | 84%   | 82%   | 84%   |
| 2 Having a spouse/partner supportive of career decisions    | 80%   | 82%   | 79%   |
| 3 Being ambitious   | 75%   | 73%   | 76%   |
| 4 Gaining significant general or line management experience | 72%   | 64%   | < 74% |
| 5 Having supportive supervisors                             | 71%   | 81%   | > 69% |
| 6 Having an overall supportive work environment             | 70%   | 75%   | > 70% |
| 7 Obtaining developmental or visible job assignments        | 65%   | 71%   | > 64% |
| 8 Having an influential mentor or sponsor                   | 57%   | 63%   | > 57% |
| 9 Informal networking                                       | 50%   | 57%   | > 49% |
| 10 Changing companies/firms                                 | 37%   | 39%   | 36%   |
| 11 Seeing people like me succeed in senior management       | 33%   | 34%   | 32%   |

\*Percentage “strongly” or “slightly agree”

# Brief Methodology

The *Life and Leadership After HBS* study was conducted in conjunction with Harvard Business School’s commemoration of the 50th anniversary of women’s admission to the full, two-year MBA program. Under the auspices of the Culture and Community Initiative (CCI), HBS faculty designed and conducted the study with research partner Abt SRBI, a leading survey research firm. There are approximately 79,000 living alumni from the various degrees and programs, including: MBA, DBA, PhD, and Executive Education. The design of the study called for surveying all alumnae, approximately 12,000, and a somewhat higher number of alumni, for a total of 25,810 women and men. Men were oversampled because we anticipated a lower response rate from them owing to the topic of the survey.

All potential respondents received a letter from HBS Dean Nitin Nohria inviting them to take the survey. In an attempt to make the survey accessible to alumni of varying ages and in various locations, the survey was made available in several forms, depending upon the availability of working email addresses and expected response rates. Potential respondents with working email addresses received email invitations to take the survey online. Potential

respondents without working email addresses received hard copies of the survey in the mail. Non-respondents to either the web or mail versions who were in the oldest age categories received a follow-up telephone call inviting them to complete the survey by telephone. To compensate for expected longer completion times by mail and telephone compared to web, the mail and telephone formats contained somewhat fewer items.

The survey opened December 4, 2012 and closed on February 4, 2013. Completed surveys were received from 6,458 alumni: 5,820 via web, 389 by mail, and 249 by telephone. The response rate is 25.0%. We calculated design weights because the study design called for a census of alumnae but only a sample of alumni. We also made adjustments for non-responses and followed standard procedures for weight trimming and raking to population norms.

## Summary of Key Respondent Demographics\*

| RESPONDENT GENDER BY GENERATION |       |       |       |           |                   |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------------------|
|                                 | TOTAL | Gen Y | Gen X | Baby Boom | Older Generations |
| Women                           | 3,786 | 324   | 1,603 | 1,497     | 354               |
| Men                             | 2,655 | 170   | 1,003 | 952       | 527               |
| TOTAL                           | 6,458 | 496   | 2,608 | 2,459     | 884               |

| RESPONDENT GENDER BY DEGREE |       |       |          |                     |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|----------|---------------------|
|                             | TOTAL | MBA   | Doctoral | Executive Education |
| Women                       | 3,786 | 3,100 | 47       | 639                 |
| Men                         | 2,655 | 2,066 | 28       | 561                 |
| TOTAL                       | 6,458 | 5,176 | 76       | 1,206               |

\*Not all numbers add to Totals due to some respondents not answering items.

# Final Notes and Contact Information

These are some of the initial findings from the *Life and Leadership After HBS* survey. The Culture and Community Initiative will release a full report of the survey findings later in 2013.

The W50 wishes to thank each and every HBS alumna and alumnus who took the time to share his or her thoughts and experiences with us by completing the survey.

Robin Ely | Cynthia Montgomery | Boris Groysberg  
Faculty Co-Chairs of the W50 Summit

Please direct inquiries to Brian Kenny ([bkenny@hbs.edu](mailto:bkenny@hbs.edu)).

For more information on Harvard Business School's celebration of 50 years of women in the MBA program, please visit:  
[www.hbs.edu/women50](http://www.hbs.edu/women50)

For more information about Harvard Business School, please visit:  
<http://www.hbs.edu>









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