Women Shaping the World of Work: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow
Over the past six decades, women have dramatically reshaped their role in the nation’s labor force. What began with the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s, over time, turned into a monumental shift in the workplace, breaking down gender barriers and the evolution of female leadership in nearly all aspects of the nation’s business sectors.

Also getting our start in the 1960s, Randstad has since become dedicated to furthering the role of women in business. Here’s a look back at some of the key historical moments that have shaped the world of work for women, as well as a glimpse into what the future will hold in the decades to come.
This decade marked the beginning of deep cultural changes and forever altered the role of women in the workplace. The Civil Rights protests of the 1960s spurred women to renew their push for equal rights. More females than ever before were entering the paid workforce, but they quickly became disheartened by the environment they were encountering. This sparked the legal liberation of women, which addressed key disparities in the workplace like pay inequality, role discrimination and sexual harassment.

A primary turning point came with the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women, which was founded by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1961. The Commission uncovered several legal barriers that needed to be addressed, laws like those that barred women from certain occupations and discouraged equal pay for equal work.

Aimed to abolish this gender wage disparity, the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963. Shortly thereafter, the 1964 Title VII of the Civil Rights Act banned employment discrimination on the basis of race and sex. The passage of these laws and others opened the door for women as they began making their mark in the working world.

In 1966, the National Organization for Women was formed by feminist-leader Betty Friedan to further the fight for women’s rights. Progress was slow, but steady. Muriel Siebert became the first female member of the New York Stock Exchange in 1967 and Mary Kay Ash started the first female-owned business in 1963, quickly establishing herself as a leading female entrepreneur in American history.

In the coming years, the hard work of the 1960s woman began to pay off. Employment opportunities were expanding and the working female leader was beginning to take shape.
In light of the Civil Rights movement, the 1970s liberation for female rights took on a revolutionary tone. Echoed in the words of a popular 1972 Helen Reddy song, “I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar,” women during this time were determined to make their voices heard. They began to envision lives beyond marriage and motherhood, and saw themselves going to college, attending graduate school and managing careers.

This new movement reached greater heights on August 27, 1970 when 100,000 women participated in marches across the country — including 50,000 who marched down New York’s Fifth Avenue. This historical moment, known as the Women’s Strike for Equality, marked the 50th anniversary of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote. This ongoing fervor encouraged more women to pursue higher levels of education and more leadership positions in the workplace.

Prior to 1970, women were rarely in positions of power and authority. Only a handful of women held leadership roles at large companies, and even fewer were in public office. Most noticeably, in the media, women did not hold editorial rank and were never featured on programs like the evening news. Almost half of all college-educated women did not work, and those who did tended to be concentrated in areas such as nursing, elementary and secondary teaching.

In 1970, only four percent of architects, five percent of lawyers, five percent of veterinarians and 10 percent of physicians were women.

But, with the passing of Title IX in 1972, things began to change. The law mandated that no person in the U.S. shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. Women began to flood colleges and graduate schools. They began entering professions like medicine, law, dental and business. And, throughout much of the 1970s, the major of choice among women became business and management in lieu of the education degrees they had previously been earning.

This increased presence was most notable in the labor force. Between 1970 and 1980 alone, the participation rate among women in the workforce increased by 20.5 percentage points for those who were 25–35 and by 14.4 percentage points for those women who were 35–44. In the history of the U.S. labor force, no other demographic has made such dramatic increases in one decade.
By 1980, the demonstrations and sit-ins were over. Women were no longer marching in the streets and picketing for their rights. Instead, they were working in an array of environments, like corporate boardrooms, political offices, college campuses — and even outer space. And, halfway through the decade, women comprised 40 percent of students entering medical, law and business schools.

Although this quieter period came on the heels of a revolution, this segment in women’s history continued to make a lasting impression. In fact, many women during this time were unaware of the transformation they were taking part in that would ultimately influence women and their families for decades to come.

In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission deemed sexual harassment a form of discrimination, a victory that was brought to life in the decade’s highest-grossing comedy, Nine-To-Five.

By the mid-1980s, there was a general perception that women had reached their goals in changing social attitudes towards their roles in the workplace. Oppressive gender laws had been repealed, and women were infiltrating traditional “boys’ clubs” such as the Armed Forces, NASA and the Supreme Court.

Important historical female leaders and trailblazers emerged during this decade. Sandra Day O’Conner secured the first female appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court. Sally Ride became the first female astronaut. In 1984, Geraldine Ferraro asked “not what America can do for women, but what women can do for America,” as she became the first female candidate for Vice President.

Within the business world, the general public widely acknowledged that women entrepreneurs were an integral part of the nation’s economy, as women owned 25 percent of all U.S. companies. In 1988, Congress passed The Women’s Business Ownership Act, which ended discrimination in bank lending and gave women-owned businesses a chance to compete for lucrative government contracts. Solidifying the value of women in business, in 1989 President George H.W. Bush appointed Susan Engeleiter as the first woman to head the Small Business Administration.

These advancements paved the way for women such as Meg Whitman, who became the first-ever female executive at Proctor & Gamble, and Linda Alvarado, who broke through the male-dominated construction industry to become the first woman to own a construction business. These accomplishments would set the groundwork for an even greater entrepreneurial explosion in the following decade.
The momentum of the 1980s continued as women reached new heights of power. In fact, 1992 was dubbed “The Year of the Woman” after the percentage of women in Congress doubled following that year’s election. Later in the decade, Madeleine Albright would be confirmed as the first female U.S. Secretary of State. Meanwhile, U.S. Army General Claudia Kennedy was named the first female three-star general.

Women also began making a significant impact on the labor force and employers. By the 1990s, 60 percent of women were working outside the home, making up almost half (46 percent) of the labor force. By the end of the 20th century, the concept of “male” professions was no longer relevant. In fact, by 1997, women were earning more than 40 percent of medical, law and doctorate degrees.

Many of the changes for women during this time were accelerated by technological and economic advances that reshaped the intersection of work and family. The World Wide Web was created in the 1990s, sparking the subsequent Internet revolution. This had a huge impact on women by the end of the decade as employees could now work from almost anywhere, including home.

Alongside these technological strides came the steady rise of women in the workplace who were also committed to raising families. This gave birth to a new set of company policies and values. Corporations began to place value in work/life balance initiatives as a way to stay competitive in the marketplace and to alleviate the push-pull feelings of women in the workplace who were also raising children and predominantly managing the functions of the home. In fact, a U.S. Department of Labor survey in 1994 found 79 percent of women “love” or “like” their jobs, while another study found that more than four-in-ten “worry a great deal” about balancing family and work responsibilities.

As a result, the 1990s saw a relative work/life balance boom, with both companies and employees taking interest in programs that attempted to strike this precious balance.

Also impacting the future of women in the workplace was the birth of several initiatives to address the “Glass Ceiling” barriers that hindered qualified women from advancing in the workplace. In 1991, the Glass Ceiling Act was enacted as Title II of the Civil Rights Act. It established a bipartisan Glass Ceiling Commission to study and make recommendations on “eliminating artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities” to “management and decision-making positions in business.”

The Commission found that at the highest levels of business there was indeed a barrier only rarely penetrated by women or persons of color. During the 1990s, 97 percent of senior managers of Fortune 1000 industrial and Fortune 500 companies were white males. The Commission took action and began to prove the financial and operational benefits of utilizing this untapped population of workers. A 1993 study of Standard and Poors (S&P) 500 companies showed that firms increased their stock market value, by nearly two and half times their competitors, when they employed these other resources.
The new millennium brought about a radical shift for the educated working woman. During this decade, women continued to set themselves apart from their male counterparts and female role models now included both stay-at-home moms and powerful women in business.

During the 1960s, only 62 percent of college-educated women were in the labor force and 40 percent of them were working in education; leaving just two percent in business and management. Fast forward 40 years and 80 percent of American women with college degrees were working, and half of them were earning degrees in business and management.

With a growing number of women pursuing business and management degrees, the 2000s became one of the most entrepreneurial decades for women. During this time, 30 percent of all non-farm privately held companies in the U.S. were owned by women, increasing from 26 percent in 1997. Of these 7.8 million firms owned by women, sales reached upwards of $1.2 trillion and employed 7.6 million workers — more people than the largest Fortune 500 companies combined.

And, women-owned businesses had staying power. Even amid the recession of 2001, women-owned companies added roughly 500,000 jobs while other privately-held firms lost jobs. The Chairman and CEO of Goldman Sachs declared in 2009 that women’s businesses offer the “highest return on investment.” Women’s achievements in this area are even more impressive considering they historically had little access to traditional forms of business capital, often having little choice but to use credit cards and savings to launch their businesses.

At the onset of the year 2000, there were only three female CEOs running Fortune 500 companies. By the end of the decade, there were 15 women running Fortune 500 companies, including Ursula Burns, CEO of Xerox and the first African American female CEO in the United States.
As we enter this decade, it’s remarkable to look back on how far women have come over the past 60 years. As a nation, we now view women as one of the driving forces of innovation, leadership, productivity and economic power.

Overall, the outlook for women in the workforce is exciting and full of promise. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that women make up more than two-thirds of employees in 10 of the 15 job categories likely to grow the fastest in the coming years. This critical role women will play in shaping the workforce also greatly impacts the overall health of the country’s economy. Gross Domestic Product, one of the primary indicators used to gauge economic health, is driven by two factors — an expanding workforce and rising productivity. Working women play a key role in this crucial barometer. For example, between 1970 and 2009, women went from holding 37 percent of all jobs to nearly 48 percent. That’s almost 38 million more women. Without them, the economy would be 25 percent, if not more, smaller today — an amount equal to the combined GDP of Illinois, California and New York combined.

And yet, there’s still progress to be made.

Today, women make up less than a quarter of the entire STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematic) workforce in the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor states that in some engineering fields, the percentage of women drops to single digits. This exemplifies the need for major initiatives that will encourage women to enter these traditionally male-dominated fields.
Women in Leadership: The Key to Maintaining Our Nation’s Competitive Edge

Although women today are underrepresented at the highest levels, this leaves abundant opportunities for aspiring female leaders. Today, only two percent of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies are women, and females make up less than 13 percent of board members in America. And when it comes to pay equality, women account for just 7.5 percent of top earners among the Fortune 500 companies.

However, over the next few decades, this will most likely change dramatically as more corporations acknowledge the need for women in leadership roles, and realize the positive financial impacts of having gender diversity at the top levels of business.

In a 2011 research initiative, Catalyst, a non-profit entity focused on expanding opportunities for women in business, found a 26 percent difference in return on invested capital (ROIC) between the top-quartile companies (with 19–44 percent women board representation) and bottom quartile companies (with zero female directors).

Further research from Harvard Business School and Catalyst indicates that women in leadership improve corporate social responsibility. The philanthropic donations of Fortune 500 companies were 28 times greater in organizations with three or more female directors compared to those with no female representation on their boards.

Lastly, Randstad’s latest Engagement Study found that in order for companies to recruit and attract top female talent, the prevalence of women in positions of leadership will have an impact. The study found that 76 percent of working women today say when considering taking a position with a new company, whether it has women in positions of leadership will be a very important component in their decision-making process. This was much less important for male counterparts, with only 55 percent saying it would be an important factor.

Furthermore, a 2009 McKinsey Women Matter global survey found a direct correlation between the characteristics of women leaders and the organizational health of a company. After asking business executives globally what they believe are the most important leadership attributes for success today, each of the top four — intellectual stimulation, inspiration, participatory decision-making and setting expectations/rewards — were more commonly found among women leaders.

Randstad’s Engagement Study also examined the qualities and skills associated with women today. The study found that women ranked listening skills (44 percent) and problem-solving (34 percent) as the top two leadership qualities most associated with women. The study also looked at what skills working women today believe are most important for growing their careers. The top three included:

- Training and Development (41%)
- Flexibility/Adaptability (36%)
- Collaboration and Teamwork (29%)

Furthermore, 63 percent of working women strongly or somewhat agree that their company has equal representation of male and female leaders, and another 65 percent strongly or somewhat agree their opportunities to attain a position of leadership at their company is limited.
Women Powering Business, for Decades to Come

There’s no question that women have the power to influence labor market dynamics, corporate successes and the overall health of the nation. Bottom line: women are extremely good for business. As growing mounds of evidence suggests, the female management style can be lucrative and the companies that tap into it will thrive.

The Employment Policy Foundation estimates that within the next decade, there will be a six million person gap between the number of college graduates and the number of college-educated workers needed to cover job growth. Consider that nearly one billion women are poised to enter the global economy in the coming decade, armed with the majority of college and advanced degrees. Furthermore, experts predict that by 2018, women’s businesses will create more than half of the new small business jobs and a third of the nation’s total new jobs.

Women also control 83 percent of all consumer purchases, including electronics, healthcare and even automobiles. Savvy organizations will acknowledge their reliance on women and will need to determine how best to market to this crucial segment.

The Randstad Engagement Study also asked working women what their expectations are about the presence of female leadership in their company by 2020. A full 65 percent of women say they strongly or somewhat agree that there will be many more women in leadership positions by the end of the decade.

A surge in female employees, employers, producers and entrepreneurs over the course of the next decade will greatly improve not only the continuance of gender equality, but also promote global economic growth. Companies must recognize and support this rising population of female talent and create programs that protect, support and sustain their mounting ambition.