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State's glass ceiling gets higher

Women in charge at fewer companies

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Fewer of Wisconsin's largest public companies have women in the executive suites than just two years ago, a new report shows.

The report's authors say the

findings indicate a lack of women on the corporate ladder's lower rungs.

More than a third of the state's 50 largest public companies have no female executive officers, up from two years ago, when Milwaukee Women inc last issued the report. The number of firms with at least one woman in top management also dropped since 2005. The total number of female executives



Canter

the C suites are virtually statistical anomalies."

Diversity in executive offices and boardrooms leads to diverse ideas that can help companies better relate to clients and customers, more than half of whom are women, Canter said. Companies that lack women at the upper levels risk losing profits and jeopardizing their firms' viability, she said.

Milwaukee Women inc, a non-profit organization that works to

across all 50 companies grew by just 1.3 percent, the report found.

"The pipeline is really stagnant," said Sharon Canter, the organization's chairwoman. "Women in

SEE REPORT, A56

REPORT: Group finds not enough women in executive roles

CONTINUED FROM A1

advance women in business leadership, examined companies' 2006 filings with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission to determine how many had women executives. The group evaluated the 50 largest public companies in the state. Nineteen of those firms had no female executives. That's 38 percent, a two point increase from 2005.

Fewer than two-thirds, or 62 percent, had one female executive officer, down from 64 percent in 2005 and 66 percent in 2003. Twelve companies had two or more female executive officers, down from 16 in 2003.

"We're going in the wrong direction," Canter said.

Company chief executives need to work harder to identify women lower in the company ranks who could be potential chief financial officers or chief operating officers, for example, and take steps to develop them, she said.

NOT INTENTIONAL

It's unlikely that companies intentionally avoid developing female employees, but the top brass need to recognize barriers women may face in moving up the corporate ladder. An example would be a corporate culture that makes it harder for women with families to succeed, as opposed to one that removes barriers by allowing flexible schedules or part-time work. Other ways to help include mentoring or other programs that keep women who do leave the work force connected with their former company.

"When a company takes the initiative to be aggressive about developing women at many levels, that's when you're going to see more women enter the pipeline," Canter said.

Developing high potential women who could one day sit in the corner office is everyone's responsibility, said Melanie

Down the corporate ladder

Milwaukee Women inc recently completed its biennial look at progress of women executives at Wisconsin's 50 largest public companies. The study found:

- 19 of 50 companies, or 38 percent, had no women executive officers. In 2005, 36 percent of companies had no female executives.
- Fewer than two-thirds, or 62 percent, had one female executive officer, down from 64 percent in 2005, and 66 percent in 2003.
- Twelve companies had two or more female executive officers, down from 16 in 2003.
- Five companies gained a female executive, compared with two in 2005.
- Women make up 6.4 percent of the top five highly compensated officers, compared with 5.2 percent in 2005.

Holmes, Manpower Inc.'s vice president of corporate affairs for North America.

"It takes the woman and the company" to make a difference, she said. "We need to take responsibility for our careers and we need to have the opportunity within the company."

Companies can give women responsibility for projects outside of their normal 9-to-5 jobs, Holmes said. Manpower has a tradition of promoting from within, and gives women equal opportunity to prove themselves through special projects or participation in teams or task forces, she said.

For example, many of those who oversaw construction of the staffing firm's new downtown Milwaukee headquarters, including the project manager, were women,

Holmes said. Women also need the necessary tools to accomplish those special projects, she said.

Holmes got her first promotion at Manpower when she developed a way to train all its temporary employees on word processors. Then-CEO Mitchell Fromstein listened to Holmes' idea and gave her the resources to run with it, she said.

"We need to have the resources to get our work done," she said.

Although Manpower does not have a formal mentoring program, Holmes mentors three women in the company. That's something young women beginning their careers should seek — other women who can help them navigate the corporate world, she said.

INFLEXIBLE ENVIRONMENT?

One reason women aren't moving to the top of corporate world may be that they leave their careers early or at some point, said Cristy Garcia-Thomas, president of Tempo Milwaukee. The lack of women in executive roles could mean that companies have environments that women see as inflexible, prompting those women to quit and find alternatives such as starting their own businesses, she said.

As companies face retirement of the baby boom generation of workers, they will have to be more flexible if they want to retain women.

"Companies are really going to have to create an environment that allows women to balance their life," Garcia-Thomas said.

The Milwaukee Women inc report, which will be released at the Greater Milwaukee Committee's Oct. 8 meeting, also found that five of the companies studied gained a female executive, compared with two in 2005; and that women make up 6.4 percent of the top five highly compensated officers, compared with 5.2 percent in 2005.