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The Feminization of Human Resources and How It Affects Women's Careers

BY Courtney Wegrzyn

ADVISOR • Diya Das

EDITORIAL REVIEWER • Valerie Leduc

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 50 years, women have advanced into managerial roles in the workplace at exponential rates (Beller, 1982; Scarborough, 2017). However, hiring and promotions based on societal norms and bias have often accentuated or hampered the balance of gender in certain industries (Gaucher et al., 2011; Tambe et al., 2019). The purpose of the present study is to research the differences in gender equality, perceptions, and representation in the often-perceived feminized industry of Human Resources. This research outlines the historical progression of gender balance in the workplace and reviews societal pressures and cycles that lead to the manifestation of these roles. The study was conducted through 10 semi-structured qualitative interviews and an organizational analysis. The results showed that there are significant differences in the ways female and male HR professionals view their roles and the profession itself. In addition, there are predominately more women in HR than men even though it might vary by industry. While women do rise within HR, it is harder for them to move from the CHRO role to the CEO role of an organization. Human Resources appears to be used as a token profession where women may be experiencing the new glass ceiling.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of history, gender has played a key role in the workplace and society. Women have long been fighting for equality and have made great strides but there is still a very long way to go. Specifically, women are being afforded fewer opportunities based on gender and the stereotypes that surround gender (Kolb, 2008). The most blatant example of this in everyday life is the gender pay gap. Despite progress for females in the past 20 years, there was only a 2% increase, from 80% to 82%, of what females earn to what males earn for both full-time and part-time workers (Greenwood, 2023). Historically, the wage gap is also smaller for workers ages 25 to 34 compared to workers that are 16 and older. For ages 25 to 34, females were paid 92 cents for every dollar a man made in 2022 while the overall wage gap for women 16 and up, was 82 cents for every dollar in the same year (Greenwood, 2023). The manifestation of this inequality is demonstrated by the lack promotions within companies and how men and women are perceived in the workplace. Women tend to receive higher performance ratings than men but lower ratings for their potential which leads to almost half of the overall gender wage gap seen in promotions (Benson et al., 2022). Even as this gender wage gap and gender stereotypes have become more forthright in conversations, laws passed, diversity quotas made, there is still great progress to be made. Stereotypical perceptions surrounding typical “male and female” jobs often complicate the landscape as well. In some cases, certain industries were especially feminized, as societal norms played into filling these positions.

This paper analyzes the feminized profession of human resources- specifically how different genders perceive a profession in Human Resources and how that has impacted the organization of human resources today. With the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews and organizational analyses of the top Fortune 50 companies, the personal experiences and ideas that people have about human resources can be examined to determine the underlying effects on women's careers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Women in the Workplace (social movements)

There is widespread agreement that women have made significant progress in the workplace, most notably, starting in the women's movements in the 1960's. This was especially apparent with the passing of multiple Equal Employment Opportunity Acts including Title VII Civil Rights Act and Title IX of the Education Amendments (Beller, 1982; Scarborough, 2017). Despite this progress, societal norms, traits, and skill sets still led to occupational segregation as observed within certain industries such as human resources (HR), teaching, and nursing (Frehill, 1997). Female prominence in teaching and nursing remained steady during this time, however, human resources had a dramatic increase. What started as a male dominant field of 75% males and 25% females transformed during the 1970s and 1980s to a female dominant field of 76% female and 24% male (Yau, 2017). This has led to the feminization of these specific occupations, as those jobs often employ the skills that women generally exhibit.

Gender Stereotypes in the Workplace (Gender bias)

Gender stereotyping research conducted over the past four decades showed that both male and female survey respondents agreed that men are better suited for leadership positions (Hideg & Krstic, 2020). There are serious implications to these results because whether this comes from unconscious bias, historical practices, or societal norms, it has impacted roles and responsibilities in the workplace. This could be due to the connotations with both masculine and feminine roles. For example, the characteristics most often associated with male leaders are ambition, aggressiveness, objectivity, leadership ability, competitiveness, and self-confidence (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). In stark contrast, the characteristics associated with women are being kind, gentle, sympathetic, helpful, and friendly (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). These characteristic biases created a norm that jobs within nursing and teaching domains were considered suitable for women because they were a natural extension of their gender-specific characteristics. As a perpetuating cycle, women tend to display expressive characteristics such as a nurturing nature and sensitivity that were learned through these sex role socialization and societal norms (Ozdemir, 2021). These gender biases can lead to a disparity in promotions between men and women. An especially important implication of this diversity is that even if men and women have the same job title, responsibilities, and performance, men are promoted

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more often than women. This may be because there are perceived doubts surrounding women's leadership skills and whether they have the vision to help their organization succeed (Castilla, 2012; Carless, 1998; Appelbaum et al., 2013). These gender stereotypes have a very strong impact on women's careers and can be especially seen in certain professions.

Evolution of Human Resource Management as a Profession

The shift of male to female dominance in the 1970s and 1980s shifted the overall focus from satisfying outside pressures in "Personnel" and instead focusing on the employees and what was best for the organizational effectiveness of the company. The shift consisted of three main components driving the department: innovation, quality, and cost, all while working to keep employee satisfaction high to achieve those goals (Schuler & Jackson, 2014).

Implementing these components meant designing jobs that facilitated teams and employees to work together as well as distributing performance appraisals to improve employee performance. The cost reduction strategy focused on rigid job descriptions with specialized jobs and career paths to produce what the company requires for growth at that time. Market-based compensation and short-term performance appraisals were also used as a part of the strategy. The quality-enhancement strategy includes extensive and continuous training, high employee involvement in decisions that affect them and their job, and fixed job descriptions (Schuler & Jackson, 2014).

At its core, Human Resources typically handled transactional business functions such as payroll, benefits, and staffing. Organizations now need to respond to cultural expectations and adopt strategies for talent management, globalization, diversity, equity, and inclusion (Obedgiu, 2017). As the scope of Human Resources has shifted, it has worked to gain credibility in the profession by establishing accepted criteria and professional certifications. Human Resources as a profession was finally recognized by the United States Department of Labor in 1976. The Society for Human Resource Management was established and currently has over 53,000 HR professionals. It serves to advance human resources practices and support its members with resources and opportunities (Dunn, 2009; Obedgiu, 2017; SHRM, 2021). The McKinsey firm conducted a study that determined the following factors that companies need to succeed in the future: know who they are and what their ideals as a company are,

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operate with a simple, streamlined process, and constantly learn and innovate (Komm et al., 2021). HR can help ensure all these goals are accomplished because the department is there to ensure that the employees are working hard and helping the organization develop further for the future.

Feminization of Human Resources (societal norms)

Feminization of an industry occurs when most of that profession is female (Collins Dictionary). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 89 percent of teachers and 90 percent of nurses are female and the Human Resources industry is not far behind at 71 percent (Ulrich, 2010; Gaucher, 2011). In the 1960s, human resources faced pressure to radically diversify the workplace during the civil rights movement and succeeded in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was done through recruiting specific underrepresented groups and attempting to eliminate hiring bias. During the 1970s, the same pressure ensued once again including hiring more women into the workforce in both entry-level and managerial positions (Scarborough, 2017). In the 1980s, men continued their rise in managerial positions in all sectors, but their presence at the top ranks of HR declined. It is important to note that at the same time, the increase of women in HR positions compared to other management positions increased from 188 percent to 473 percent (Roos & Manley, 1996). Part of the reason for this was that there was a shift in how females viewed their careers. They chose to participate not solely for monetary reasons, but also for a sense of self-identity, empowerment, and contribution (Jacobs & Bahn, 2019; Goldin, 2006). This increase of women entering the HR workforce and the decline of men, was the first significant sign of the eventual feminization of the profession.

The trend in numbers can be seen into the 2010's as well. The number of HR management positions increased from 30.5 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2010 and white women are by far the largest group represented in HR management (Scarborough, 2017). This could be due to the idea that when women are put into management positions, they look for other women to fill roles and create more gender diversity within the field (Scarborough, 2017). Feminization can be seen in other industries as well. It was discovered that female surgeons were delaying having children either after medical school or after their residency (Baptiste et al., 2017).

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Despite this sense of choice, many women still decided to pursue careers that would enable them to leave and re-enter the same job easily to take care of family obligations (Beller, 1982). This meant that careers such as nursing and teaching maintained the strong presence of young females, but other more male-dominated careers attracted them as well. Even if women continue to stay in their job, they are still expected to take care of the childcare planning, meal making, and grocery shopping once they get home from work (Baptiste et al., 2017). Another example is that being a pilot was once considered an intuitive and feminine pursuit in its early years. Aircraft flying became progressively more masculinized, technical, and professional to the point where women were confined to the role of flight attendant. As such 'feminized' support work was needed for 'professions' to function, it was also devalued (Ainsworth and Pekarek, 2022). Women have progressed to the point of making their own decisions regarding their careers, but there are still outside pressures and expectations from society to find the perfect balance. Even as they do choose their own careers, some may be seen as "less than" because of the idea of tokenism. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: How do the different genders perceive a profession in Human Resources?

Implication of Feminization

When a profession becomes feminized, the overall value of the profession goes down. This can be seen in the cases of nurses, schoolteachers, and flight attendants as mentioned above. It is no accident that female-dominated occupations such as teaching and nursing have struggled to gain recognition as professions of the same status as law and medicine because the very meaning of "profession" is gendered (Ainsworth & Pekarek, 2022). The definition of tokenism means, in this case, that females make up less than 15 percent of a population in an industry or company. Tokens within a company have also been known to have a harder time at work with opportunities, isolation and more (Bhardwaj & Datta, 2015). It can be exceedingly difficult to thrive in a position where one is the token, especially as a woman. Women leaders are "more likely to experience belittling microaggressions, such as having their judgement questioned or being mistaken for someone more junior. They're doing more to support employee well-being and foster inclusion, but this critical work is spreading them thin and going mostly unrewarded" (Krivkovich et al., 2022). While Human Resources is a

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feminized profession, it has 'token status' within companies and industries because of the majority female population. This has led to the second research question:

RQ2: What is the extent of feminization in Human Resources now?

METHODOLOGY

I used multiple methods of collecting data for research. The first was semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 men and women from multiple industries at varying levels of their profession. The second was an analysis of the organizational structures of the top Fortune 50 companies. I interviewed 6 women and 4 men, with positions in higher-education, financial services, construction, HR advising, and a current student entering an HR Rotational Program. I used a prepared semi-structured list of questions to be able to add follow-ups and clarifying questions if a unique perspective or concept came up in conversation during the interview. I also transitioned out of asking one of the original questions because it didn't fit with the research I was finding online and in my interviews. I started with background questions, including past HR experience, their current HR role and asked about the company that the interviewee works at. Then the questions transitioned into deeper, more inquisitive questions. These questions included "Do you see a lot of diversity within the HR department based on gender and race?", "What do you think the traits are of a successful HR professional?", and "Why do you think there are more women than men in HR?". The interviews typically lasted around 30 minutes with 10 set questions. In addition, I recorded the interviews and transcribed them later so that I could focus on the conversation and later performed a line-by-line analysis of the responses to look for trends and patterns in the answers.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

RQ1: How do the different genders perceive a profession in Human Resources?

There were multiple trends seen throughout the interview answers. The first trend was that HR is still seen as a very feminized profession from an outside perspective but has been making progress. The first quote from a female director stated, "It almost seems like there is a tag line around the 'HR lady'- almost seems externally that there is a feminized view of HR" that she doesn't believe is true at the financial services company she works at (Interviewee 5,

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January 27, 2023). The same director also explained that there is “a balance of compassion and reality that happens in HR- I will sometimes see the balance of compassion and reality related to parenting. If you are coaching an associate or coaching a manager through a difficult situation, you don't want to pat them on the head, tell them everything is going to be okay, and you also don't want to say just go deal with it. You have to balance the ‘it's going to be okay with that sometimes-tough messaging’ and make sure that your associates are taking it the right way and are able to dust themselves off and go forward in the right direction” (Interviewee 5, January 27, 2023). As mentioned in the literature review, there is a strong connotation with women being caretakers which translates into jobs such as Human Resources. Another study found that “being and acting competent in some occupations, such as management, often implicitly and explicitly takes the form of ‘masculine-coded’ traits and behaviors, for example being agentic, authoritative, analytical, decisive, etc. However, if women behave in these ways, they risk disapproval because they transgress gendered expectations that women will be communally oriented, caring, nurturing, deferential, and concerned with relationships” (Ainsworth and Pekarek, 2022). This was also seen in my research when interviewees were asked what traits make up a strong Human Resources professional. For the women, the main traits were being optimistic, having strong instincts, and having the ability to let go of problems that arise at work when they get home. For men, the main traits were understanding the business to contribute at the executive table, standing up to the CEO, if necessary, as CHRO, and having a growth mindset. Then, I decided to study what both genders agreed on. This includes having resilience, being good listeners, having a balance between business need and advocacy for employees, having a problem-solving mentality, and being adaptable in grey areas. From the inside perspective of Human Resources, there is much less of a difference between men and women in the field than others tend to see from an outside perspective.

Another trend that was discovered during the interviews was that roles in HR such as compensation, talent acquisition, and strategy & development may be more male dominated because they provide skills that males generally are drawn to such as finance and sales. The female director that works in compensation mentioned that “As it has become more universally acceptable for men to be people-focused, for men to be emotionally in-tune, men

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have started to step into HR in the traditional sense. They are certainly in compensation, where we have got a little bit of HR with a heavy finance flavor, but I am starting to see more and more women step into compensation and more men move into the traditional HR business partner roles. Talent acquisition can be very salesy. At least in compensation, you get enough of that finance but where it doesn't feel like a 'girly job' for lack of a better word" (Interviewee 5, January 27, 2023). Prior research has also confirmed that the gender-coding of HR can vary between the different functions as well as just in different interactions between men and women in other departments as well. It was also mentioned in that study that men in feminized occupations experience "not only challenges to their masculinity but also 'special consideration' whereby they are encouraged to pursue a more careerist orientation and rise more quickly through the ranks" which was coined the 'glass elevator' compared to the typical female 'glass ceiling' (Ainsworth and Pekarek, 2022).

In the same avenue, women are having greater opportunities for promotion but not always for the right reasons. A male HR consultant for organizational executive teams witnesses "leadership teams daily and there are a lot of white males but there are two jobs that if it is going to be a female on the executive team, it would be the Chief HR Officer or Chief Legal Officer. That is a shame because now there are a lot more female engineers that could actually be running manufacturing, etc. We are seeing more CEOs, but it is not where we should be. At least it is some place, but it should not just be allotted to those two roles. In previous roles, there was a mostly equal distribution in the HR departments as well as the companies overall, even in more industrious fields" (Interviewee 7, November 4, 2022). This same idea was also reiterated by another male interviewee, a Vice President of HR in higher education. He also added that not only was it expected for a woman to be the CHRO, that his other male colleagues discouraged their own sons from getting into the field for the perceived lack of opportunities based on gender. The interviewee himself felt this in the process of getting his current position. When applying for a new position, he noticed that a lot of the roles ended up going to women and in his current job, his predecessor, and others in the department, are women as well (Interviewee 2, October 26, 2022). This was an interesting perspective as this shift is not usually seen in other industries and professions. Tokenism in this profession is

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creating a serious disparity between men and women in the field, especially in the CHRO position.

RQ2: What is the extent of feminization in Human Resources now?

As mentioned in the previous section, there is a serious issue with tokenism on boards and senior teams that deters men from applying for HR positions (Interviewee 2, October 26, 2022). A female senior director from the same higher education organization also commented on the lack of male applications. She said, "it has tended to be mostly female dominant and had some men in the office, the current VP being the first male in my history as the head of HR." (Interviewee 3, November 4, 2022). On the other hand, other interviewees from other fields noticed a different balance of men and women.

A second female director from the financial services company mentioned that she doesn't feel that the general perception of there being more women than men in HR is true. Additionally, she has had male bosses for most of her experience in HR and feels that gender is balanced across all HR functions (Interviewee 4, October 26, 2022). People in the same company also had different perspectives. The third female director argued that there are more than 50% females in the HR department but the company itself has been actively trying to balance the gender diversity in the financial services company (Interviewee 6, November 8, 2022). With this, there is still a stereotype that HR is the "light villain" and that human resources makes people follow the rules. Specifically, "everybody has the story of the mean lunch lady or the mean HR lady, etc. and it feels that the "HR Lady" can be cast as such even though it isn't accurate. We coach people to their fullest potential; we work with managers and leaders to think through how the organization is designed and structured so that we can maximize talent and employment opportunity" (Interviewee 5, January 27, 2023).

Overall, the extent of feminization in human resources depends on the perception of each person as well as the company. Out of the companies that were surveyed, the highest amount of feminization was in Higher Education with 91% female and 9% male, the second highest being the insurance rotational program at 80% female and 20% male. The two companies with the lowest amount of feminization are construction at 65% female and financial services at 60% female (See Appendix A). This could be explained by a quote in the previous section,

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that men are more drawn to more masculine-coded areas of Human Resources so it makes sense that this same concept would apply to more men in HR in more masculine-coded industries such as construction and financial services.

In addition to the interviews, the organizational analysis included research on the Top Fortune 50 companies and the gender in their top positions. My research started with just the top Human Resources position, whether that was Chief Human Resources Officer or Vice President of HR (72% women and 28% men). After analyzing these results, the comparison of gender of the top 4 positions of CEO, CFO, CMO, and CHRO was made. The CEO positions were comprised of 16% women and 84% men which was exactly the same as the CFO roles. The differences started to shift in the Chief Marketing Officer position with 58% women and 42% men (See Appendix B). Studies show that 80% of CEOs are internal successors but rarely are CHRO's, let alone women, chosen for the position (Ilevbare, 2022). The CHRO position is often overlooked even though they know the ins and outs of the company and its values, as well as the employee experience, arguably better than other key positions. The team is often also underutilized at companies, with fewer training and development opportunities in Human Resources compared to those in finance or brand marketing (Ilevbare, 2022). The conclusion to draw from this data is that being the CHRO is the new glass ceiling for women in a c-suite position. In recent years, however, there have been women crossing this barrier in a trend of more female CHROs becoming CEOs. This list includes Leena Nair, former CHRO of Unilever, now CEO of Chanel, Masry Barra, former VP of HR, now CEO of General Motors, Leslie Motter, former CHRO/Chief Operating Officer, now CEO of Make-a-Wish, and Briana Van Strijp, former Chief People Officer/COO, now CEO of Anthemis Group (Financial Services company) (Burton, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The limitations of this study are that it was not a dynamic study across time, and that it was a small sample size of 10 people. Despite these limitations, there were validations to my study with other studies having similar results using wide range of diversity of industries. Multiple conclusions have been drawn from this research. The first is that Human Resources continues to be feminized, however, the rates vary depending on the industry and there is an early trend

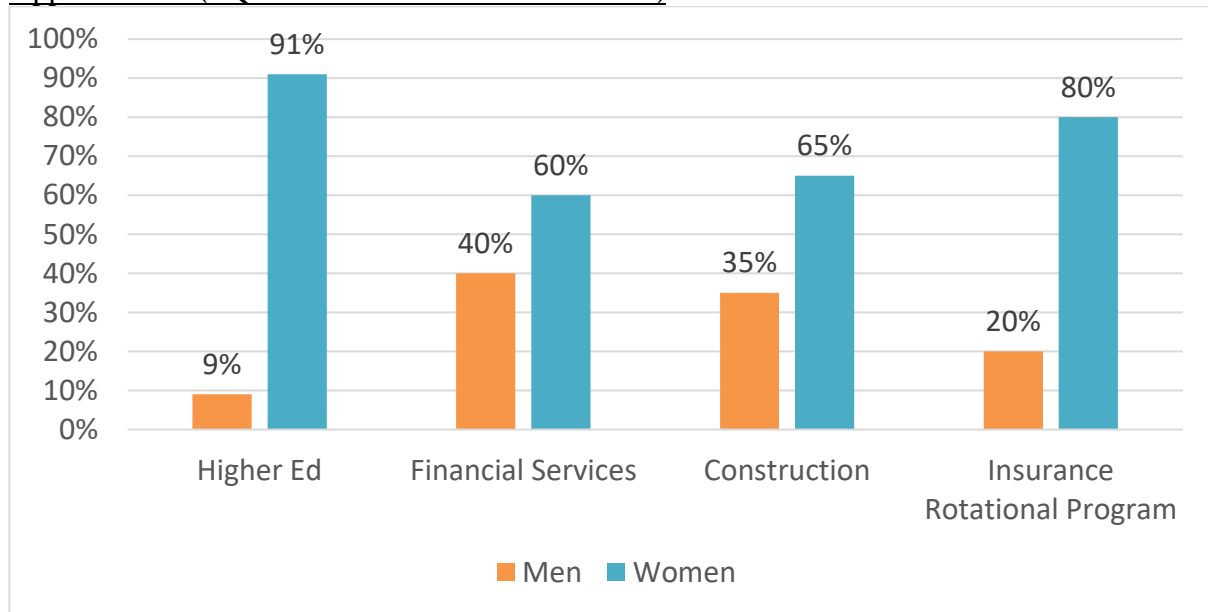
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of more men joining the profession. The second is that there are feminine and masculine gendered associations not only in different sectors of work but within HR as well. This can be seen in the number of men and women in human resources in certain industries such as construction and financial services compared to higher education. In addition, women in masculinized jobs tend to adopt more masculine characteristics while males in feminized jobs tend to stay away from feminized characteristics (Ainsworth and Pekarek, 2022). One of the most thought-provoking conclusions that I found from the research was that there are more males in the CEO, CFO, and CMO positions and more women in the CHRO position of the top Fortune 50 companies. This leads to the question of: Is CHRO becoming the new glass ceiling? In the field of Human Resources, yes it appears to be. Even with this conclusion, there is a ray of hope for the future. The very recent trend of CHROs becoming CEOs, with those who are making that leap mostly female, will hopefully get us one step closer to decreasing the feminization of Human Resources.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – (RQ#2: Feminization Per HR Team)



Appendix B – (Fortune 50 C-Suite Gender Distribution)

Company	CEO	CFO	CMO	CHRO	Company	CEO	CFO	CMO	CHRO
1 Walmart	Male	Male	Male	Female	26 Meta Platforms	Male	Female	Male	Female
Amazon	Male	Male	Female	Female	Comcast Cable	Male	Male	Female	Male
Apple	Male	Male	Male	Female	Phillips 66	Male	Male	Male	Female
CVS Health	Female	Male	Male	Female	Valero	Male	Male	Male	Female
UnitedHealth Group	Male	Male	Male	Female	Dell Technologies	Male	Male	Female	Female
Exxon Mobil	Male	Female	Male	Female	Target	Male	Male	Female	Female
Alphabet	Male	Female	Female	Female	Fannie Mae	Female	Female	Male	Female
McKesson	Male	Male	Female	Female	UPS	Female	Male	Male	Male
AmerisourceBergen	Male	Male	Female	Female	Lowes	Male	Male	Female*	Female
Costco	Male	Male	Female	Male	Bank of America	Male	Male	Female*	Female
Cigna	Male	Male	Female	Female	Johnson and Johnson	Male	Male	Female	Male
AT&T	Male	Male	Female	Male	Archer Daniels Midland	Male	Male	Male	Female
Microsoft	Male	Female	Male	Female	FedEx	Male	Male	Female	Male
Cardinal Health	Male	Male	Female	Female	Humana	Male	Female	Female	Male
Chevron	Male	Male	Male	Female	Wells Fargo	Male	Male	Female	Female
Home Depot	Male	Male	Female	Male	State Farm	Male	Male	Female	Male
Walgreens Boots Alliance	Female	Male	Female	Female	Pfizer	Male	Male	Male	Female
Marathon Petroleum Corp	Male	Female	Male	Female	Citi	Female	Male	Female	Female
Elevance Health	Female	Male	Male	Female	Pepsico	Male	Male	Female	Male
Kroger	Male	Male	Male	Male	Intel Corporation	Male	Male	Female	Female
Ford	Male	Male	Female	Female	Procter and Gamble	Male	Male	Male	Male
Verizon	Male	Male	Male	Female	General Electric	Male	Female	Female	Male
JP Morgan Chase	Male	Male	Female	Female	IBM	Male	Male	Female	Female
General Motors	Female	Male	Female	Female	MetLife	Male	Male	Male	Female
Centene Corp	Female	Male	Female	Male					

(CMO position was eliminated and now under a male in different department)
 (CMO position was eliminated and now under a male in different department)

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