



# The Pandemic's Lasting and Surprising Effects on Women in Tech

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**The COVID-19 crisis impacted women in tech differently. Midlevel women saw some benefits—but women of color, in particular, faced new challenges.**

The conventional wisdom is that the pandemic upended the career trajectory of working women. For women leaders in tech, however, the reality is a bit more nuanced.

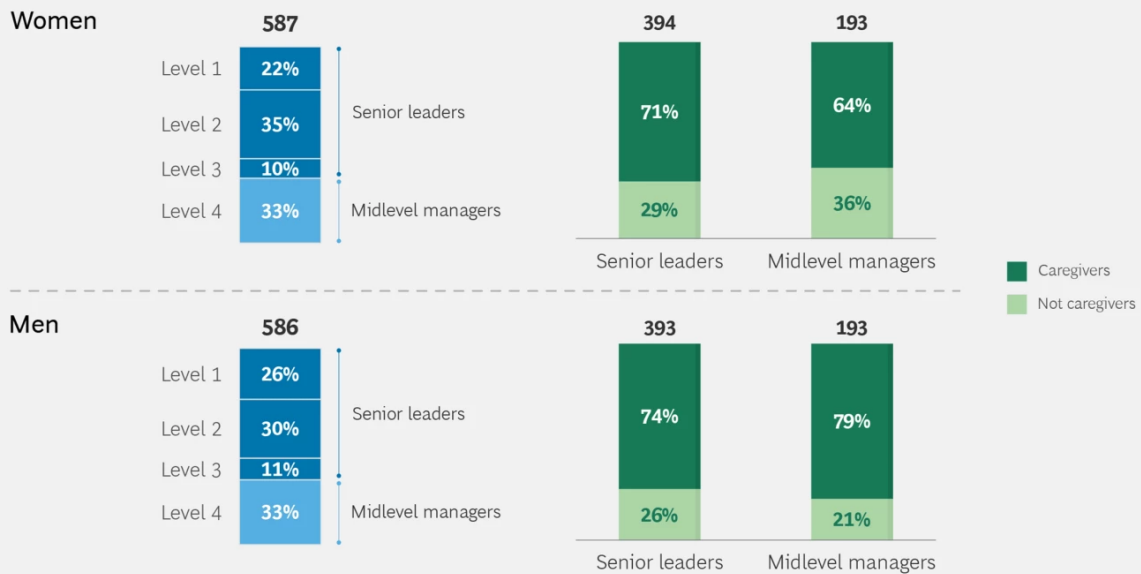
A BCG survey of nearly 1,200 men and women leaders in tech sheds light on the complex impact of the pandemic. (See “Our Methodology.”) For example, 44% of women respondents spent more than 20 hours per week on caregiving activities, whereas that was true for only 33% of men respondents. And 41% of women of color reported a negative impact on their work-life balance, whereas only 28% of white women noted the same.

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## OUR METHODOLOGY

We surveyed nearly 1,200 women and men tech leaders. Respondents were within four levels of the CEO and worked in either technology companies or in tech functions of companies in other industries. (See the exhibit.) The survey included 248 respondents who identified as a person of color, including Hispanic or Latino, Black or African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American or Alaskan Native, or multiracial or biracial.

## BCG Surveyed Women and Men Leaders in Tech



Source: Assessing COVID-19's Impact on Diversity in Tech Leadership Survey, December 2021.

Note: n = 1,183 (1% did not specify if they were women or men); level 1 = C suite. Participants were also segmented by industry, company size, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, industry, function, educational background, and employment status.

We also interviewed 22 women and men in tech leadership roles to get their insights on the impact of the pandemic on their careers and the gender differences they observed.

The survey also revealed some clear—and at times, surprising—benefits to the new work model. Midlevel women, for example, found that work-from-home arrangements made certain managerial tasks (such as chairing meetings) easier, and their promotion rates were above those of midlevel men.

Such insights should inform how companies reevaluate their **diversity, equity, and inclusion** (DEI) efforts in the new work reality. And there are clear warning signs that such a rethink is needed. For one thing, while the total number of computer and information systems managers (a reasonable proxy for tech leaders) increased 9% from 2019 to 2021, the share of women in those positions decreased by 2 percentage points over that period, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

To attract and retain a diverse workforce, companies should build on what works well for women leaders in tech and address those things that do not. We have identified five steps that companies should take to support **women in tech**—actions that address the variety of their experiences and the changes in the work model.

## The Benefits of—and Risks to—Diversity

There is mounting evidence that diversity—including gender diversity—is correlated with strong financial performance. According to BCG’s research, companies with above-average diversity on their management teams had innovation revenue (revenue from products launched over the past three years) that was 19 percentage points higher than that of companies with below-average **leadership diversity**. And other studies have found a link between gender diversity in leadership and increased return on assets, return on equity, and profitability.

Although the benefits of diversity are increasingly clear, progress is far from guaranteed. Our research shows that **DEI progress often slows in the aftermath of an economic crisis**. In the 2008 US recession, the share of ethnic minorities in management fell by 11% in industries most affected by the downturn, and the share of women in management fell by 4%. Certainly, it will take time to understand the lasting impact of the pandemic on women in tech. But the decline in the share of women tech leaders reflected in the BLS data serves as a warning that we may be seeing a similar outcome taking shape.

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Another concerning sign arose when we compared the results of our survey to a similar one that BCG conducted in 2020. The share of women of color who reported that DEI programs at their company had been effective in increasing gender diversity in

leadership fell from 86% in 2020 to 59% in 2021, greater than the decline in the share of white women (81% in 2020 to 67% in 2021) with the same view.

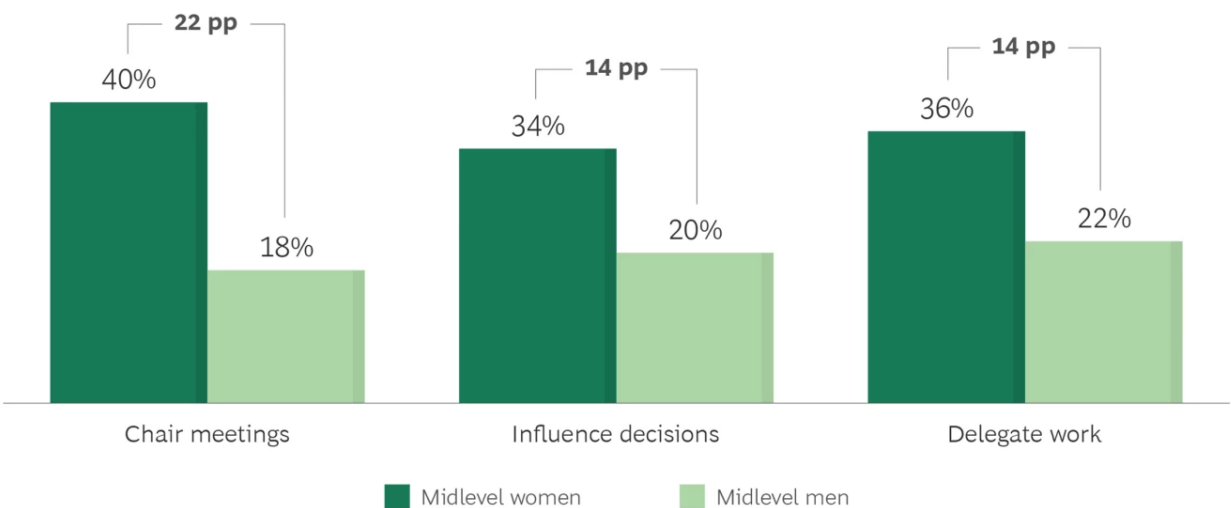
By understanding not only the benefits of diversity but also the factors that impact it, companies can ensure that the disruption of the past few years does not derail the careers of the next generation of tech leaders.

## The Upside and Downside of the New Work Model

When it comes to how new work-from-home arrangements affected work directly, the results were decidedly mixed.

**The Equalizing Effect.** Women, in general, adapted well to the new work-from-home reality. This became evident when we looked at three critical tasks—chairing meetings, influencing decisions, and delegating work. For each one, the share of women was greater than the share of men who reported that it became easier during the pandemic. The difference was particularly pronounced for midlevel women. (See Exhibit 1.) At the same time, midlevel men, more than midlevel women, said that these tasks became more difficult.

Exhibit 1 - Midlevel Women, More Than Midlevel Men, Found That Certain Tasks Became Easier in a Remote Setting

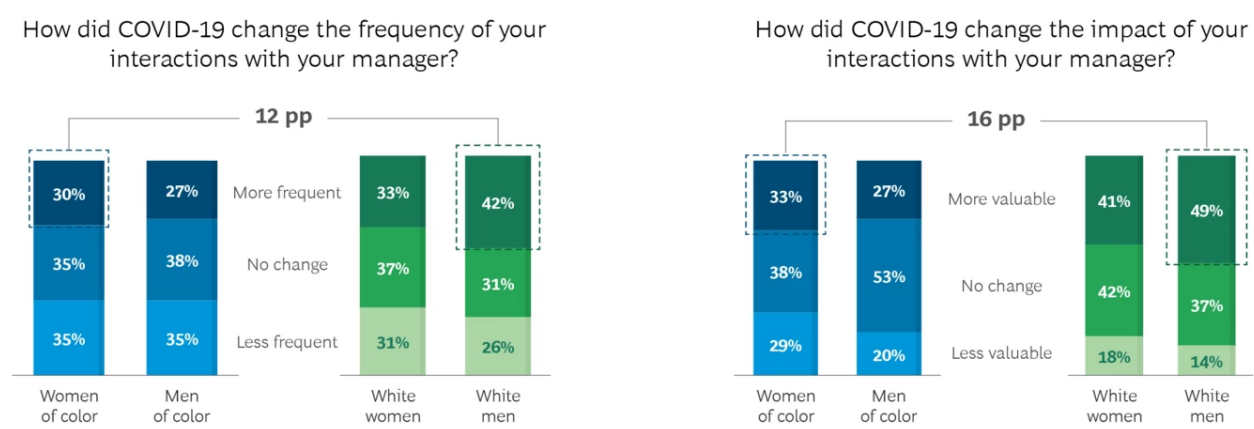


Source: Assessing COVID-19’s Impact on Diversity in Tech Leadership Survey, December 2021.  
Note: pp = percentage point.

Our interviews shed light on what might be behind this finding. Speaking about remote work, an interviewee said, “[It was] easier to chair meetings, have productive discussions, and have my voice heard thanks to a better process and the power of the mute button to limit prolonged speech.” Renee Guttmann-Stark, who has held high-level positions in information security at several large companies and now serves as an advisor to startups, notes that remote work models also helped to equalize responsibilities at home. “Within one to two months [of the start of the pandemic], men on my team started telling me that they would need to miss calls,” Guttmann-Stark recalls. “They said, ‘My wife has been carrying the load, and that isn’t fair.’”

**Challenges for Women of Color.** Women of color reported challenges in the new work-from-home reality, particularly when it came to maintaining critical connections. Nearly half—47%—of women of color surveyed said that it became more difficult to connect with mentors and sponsors in a remote setting, whereas that was said by only 35% of white women. At the same time, the shares of women and men of color who reported less frequent and less valuable interactions with managers were higher than the shares of white women and men who gave the same response. (See Exhibit 2.) Overall, white men fared the best in these areas.

Exhibit 2 - Respondents of Color Found That the Pandemic Negatively Affected Interactions with Their Manager



Source: Assessing COVID-19’s Impact on Diversity in Tech Leadership Survey, December 2021.  
Note: pp = percentage point.



The findings may reflect an unconscious bias that surfaces in remote relationships and that results in managers making less effort to remain connected with the women—and particularly, the women of color—on their teams. Research has found that unconscious bias is a persistent issue for women of color. For example, black women leaders were evaluated more negatively than were black men and white women when the organizations they led failed, according to research published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Our interviews also underscored that unconscious bias remains a significant challenge broadly, including in hiring. An HR chief at a startup explained, “We tripled our workforce in 2021, and, with increased hiring, we saw a decrease in diversity....The speed of growth prompted teams to lean toward experienced individuals, such as those who have managed teams. And this reinforces inequality of opportunities for women and people of color, given that more white men have been given the opportunity to manage a team.”

## A Window on the Work-Life Ecosystem

The degree to which new work models created opportunities or challenges during the pandemic reflected, in part, women’s roles as caregivers. Our survey found that caregiving roles varied—as did the degree to which women decided to downshift their careers—depending on the survey segment.

**Caregiving Duties.** Both women and men grappled with significant caregiving duties during the pandemic, with roughly three-quarters reporting that they were providing care to children or other relatives, or both. Lauren Cappell, a senior technology executive at Amazon Web Services, described the rapid shift to work from home as “a level equalizer,” in the sense that many working women and men felt the exhaustion of attending to both caregiving and work duties. Still, our survey found that women carried an outsized share of the caregiving duties: roughly 44% of women caregivers, compared with 33% of men caregivers, spent more than 20 hours a week on these duties.

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When we dug deeper, we found that the responsibilities of caregivers of color (both women and men), in particular, looked a bit different. Fifteen percent of women and men of color, compared with 8% of white women and men, reported caring for both children and other relatives. The strain from these caregiving burdens can be significant: a 2020 [BCG survey](#) of more than 3,000 working parents in five countries found that those caring for an adult (compared with those caring for children) were more likely to say that they expected to leave their job within the next six months.

Despite such evidence, few companies pay sufficient attention to the issue. According to a 2020 survey of 53 large US companies by S&P Global and AARP, only 30% of the respondents reported that benefits for caregivers of adults were a high priority at their company, compared with 60% who said benefits for parents were a high priority. “We have more programs supporting parents than caregivers for family members, but it is often harder when it is your parents or partner that requires your help,” said a woman tech executive. “It is not just physical exhaustion but the additional uncertainty and mental fatigue that weigh [caregivers] down.”

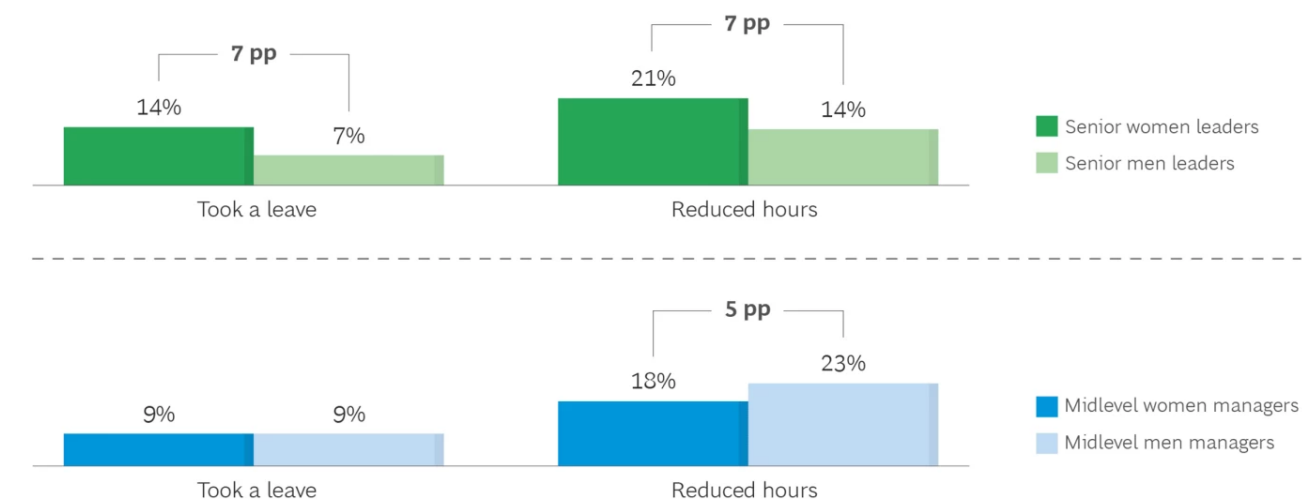
This reality may help explain another finding: the share of women of color who reported that the pandemic negatively impacted their work-life balance (41%) was higher than the shares of men of color (34%), white women (28%), and white men (28%) who noted the same effect.

**Downshifting.** Having caregiving duties likely influenced whether women and men downshifted in their careers. While men and women caregivers expressed a similar interest in stepping back during the pandemic, 12% of women took a leave of absence, whereas only 8% of men did so. In addition, 20% of women reduced their hours, compared with 17% of men who made this change.



But there was a significant difference between senior women and midlevel women. More senior women than senior men reported taking a leave and reducing their hours, while midlevel women made such moves as or less frequently as midlevel men managers. (See Exhibit 3.)

Exhibit 3 - More Senior Women Than Midlevel Women Reported Taking a Leave and Reducing Their Hours



Source: Assessing COVID-19’s Impact on Diversity in Tech Leadership Survey, December 2021.  
Note: pp = percentage point.

The disparity likely reflects the fact that seniority gives women the freedom and confidence to make changes, including those that will improve their work-life balance.

### Insights on Advancement

So how did the new work-from-home arrangements and the care challenges combine to shape the career trajectory of women? Here, too, there is good news—and some cautionary signs.

**Promotions.** Overall, women reported similar ambition levels to men: 45% reported that they were looking to get promoted to a more senior role. And there was no difference in ambition level between women of color and white women.

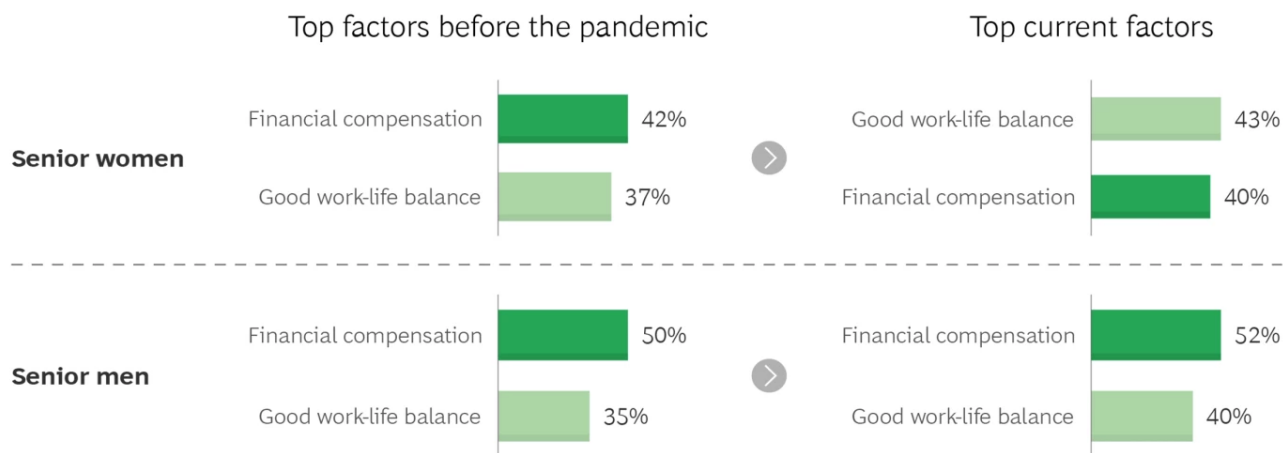
At the same time, women and men overall—as well as senior women and senior men—were promoted at roughly the same rate. But the promotion rate of midlevel women (15%) was higher than that of midlevel men (10%)—potentially reflecting the improved ease of performing critical managerial tasks in the evolving work models.

**Job Mobility and Pay Hikes.** Job mobility is well recognized as a factor that affects advancement in the **tech** field. Similar shares of women (33%) and men (31%) changed jobs during the pandemic. However, senior women changed at a higher rate than senior men did. “COVID lowered the bar for women to take risks and switch [jobs],” notes Rama Moorthy, CEO and founder of Hatha Systems. She says that more women are “able to take the leap and go on a path where they can be happier and more productive.”

Midlevel women changed jobs at a slightly lower rate than midlevel men did, but a greater share of midlevel women who changed jobs received a pay raise, compared with midlevel men who switched. However, senior women changed jobs at a slightly higher rate than senior men did (36% versus 31%) but garnered a pay increase at a lower rate (39% versus 50%). Although that’s a possible sign that the wage gap in tech could remain high or even widen, it likely reflects a shift in priorities among senior women.

We asked senior women and men what their top three priorities were when looking for a new role before the pandemic and currently. Among senior women, the most commonly cited priority before the pandemic was financial compensation, while the top current priority was a good work-life balance. Among senior men, meanwhile, financial compensation was the top issue in both periods. (See Exhibit 4.)

## Exhibit 4 - Senior Women Prioritized Work-Life Balance After the Pandemic



Source: Assessing COVID-19’s Impact on Diversity in Tech Leadership Survey, December 2021.

The women tech leaders we spoke with often noted the increased importance of balance in their lives. Emily McEvilly, who took a new position as chief customer officer at OneTrust early this year, says, “[The pandemic] not only shifted my own prioritization—but also my family’s expectations about things like my presence at family dinners or birthday parties.”

## Supporting Women in the New Work Reality

As the pandemic recedes a bit—for now—companies need to reassess how they are supporting the advancement of women in tech. On the basis of our survey and interviews, we identified five actions that companies should take:

- Provide a variety of pathways to leadership, particularly for those who have not followed the traditional trajectory. These can include “returnships,” which are programs that offer former employees a gradual return to the company over a transition period. “These programs are still few and far between,” noted the head of HR at a digital startup.

- Structure interactions and meetings so that all participants have an equal voice and opportunity to contribute, whether they are using a remote, hybrid, or in-person work model. “Hybrid is the future,” says Niel Nickolaisen, chief information officer at Sorenson Communications. “This requires a culture change.”
- Identify what adds value to manager-employee relationships in terms of the frequency and types of interactions, and then communicate and incentivize such activities. Companies should also support mentoring and sponsorship opportunities in a hybrid world. Some of the executives we interviewed highlighted the importance of connection and empathy in remote and hybrid environments. “COVID has changed [the] mindset in leaders,” says Neel Venkataraman, director of hardware engineering at Microsoft. “Mental health starts to be a [part of the] conversation, focusing on, Are you doing well? instead of, Have you done your task?”
- Assess whether benefits and work models align with the new reality, including the growing demand for a better work-life balance—and ensure that those issues are given as much consideration as financial compensation when recruiting talent.
- Normalize temporary leaves and reduced hours for all employees, whether or not they are caregivers. Ensure that support for caregivers is comprehensive and includes those who are caring for family members other than children.

In a recent [BCG survey](#), 73% of digital workers said that they expected to leave their current job in the next two to three years, and 40% were actively job-hunting. Given that tech talent is increasingly on the move, the mission to support women in tech takes on increased importance and urgency. Taking all five actions will not only help women advance and thrive but also enhance a company’s ability to attract and retain talent in the process.

# Authors



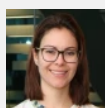
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