

October 2024

Pathways to Growth

Gender-smart business
actions that work



Pathway 3

Recruitment



Gender Equality

Pathway 6
Workplace Safety



Establish robust systems for addressing sexual harassment

- + Employee satisfaction / retention
- + Attract more diverse talent
- Legal risks

- + Equity in the workplace
- Harmful norms

Pathway 1
Product Delivery




Deliver high-impact products and services to women customers

- + Sales to existing and new customers
- + Customer satisfaction

- + Economic empowerment
- Time poverty

Pathway 2
Agriculture

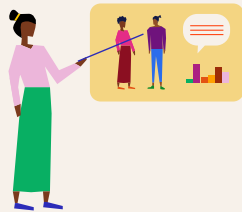


Connect women smallholder farmers to formal supply chains

- + Supply volume and quality
- + Retention of suppliers

- + Income for women farmers
- + Agency for women

Pathway 5
Work Culture



Foster an inclusive work culture in which women can thrive

- + Employee retention and productivity
- Absenteeism

- + Opportunities for working caregivers
- Sexual harassment of women
- Stress and burnout

Pathway 4
Last-mile Sales



Equip women sales agents with the tools to excel

- + Sales through new customers
- Agent turnover

- + Income opportunities for women
- + Access to products in rural areas

Pathway 3
Recruitment



Hire more women by creating quality jobs and inclusive hiring practices

- + Market size and profitability
- Employee turnover

- + Women entering key fields
- + Employee satisfaction
- Gender pay gap

Pathway 3

Recruitment



**Improve business performance
by bringing more women into
quality jobs**

Talented women are active in all sectors, including ones they have traditionally had less access to enter, such as technology, agriculture, and infrastructure. Companies have an opportunity to lean into this talent pool and bring more women into quality jobs at all levels. Recruiting the best talent — through intentional action that makes these jobs accessible to diverse jobseekers — simultaneously drives improved business performance and advances equality.

Which enterprises this pathway works for:

Businesses that have faced challenges in recruiting women, particularly in historically male-dominated sectors.

The challenge: Women are underrepresented in many sectors, including technology, clean energy, finance, and agriculture. For example, globally women make up just 32% of the clean energy workforce and only 28% of technical roles in this workforce.^{45 46} This lack of representation is even more pronounced in leadership positions. For example, in the energy sector, companies have only achieved women being 22% of the workforce, and 15% of senior management level positions.^{47 48}

While social norms often steer women away from certain educational paths, this accounts for only part of the gap. Women are increasingly completing degrees in traditionally underrepresented fields, but then companies are not successfully hiring them in these fields. Case in point: Only one-third of women graduating in STEM subjects are hired into the STEM workforce.⁴⁹

Generally, companies do not seek to discriminate and have equal employment policies on the books, but often this is not enough to bring in women talent. This is because unconscious biases may play into recruitment and hiring, disadvantaging women jobseekers. Or companies might have policies and work cultures that unintentionally

turn away women.⁵⁰ The consequence is companies are potentially missing out on their full talent pool, including highly skilled women jobseekers, and women are missing out on entering quality jobs.⁵¹

What businesses can do: To identify if there is a problem, businesses can look at the percentage of women and men across their workforce, departments, and levels, including in the C-Suite and board. This will help to surface disparities. From there, to address disparities there are many potential lines of action. Businesses can:

- **Design inclusive jobs:** Consider distinct challenges that women and diverse job seekers face and distinct preferences they have. Look at gender gaps that might prevent women from thriving or even applying for certain jobs and then design solutions. These can include flexible schedules, remote work options, extended parental leave, childcare support, family health benefits, mentorship opportunities, and access to credit, among others.
- **Set targets for gender diversity within the company,** with these varying by role type.
- **Create inclusive job descriptions.** For example, ensure job descriptions and any communication about the role differentiates between required and preferred skill sets to encourage women

to apply even if they don't have every preferred skill.⁵²

- **Advertise in channels that reach talented women jobseekers.** Collect and analyze data on where women in a given job market find job postings. For example, diverse job seekers in clean energy in Africa may use [Shortlist](#) while in Latin America they may use [We Link Her](#). Use multiple advertising channels, such as social media, newspapers/magazines, physical flyers, and job boards used by women in a given market.
- **Use standard criteria for assessing candidates based on their relevant skills** to mitigate bias in the shortlisting and evaluation process.
- **Diversify the hiring panel.** Make sure to include women, ideally of different levels of seniority.
- **Encourage employees to refer women candidates** and consider offering cash bonuses for successful hires.
- **Provide gender training to the recruitment team,** both on unconscious biases and ways to mitigate them in the recruitment process.

Business outcomes:

- **Better financial outcomes and profitability.** In a recent large study by McKinsey, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were 39% more likely to see financial returns above their national industry median.⁵³
- **Greater innovation** due to the varied perspectives.⁵⁴
- **Market growth and new market capture.** In a study that analyzed data from 1,800 professionals and 40 case studies, more diverse companies were 70% likelier to report having captured a new market.⁵⁵
- **Lower employee turnover rates.** Women in leadership has been correlated with lower employee turnover due to women building and fostering relationships.⁵⁶
- **Faster problem solving,** which is characteristic to diverse groups.⁵⁷

Social outcomes: Increased opportunities for women to occupy quality and decent jobs, which contributes to:

- Closing the gender pay gap.
- Closing gender gaps in fields where women are underrepresented.
- Higher overall employee satisfaction and well-being, among all employees.⁵⁸



Case study

Koolboks



Company profile

Koolboks offers solar-powered refrigerators to micro-entrepreneurs in Nigeria. These refrigerators, powered by ice thermal batteries, reduce customers' dependence on unreliable electricity grids and ensure food preservation during power cuts. Koolboks also offers pay-as-you-go financing to make these refrigerators accessible to low-income consumers.

Background

Since its founding, Koolboks believed in offering equal opportunity to men and women. However, it did not intentionally support women in the workforce nor did it directly design for or sell to women customers.

Koolboks' "aha moment" came when the company leadership began noticing that women on the sales team, while a minority of the salesforce, were very strong at engaging with customers. They saw a business opportunity to bring in and cultivate women talent.

Business priority and entry point for the gender work

In 2023, Koolboks began a collaboration with Value for Women and Acumen. A holistic gender diagnostic quantified the gender gaps and opportunities that Koolboks faced:

1. **Only 16% of Koolboks' sales agents were women**, despite women comprising 60% (1,399 out of 2,321) of the customer base.⁵⁹
2. **Only 5% of Koolboks' engineering team was women**, compared to 35% of the overall workforce of Koolboks, indicating particular under-representation of women in technical roles.^{60, 61}

This diagnostic also pointed to the factors contributing to these gender imbalances in sales and technical roles:

Sales agents

- Reliance on referrals: Sales agents were primarily recruited through word of mouth by current sales staff, who were mostly men, thus bringing in even more men.
- Perceptions favoring men: With sales being a public role and requiring interacting with strangers, communities saw it as a man's role.

- Sales agent inactivity: Multiple sales agents in Koolboks' database, many of whom were women, were inactive.

Technical roles

- Lack of inclusive recruitment practices: The Koolboks team had limited awareness of the benefits of a diverse team, the impact of gender biases in hiring, and the barriers women, disproportionately, face in the labor market. As a result, Koolboks was not employing practices that would attract and advance women jobseekers.

We noticed that women, although few on our sales team, excelled at engaging customers. They particularly excelled at engaging women customers, who are an important percentage of our customer base.

— HR Manager, Koolboks



Koolboks, Kenya. Photo: Peter Irungu

Actions

Inspired by these findings, Koolboks took action, both externally vis-a-vis customers and internally vis-a-vis its workforce and distribution force. Here the focus is on the latter set of actions geared toward diversifying the company's workforce.

Koolboks took these actions to increase the number of women sales agents:

1. Set a target to hire 50 new women sales agents. This target helped to unify efforts across the company.
2. Launched a recruitment campaign to rebrand the sales role as appropriate for both men and women and directly appeal to women candidates. The campaign included flyers visually showing women as sales agents, highlighting the benefits of becoming a Koolboks sales agent⁶², and featuring clear application requirements. These flyers were disseminated mainly via Whatsapp, an effective channel with women locally.
3. Re-engaged existing sales agents. Koolboks' HR team reviewed its historical records of inactive women sales agents and directly contacted them to rejoin the team and share the benefits of doing

so, including: attractive commission and incentives and participation in annual training opportunities.

Koolboks took these actions to increase the number of women in technical roles:

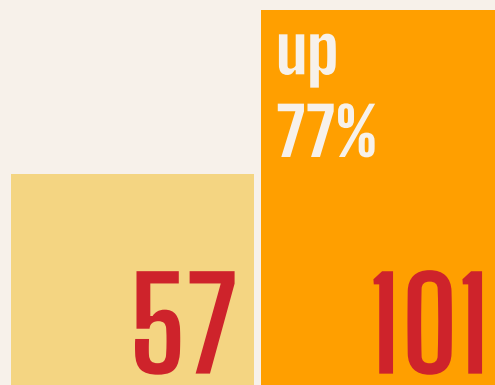
1. Trained the team on gender diversity. A training for Koolboks leadership and project team, facilitated by Value for Women, helped Koolboks identify biases they held unconsciously regarding women jobseekers and the importance of taking intentional action to counteract these biases. Koolboks leadership walked away with a redoubled focus on prioritizing gender diversity among its staff. To support this goal, Koolboks leadership cascaded this training to the rest of its workforce of 86.
2. Piloted inclusive recruitment processes and practices. These involved:
 - Updating job descriptions to appeal to women candidates (e.g., disclosing the salary range, letting candidates know Koolboks is committed to diversity, highlighting workplace benefits, and making travel expectations clear).
 - Having gender-balanced selection panels to mitigate potential bias during the selection process.

- Training managers on gender-inclusive hiring and measures for mitigating unconscious bias in the recruitment process (e.g., removing the candidate's name and gender from CVs to ensure the recruitment team focused solely on the applicant's qualifications and experience).
- Whenever possible, guaranteeing minimum gender balance among shortlisted CVs.

Results

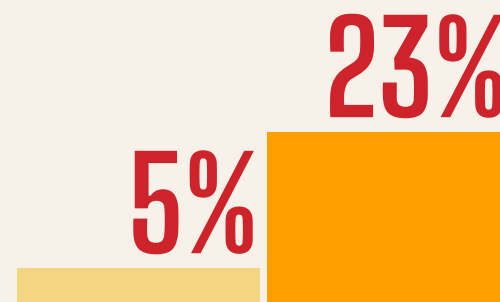
Koolboks made sizeable progress in four months:

Increased the number of women sales agents by 77% (from 57 to 101 women)



women sales agents

Increased the percentage of technical roles held by women from 5% to 23%, by hiring nine women in roles such as front-line engineers, customer onboarding specialists, electrical engineer, and inventory officer.



technical roles held by women

Going forward, Koolboks is predicting that this diversified talent will help bring in more customers and improve sales.

We achieved our goal of increasing the number of women sales agents. This was the result of implementing multiple gender practices, from publishing the salary range and including statements like ‘women are encouraged to apply’ to setting intentional targets to increase the number of women. With these improvements, we expect to increase our sales.

— HR Manager, Koolboks

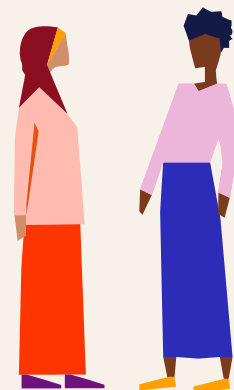
What contributed to Koolboks' success?

Gender inclusion training

In-person training on gender inclusion. Value for Women trained Koolboks' project and leadership teams, and the project team then trained the rest of the 86 Koolboks employees.

[Promoting gender inclusion] requires patience and sensitizing everyone in the organization to make sure everyone is aligned about why we are trying to bring in more women to the organization.

— HR Manager, Koolboks



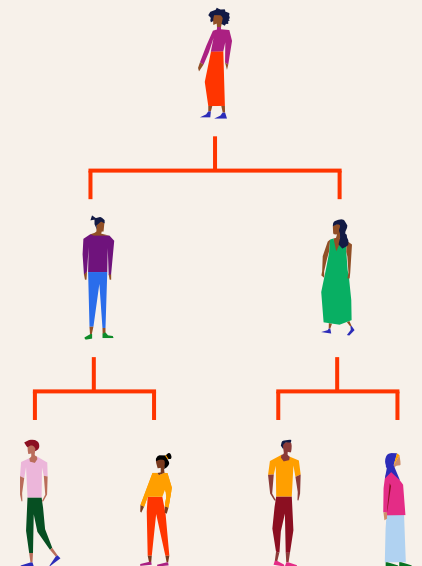
Setting and monitoring targets

Koolboks set a target of 50 women sales agents and was intent on achieving it. To create accountability and ensure all eyes were on the goal, the team met weekly to discuss progress.



Layered accountability

Layered accountability, including leadership. The initiative was managed meticulously with accountability mechanisms at different levels across departments. Koolboks designated two project managers to oversee the overall work. Then, for each specific action, they assigned a departmental team member and a senior leadership sponsor.



Mini case study

uPlanner



Case Study: uPlanner increased the percentage of women in its workforce from 25% to 42% and in its C-level team from 0% to 43%



Sector: EdTech



**Country: Chile
(Latin America operations)**

uPlanner is a Chilean Edtech company that provides higher education institutions in Latin America with platform solutions to streamline and improve their operations.

Challenge

uPlanner had previously failed to bring in women hires at the same rate as men, particularly in uPlanner's operations area where the tech roles were concentrated. uPlanner was preparing for a recruitment drive and sought to recruit the best talent.

Actions

With support from Value for Women and its investor ALIVE Ventures, uPlanner implemented several initiatives.

The company:

- Set gender targets: $\geq 35\%$ of women in the workforce overall and $\geq 25\%$ of women in the operations team specifically.
- Used targeted channels for recruiting women in tech, such as the We Link Her

platform (formerly known as Proyecto Moms) to recruit women in senior roles and Laboratoria, a women in tech NGO, for junior roles.

- Adjusted recruitment materials and branding to focus on inclusion. For example, the company created social media posts about gender gaps in the STEM sector and the importance of companies like uPlanner closing those gaps.
- Trained hiring managers on the importance of diversity and inclusion within the company and actions hiring managers can take to counteract workplace biases.

The company also established a gender committee to report on progress to the CEO and investors.

Results

Two years after implementing these actions, women have increased from 25% to 42% of uPlanner's workforce.⁶³ The percentage of women in uPlanner's operations area has increased from 17% to 36% and in uPlanner's C-level team from 0% to 43%.⁶⁴⁻⁶⁶

Mini case study

Yellow



increased from one to 185 the number of women sales agents in Malawi



Sector: Clean Energy



Malawi and Uganda

Yellow sells solar home systems in Malawi and Uganda, as well as essential products and services like solar-powered televisions and smartphones. It distributes them through its network of over 900 sales agents.

Challenge

In Malawi in 2018, very few women were applying for sales agent jobs in the solar sector. The barriers preventing women from becoming Yellow sales agents included:

- limited smartphone access (essential for the job).
- societal beliefs that the role was for men.
- lack of support from spouses and community members.
- financial constraints that hindered women from wearing functional clothing like trousers in the field.

Despite these challenges, the Yellow women sales agents who were on board excelled compared to their men counterparts. As a result, Yellow aimed to increase the number of women sales agents in its workforce.

Actions

Yellow rolled out an “agent scouts program” and promoted the program through posters that included pictures of women agents in action, a statement encouraging women to apply, and key statistics on women applicants.


The next year, with funding from the Norwegian government’s Energy and Environment Partnership Trust Fund (EEP Africa), Yellow implemented a large-scale digital skills training for young women and girls and encouraged participants to apply for agent opportunities at the company.

Results

- Yellow increased the number of women sales agents in Malawi from one in 2018 to 185 at the start of 2022. By 2022, women represented 22% of Yellow’s sales force.
- Women agents are strong performers. Though women make up 22% of the sales force, they make up 44% of the sales teams’ top performers (defined as having closed 500 sales or more each).



VALUE
FOR
WOMEN

 AcumenFund

 @Acumen

 @AcumenOrg

 ValueforWomen

 LinkedIn

 LinkedIn

acumen.org

v4w.org

This pathway contains references from the our report, Pathways to Growth: Gender-smart business actions that work. Please refer to the full report for complete context and to access the referenced footnotes and additional details.