

The Learning and Performance Link

The challenges of being a manager
(in their own words)

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GoodPractice





Contents

- Introduction
- Background
- 1 The range of challenges facing a manager
- 2 Challenges by seniority and age
- 3 Challenges by age and gender
- Conclusions
- About GoodPractice

Introduction

What aspects of their work do your managers feel challenged by? Understanding this can help provide the right support to improve a manager's performance.

In this paper we present some additional findings of research that was carried out in November 2009 with over 200 managers across a wide range of sectors. As part of this research, managers were asked to give their view of the challenges they faced.¹

Background

The initial research was, on the whole, designed to establish where managers looked for support when they were faced with a challenge. These findings were published in a white paper, 'How Managers Learn (in their own words)'.² As part of the research we also asked managers about a range of issues and asked them to rate the level of challenge on a Likert scale, from 'easy' to 'very challenging'. The challenges they were asked to rate were:

-  absence management
-  developing team members
-  influencing my peers & senior managers
-  maintaining a work-life balance
-  managing budgets
-  managing change
-  managing my team
-  managing projects
-  managing/improving internal processes
-  motivating and inspiring my team
-  multi-tasking
-  performance management
-  time management

The research data for the original white paper, and the paper itself, are available on our web site.

1 The range of challenges facing a manager

By far the most challenging aspect of a manager's role from those presented was seen to be 'managing change'; this was significantly ahead of anything else, with 64% of managers finding it fairly or very challenging. Only 3% of managers thought it was easy.

The second most challenging area was 'maintaining a work life balance' with a combined percentage of 53% of managers finding it fairly or very challenging. It is interesting to note that 46% of managers found time management fairly or very challenging, suggesting that these challenges are thought about in slightly different ways.

Perhaps the results which surprise the most are those for 'managing my team' and 'motivating and inspiring my team', both of which were seen to be easy or straightforward by 57% of managers. Given the evidence from other research into employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of managers,³ this finding in particular highlights that there may be blind spots when it comes to managers' awareness of their own development needs.

The following graph shows the areas of challenge rated on a relative scale of their perceived level of challenge.⁴



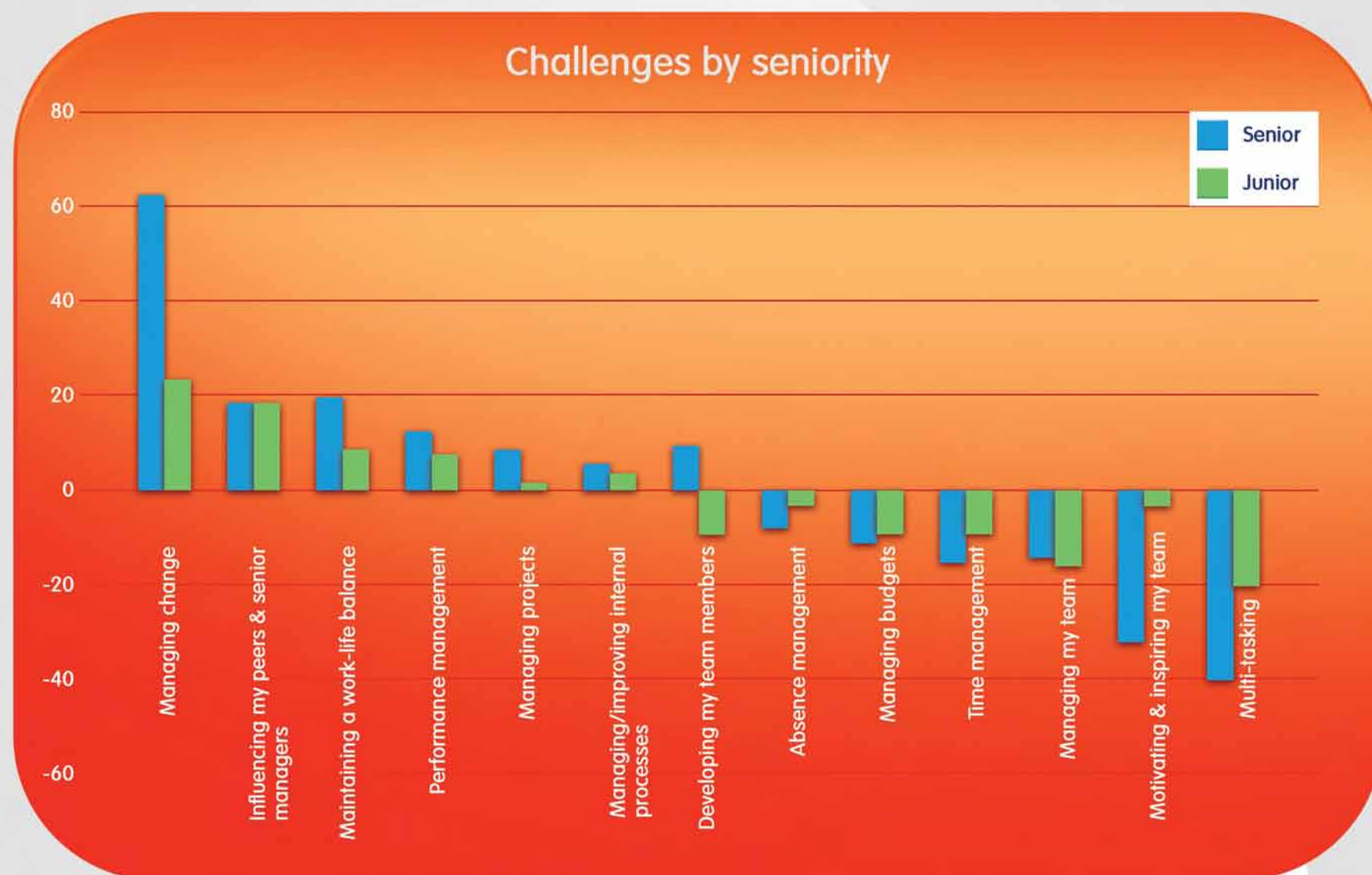
2 Challenges by seniority and age

When we compared the challenges as viewed by senior and junior managers a more complex picture emerges.

Senior managers view 'managing change' and 'maintaining a work-life balance' as significantly more challenging than their junior colleagues. They also see 'developing team members' as more challenging, but at the same time they also perceive 'motivating and inspiring their team' and 'multitasking' as much easier than junior managers.

This may be down to the scale and complexity of the change and people management challenges faced by senior managers, as well as the difference between leading initiatives and implementing them.

The graph below illustrates the differences between the senior and more junior managers, again using a weighted relative scoring system.



2 Challenges by seniority and age

In addition to looking at managers' roles, we also examined each challenge in terms of the age profile. The three broad age groups we investigated were:

- a. 18-34
- b. 35-44
- c. 45+

As might be expected, as you move up the age scale it is more likely that managers have more experience in dealing with the challenges they face and therefore find them easier to deal with. Indeed, for the most part the percentage of managers finding tasks fairly or very challenging decreases as they age.

The notable exceptions to this are areas where seniority also indicated an increase in challenge. So it would appear that whilst experience (loosely correlated with age) for the most part makes dealing with challenges easier; when this is combined with increased seniority and responsibility it can lead to greater levels of perceived challenge in areas such as:

- 1. managing change
- 2. work-life balance
- 3. managing projects
- 4. developing team members

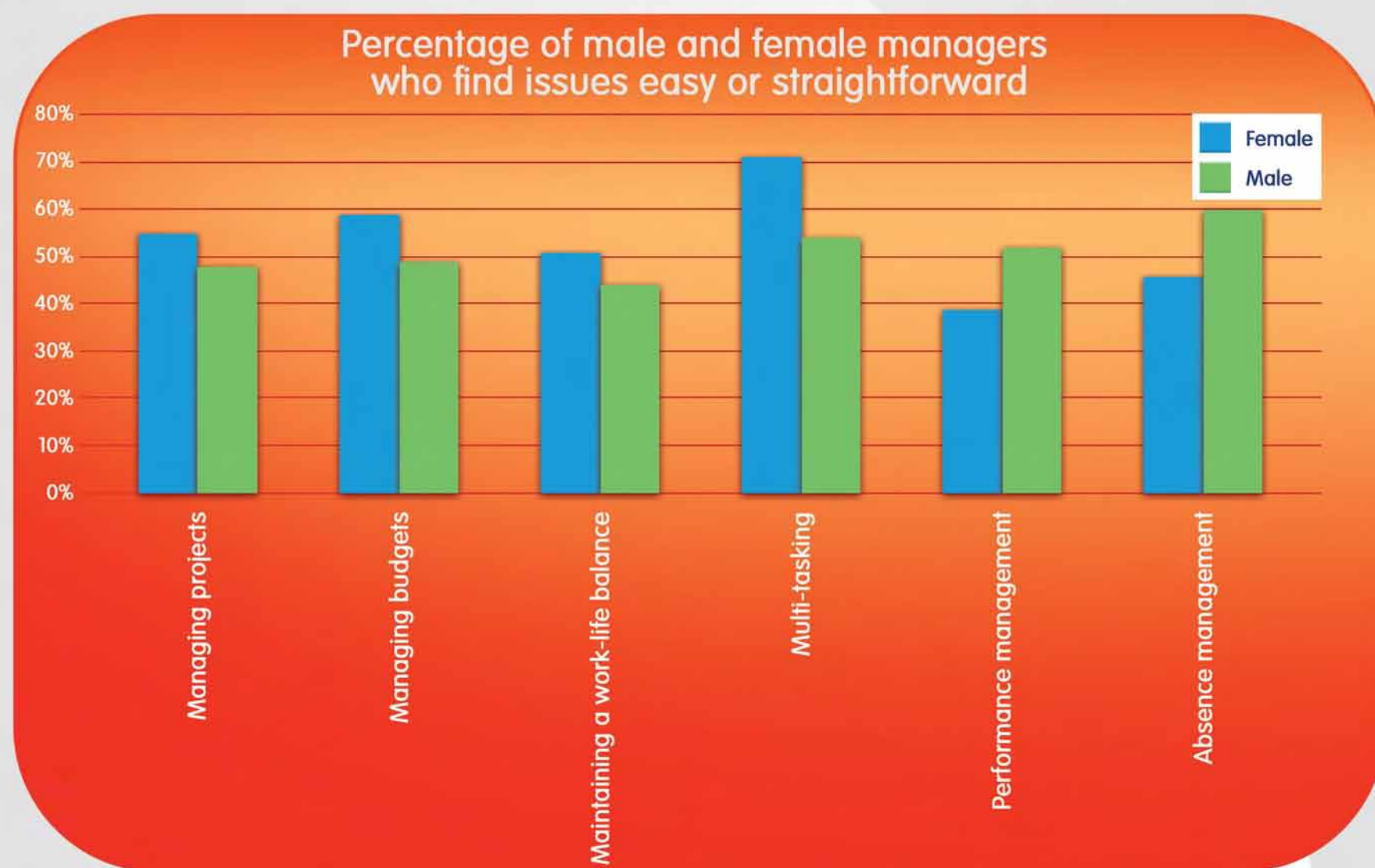
3 Challenges by age and gender

Finally, we looked at each challenge in terms of gender to see if there were any significant differences.

Overall, 34% of the respondents to the survey were female, and 50% of females were in team head/junior management roles compared to 29% of males. So, in our sample population, a larger percentage of females were in junior management roles, which is a rough reflection of the UK workforce.

We noticed some interesting differences when we looked at the data on a gender basis. However, we don't feel qualified to fully comment on the reasons for the differences.

Given the data above some of the difference can be attributed to the level of seniority of the respondent. This does not explain all the differences though, since the predominately male, senior managers find multi-tasking easier than junior managers and yet female managers clearly see it as easier than male managers.





Conclusions

The research provides an insight into how managers perceive work challenges, and therefore where they require help and support.

These requirements change as managers move up the career ladder, and there are some interesting differences in terms of age and gender.

However, it should be noted that this survey asked managers to rate what they themselves perceived as challenging. Given managers' views on the perceived level of challenge in terms of managing and motivating and inspiring teams and the other data available, it would suggest that more effort may be required to help managers recognise where their strengths and weaknesses lie.

Being aware of this, and the profile of a managerial workforce, may provide a guide as to where best to provide support that will have an impact on performance.



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