

My Career Path and Mentors in the “Old Women’s Network”

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I am in the middle of my career – I’m age 40, have been working for over 25 years, and probably have 25 or more to go. As I think about my time as a working woman and my career path, I reflect upon those mentors who gave me a chance as a young woman and also in my current job.

In America, we often talk about the “Old Boys Network,” which refers to the older, white males who have dominated the workplace, hiring decisions and leadership roles over the last...well, since the start of the country. Getting ahead in the work world is often based on “who you know,” and men have traditionally promoted and mentored other men like themselves.

Statistics in America overall still show that many industries and types of career fields are dominated by men, and that more often than not, men earn more money than women for performing the same job. The women’s rights movement over the last several decades has consistently pushed for “equal pay for equal work,” and women have risen in the ranks in all sectors of U.S. work life, whether private, non-profit or government. We’ve made progress on more equal pay as well, although our lifetime earning power is still lower than men due to the larger amount of time we take off work to raise children.

As a woman who started working in my teenage years in the 1980s, I benefited from those women who had fought hard for equality in the workplace, was mentored and given chances by some of these women. I was also mentored by male bosses as well. First I’ll have to note that my father hired me to work at his small real estate business when I was 13 years old, and I gained much office management skills as a receptionist. A family friend, Kristina Moris, hired me to work at a local broadcasting company when I was 17 years old. And I worked there for four years during summers and other vacations while I was in college. Here I gained critical experience that helped build my resume and provided a “jump” into my next jobs.

Kristina was a vice president at the company, and there were other women also in “power” positions and leadership roles. Women who have made it to the higher ranks and then take time to mentor younger women and help them grow their skills and network and get promoted up the career ladder, is one way that women have formed a

new “old women’s network.” I was recruited into my current job as Communications Director for the City of Seattle’s Office of Economic Development by one such mentor, Jill Nishi. Jill recruited me to apply for this position, one which I have held for eight years. While Jill is no longer the director at my agency, she continues to be someone with whom I consult with and network. It’s important for women to nurture these professional business relationships and serve as mentors and cheerleaders for each other.

I have been blessed to have nurturing bosses and mentors, both male and female, in my career, in both Japan and the U.S. As a young woman I worked on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) as a Coordinator for International Relations in the City of Kobe’s International Department. I had several progressive male bosses while I worked in Kobe, who gave me chances to do high profile tasks and gave me valuable experience. My current boss, a man, continues to push me and give me support to try new projects and stretch my skills with challenging new initiatives and continuing educational opportunities.

In return, I make sure that I mentor younger employees in my organization, both men and women, to give them chances to learn more skills and find their successful career path. I have an intern who works for me. And I’ m proud to say that the three young women who have worked for me have found full-time successful employment and launched their careers.

I recognize the successes that I have had in my career are partially due to nurturing mentors, both male and female, and definitely women mentors who have fostered a new women’ s network. I have great hope for the future of working women both in Japan and the U.S., as I feel this is a concept that is growing in both our countries.