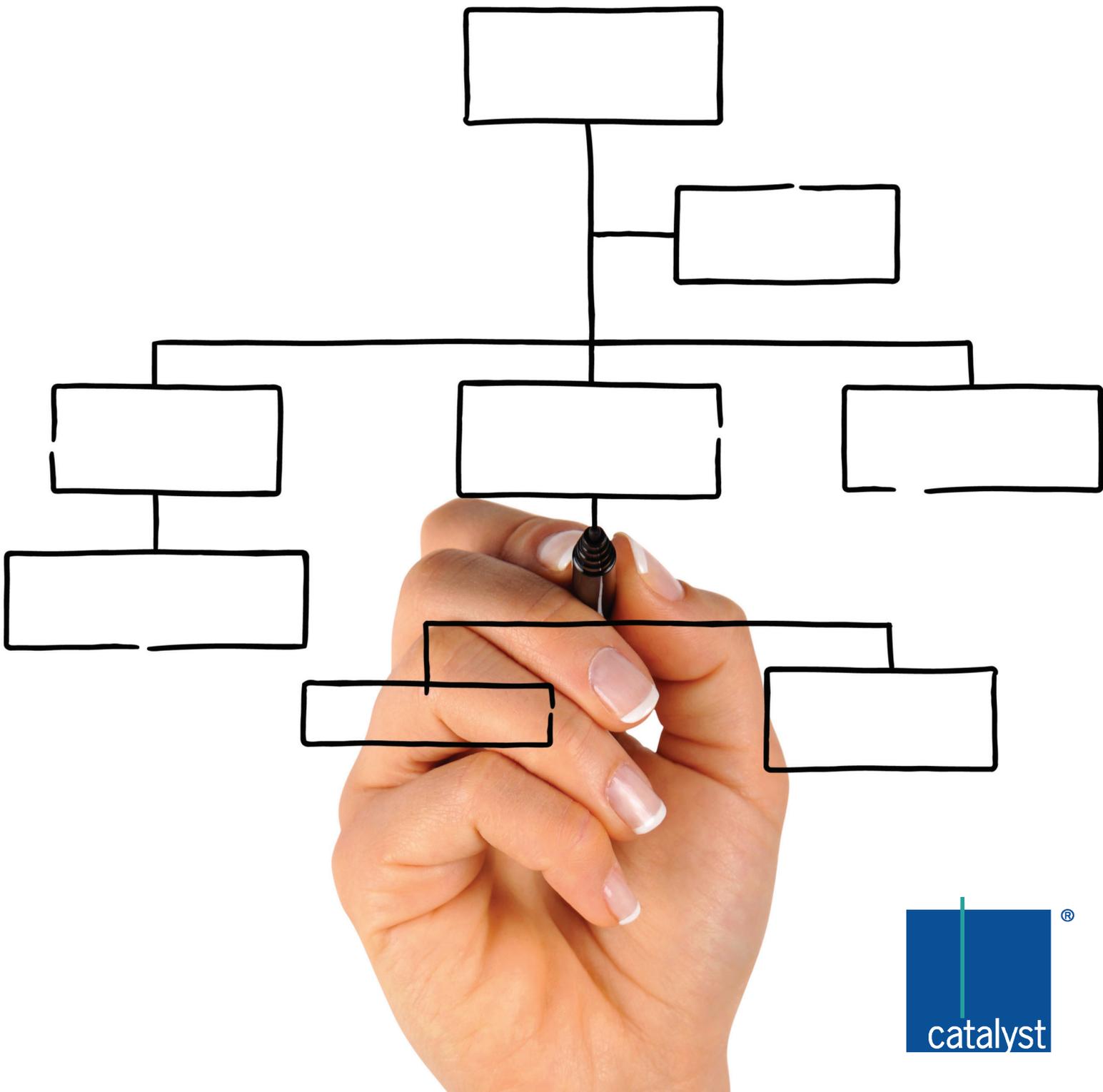


UNWRITTEN RULES:

Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough

EUROPE





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WHY DOING A GOOD JOB MIGHT NOT BE ENOUGH | EUROPE

By Laura Sabattini

UNWRITTEN RULES: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

Advancing in today's business world is often as much about learning and playing by the rules as it is about demonstrating talent and delivering results. Some rules are explicitly stated in organizational handbooks, performance review procedures, or by senior leadership. But other rules are left implicit—unwritten—for employees to decipher on their own. Those who do not have the tools to access this maze of unwritten rules and the important knowledge the rules provide remain left out, no matter how competent. Yet employees' perceptions and day-to-day use of unwritten rules can vary from region to region and culture to culture.

Catalyst's most recent research on the unwritten rules to advancement, *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough*, included responses from 700 study participants across geographies. In *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough Europe*, we consider a subset of that data from 201 European-based respondents' description of their perceptions of the unwritten rules to advancement as well as how they learned to navigate these rules within their organizations. These analyses complement the previous knowledge and allow for a more in-depth understanding of how unwritten rules might play out—and vary—across different cultural contexts.¹

The analyses of European responses show that:

- European respondents rated activities involving communication and feedback, performance and results, career planning, increasing visibility and relationship building as particularly important. They also rated working long hours as important for career development.
- When asked to select the top three strategies that, in hindsight, they wish they had known about from the very beginning of their careers, European participants said they wished they: 1) had sought out more mentors, 2) had spent more time building networks and showcasing their work, and 3) had participated in career coaching.
- European women were more likely than European men to rate visibility-building as important. Women were also more likely to have used face time and to have communicated their availability to commit many hours as strategies to advance in the past, suggesting they might have focused on strategies that disconfirmed stereotypes about their job commitment.

1. The European sub-sample represented 35 percent of the full sample of respondents who reported their location (i.e., total sample N=567). *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough* (Laura Sabattini and Sarah Dinolfo, Catalyst, 2010).

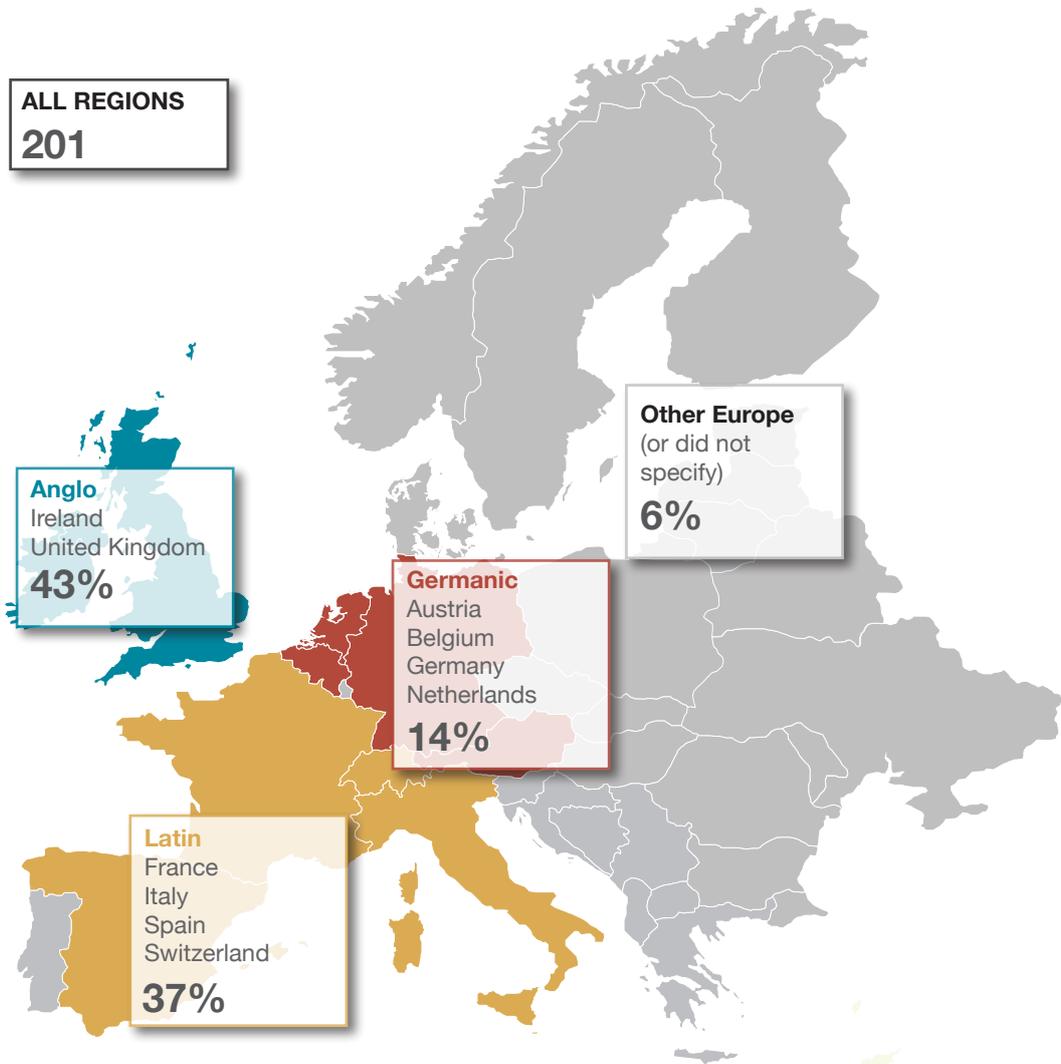
- Finally, observation (i.e., observing other people and how things get done within the organization) emerged as the most used approach to figuring out the unwritten rules, followed by learning through trial and error and mentoring and feedback. Observation and mentoring and feedback also emerged as learning approaches that European respondents would recommend to others. Interestingly, formal training and coaching didn't emerge as useful ways to learn about unwritten rules to advancement.

RESPONDENT PROFILE

The 201² study participants comprised:

- 55% women
- 45% men
- 57% worked in continental Europe
- 43% worked in the United Kingdom
- Employees from both European- and U.S.-headquartered organizations distributed across different European regions (see Table 1)³
- 60% employed in companies with 10,000 or more employees
- 85% employed by organizations with a global scope⁴

TABLE 1
EUROPEAN SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY REGION OR CULTURAL CLUSTER



2. Among those respondents who reported their race/ethnicity (N=193), 90 percent identified as white (N=174), and the remaining 10 percent (N=20) identified as Asian (N=6), black (N=2), Latino/a (N=1), multiracial (N=3), or "other" (N=7). Respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 59, with an average age of 38 years. See Appendix for more details and sample demographics.

3. *Leaders in a Global Economy: Talent Management in European Cultures* (Nancy M. Carter and Ellen Galinsky, Catalyst, 2008).

4. Out of 201 respondents, 12 percent reported working in an organization with a regional or national scope, the remaining worked in organizations with a global scope. See Appendix for more information.

WHAT ARE THE UNWRITTEN RULES TO ADVANCEMENT?

As in Catalyst's report *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough*, the analyses rely on eight categories of unwritten rules, each comprising a number of related behaviors that are prevalent in organizations.⁵ These were:

- **Building Relationships**—Striving to become a member of a formal or informal professional network and leveraging mentoring relationships.
- **Communication and Feedback**—Discussing unwritten rules with colleagues and peers, supervisors, and/or managers; communicating openly about unwritten rules in the organization, and seeking out performance- and job-related information, both to improve skills and to develop a better understanding of workplace norms and expectations.
- **Career Planning and Training**—Developing a long-term career plan, participating in career-related training, and proactively seeking a variety of assignments to increase both knowledge and skills.
- **Increased Visibility**—Maneuvering proactively to become more visible within the organization. This may involve seeking credit for the work done, being outspoken about career goals and desired assignments, and asking to be considered for promotion.
- **Performance and Results**—Understanding and exceeding performance expectations.
- **Working Long Hours**—Working long hours consistently (i.e., beyond the “regular” 40-hour week).
- **Putting in “Face Time”**—Spending time physically in the office.
- **Expressing the Willingness to Work Long Hours**—Articulating clearly one’s availability to work long hours and/or overtime in order to advance.⁶

5. In this research, we consider how unwritten rules translate into and lead individuals to develop strategies for career success. Hence, in the course of the report, we use the terms “unwritten rules” and “career strategies” interchangeably.

6. The questionnaire included two distinct items to rate the number of hours worked and participants’ perception that it is important to clearly articulate their availability to work long hours and/or weekends in order to advance and be considered for high-visibility assignments. Respondents rated each item on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 4.

PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNICATION TOP THE LIST OF MOST IMPORTANT UNWRITTEN RULES

Consistent with what emerged in the analyses with the larger sample,⁷ European respondents rated activities involving communication and feedback, performance and results, career planning, increasing visibility, and relationship building as particularly important (see Table 2).

Although employees based in Europe gave—on average—a few lower ratings than respondents from other regions, there was an analogous pattern of responses as well as similar inconsistencies between what participants

viewed as important and what they had actually used in the past and throughout their career (see Table 2 and Table 3). Participants reported using many time-related strategies (e.g., working long hours, putting in face time) but, on average, did not rate these strategies as equally important as building relationships and increasing visibility. Of note, European respondents were less likely than respondents from other regions to have used face time as a career advancement strategy in the past.

TABLE 2
UNWRITTEN RULES RATED MOST IMPORTANT FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND MOST USED BY EUROPEAN-BASED RESPONDENTS⁸

Unwritten Rules, Strategies To Advancement	Rated as Important (N=201)*	Used in the Past % (N=201)*
Performance and Results	99%	99%
Communication and Feedback	98%	96%
Career Planning	94% 	84% 
Seeking Visibility	92%	80%
Building Relationships	90% 	74% 
Increasing Face Time	73%	75% 
Working Long Hours	46%	84%
Clearly Communicating Willingness to Work Many Hours	26% 	36% 



* Use of the icon indicates categories where non-European respondents, which included those from the United States, Canada, and other regions (N=366) scored higher (see Appendix); significant mean differences for $p < .05$.⁹

7. *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough* (Laura Sabattini and Sarah Dinolfo, Catalyst, 2010).
 8. The questionnaire item read: In your opinion, “How IMPORTANT/helpful are the following behaviors to career advancement and success in your CURRENT organization (regardless of whether you have engaged in these behaviors or not)?” And “To what extent have YOU PERSONALLY ENGAGED IN the following behaviors to gain advancement opportunities? Please answer this question thinking of what you HAVE DONE IN THE PAST, not what you would like to do ideally or in the future.”
 9. Mean differences were tested through a One-Way ANOVA with responses being ranked on a 4-point scale from “Not at all” to “A large extent.”

To help identify which unwritten rules stood out the most as important for career success—and regardless of which they had used in the past—participants selected up to three specific strategies that, in hindsight, they wish they had known about from the very beginning of their careers.¹⁰ As noted in Table 3, European

employees wished they had sought out more mentors and spent more time developing professional networks. They also wished they had been more proactive in seeking credit for the work done and that they had invested in career coaching activities, the latter a finding particular to employees from Europe.¹¹

TABLE 3
IN HINDSIGHT, I WISH I HAD KNOWN . . . (RESPONDENTS' TOP THREE CHOICES)

In Hindsight, I wish I had...	% N=201
Sought out mentoring relationships with higher-level managers.	30%
Participated in informal networks within my organization. Made sure I got credit for work I do.	28% each
Participated in career coaching.	20%

10. The questionnaire item read, “Which of the following strategies do you MOST wish you had known about at the very beginning of your career?” Note that these analyses are based on individual behaviors, not constructs. See *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough* (Laura Sabattini and Sarah Dinolfo, Catalyst, 2010) for a complete list of the items within each scale.

11. Participating in career coaching was not one of the top three choices among respondents from non-European regions.

YET THE MOST IMPORTANT UNWRITTEN RULES WERE NOT NECESSARILY THE MOST USED

European women and men agreed on the importance of communicating effectively and asking for feedback, delivering high-performance results, and proactively planning their career, and they reported using similar strategies in the past (see Table 4). A few differences stand out when analyzing mean differences in women’s and men’s responses:

- European women were more likely than European men to rate some visibility strategies (i.e., seeking visibility, and clearly communicating their willingness to put in more hours) as important, and

- European women were also more likely than European men to have used face time and have discussed their availability to commit many hours to work as strategies to advance in the past.

Once again, as noted in Table 4, European women did not rate time-related strategies (e.g., working long hours, putting in face time) as highly in importance but reported using these strategies to a large extent. Similarly, there was a gap between relationship- and visibility-building strategies where respondents rated these unwritten rules as highly important but did not use them as extensively in the past.

TABLE 4
UNWRITTEN RULES RATED MOST IMPORTANT TO AND MOST USED FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT, EUROPEAN WOMEN ONLY¹²

Unwritten Rules, Strategies To Advancement	Rated As Important (N=109)*	Used in the Past N=109*
Performance and Results	99%	99%
Communication and Feedback	97%	94%
Career Planning	94%	85%
Seeking Visibility	94% 	82%
Building Relationships	89%	71%
Increasing Face Time	75%	78% 
Working Long Hours	51%	83%
Clearly Communicating Willingness to Work Many Hours	39% 	44% 

 *Use of the icon indicates categories where European women (N=109) scored higher than European men (N=90); significant mean differences for p<.05 ¹³

12. The questionnaire items read: “In your opinion, How IMPORTANT/helpful are the following behaviors to career advancement and success in your CURRENT organization (regardless of whether you have engaged in these behaviors or not)?” And “To what extent have YOU PERSONALLY ENGAGED IN the following behaviors to gain advancement opportunities? Please answer this question thinking of what you HAVE DONE IN THE PAST, not what you would like to do ideally or in the future.”
13. Mean differences were tested through a One-Way ANOVA with responses ranked on a 4-point scale from “Not at all” to “A large extent.”

OBSERVATION IS THE MOST USED MEANS OF LEARNING ABOUT THE UNWRITTEN RULES TO ADVANCEMENT

STRATEGIES TO LEARN ABOUT THE UNWRITTEN RULES

In this study, we asked respondents to evaluate the ways in which they had learned the unwritten rules for advancement in their own career. Based on participants' ratings, we identified six learning approaches:¹⁴

- **Mentoring and Feedback**—Learning by asking supervisor(s) and mentor(s) about what it is needed to succeed, learning by seeking out feedback about one's own behavior and performance and using the feedback to understand what is important and valued in the organization.
- **Formal Coaching and Training**—Learning by tapping into the knowledge and insights gained through professional training and development and/or a professional coach.
- **Observation**—Learning by observing successful employees' behaviors (e.g., who is being promoted?) and taking time to ascertain "how things work" in the organization.
- **Previous Work Experience**—Tapping into the knowledge and insights gained in other organizations and jobs.
- **Communication with Members of Professional Networks**—Communicating with people in professional (formal and informal) networks.
- **Trial and Error**—Figuring out what works and what does not work as you go along.

Table 5 summarizes the most frequently used approaches to learning unwritten rules among European women and men. The table also displays whether respondents marked each approach as especially useful and whether the respondent would recommend it to others.¹⁵

European respondents were especially likely to have used and to recommend observation (i.e.,

observing other people and how things get done within the organization) as a learning strategy. Other frequently used approaches included trial and error and learning through mentoring and feedback. However, of the two, only the latter emerged as an approach that they would recommend to others as a way to learn about unwritten rules (see Table 5).

14. See *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough* (Laura Sabattini and Sarah Dinolfo, Catalyst, 2010).

15. The questionnaire asked two questions, "Throughout your career, how did you personally learn about the unwritten rules to advancement?" and "What are the top three strategies you consider the most useful in navigating your company's unwritten rules?" The learning strategies participants rated were based on the themes that had emerged in *Unwritten Rules: What You Don't Know Can Hurt Your Career* (Laura Sabattini, Catalyst, 2008) as well as on current research literature on organizational learning and socialization. Survey respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they had used each strategy on a 4-point scale, from "Not at all" to "A great extent."

TABLE 5:
MOST IMPORTANT AND MOST RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING ABOUT UNWRITTEN RULES^a

Learning About Unwritten Rules	Used as a Learning Strategy (All European Respondents) N=201	Top Three Learning Approaches I Would Recommend to Others (All European Respondents) N= 201 ¹⁶
Learning Through Observation	83%	54% ¹⁷
Learning Through Trial and Error	79%	20%
Learning Through Mentoring and Feedback	77%	39% ¹⁸
Learning Through Previous Work Experience	51%	11%
Learning Through Communication With Members of Professional Networks	47%	23%
Learning Through Formal Coaching and Training	27%	7% ¹⁹

^a No gender differences emerged for learning strategies and recommended approaches.

THERE IS A NEED TO BALANCE STRATEGIES THROUGH TRANSPARENT EXPECTATIONS AND COMMUNICATION

Similar to what was found in the larger study, the analyses conducted with the European sample show a subtle disconnect between some of the strategies that respondents rated as important to advance and what they actually used to advance in their workplace. Once again, respondents reported using time- and performance-related strategies most often, and yet they rated relationship- and career-building strategies as equally or more important to career advancement.

It is possible that, without explicit communication, it may take some time for employees to learn about or apply the strategies that really count. It is more difficult to communicate and learn

the relevance of behaviors such as “planning a career” or “building relationships” compared with strategies that are easier to display, such as working long hours, especially considering that observation emerged in this group as the most commonly used approach to learning about unwritten rules to advancement.

This research confirms the importance of clear and transparent expectations and communication about career opportunities as well as of employing a variety of approaches to communicating and learning the rules for career progression to employees.

16. In this question, percentages are based on the number of respondents who picked each item as one of their top three choices out of the 201 total respondents in the sample. Only strategies that were picked by at least 15 percent of respondents are reported in the table. See *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job Might Not Be Enough* (Laura Sabattini and Sarah Dinolfo, Catalyst, 2010) for more information.

17. Averaged from the following individual items: Observe How Things Work (54%) and Observing Others (55%).

18. Averaged from the following individual items: Asking Supervisors (37%), Asking Mentor (35%), Asking for Feedback (44%).

19. Averaged from the following individual items: Training (9%) and Coaching (5%).

Key Findings

UNWRITTEN RULES:

WHY DOING A GOOD JOB MIGHT NOT BE ENOUGH | EUROPE

- European respondents rated the following strategies as **most important** to career development:
 - Communication and feedback
 - Performance and results
 - Career planning
 - Increased visibility
 - Relationship building
 - Working long hours
- The **most frequently** used means of learning about unwritten rules were:
 - Observing other people and how things get done within the organization
 - Trial and error
 - Mentoring and feedback
- The **most recommended** approaches to learning about unwritten rules were:
 - Observing the work environment and what others do
 - Learning through mentors
 - Asking for feedback
- This **research confirms** the importance of:
 - Clear and transparent expectations and communication about career opportunities
 - Using a variety of approaches to communicating and learning the rules for career progression

Source: *Unwritten Rules: Why Doing a Good Job May Not Be Enough* (Catalyst, 2010)

Research Partners: American Express Company, BMO Financial Group, Chevron Corporation, Deloitte LLP, Deutsche Bank AG, Ernst & Young LLP, Hewlett-Packard Company, IBM Corporation, McDonald's Corporation, UPS

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