



AlixPartners

Do female leaders view disruption differently?

Insights from AlixPartners'
Disruption Index 2024

When it really matters.sm



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Foreword

In a disrupted world, what business leaders need, more than anything else, is agility – and the ability to embrace change. Rulebooks no longer rule, and flexibility is the fastest route to finding and implementing solutions.

The findings in this report from AlixPartners are striking for that reason. When asked about disruptive forces, women C-level and senior executives consistently see more opportunity than their male counterparts. They are telling us that they are open to change – and that a positive outlook is essential to effectively navigating our currently disruptive environment toward successful outcomes.

It is the global megatrends that could fundamentally shift power dynamics and rewrite the rules where women leaders over-index in their opportunistic perspectives, on key areas such as regulation, geopolitics, elections across the globe, and social concerns.

Harnessing the opportunities presented in these seismic shifts is essential to successfully navigating the challenges that they also bring. When disruption is viewed as a threat, we risk retrenchment, reluctance, inertia, or an acceptance of the status quo. Rising trade tariffs, data localisation, and protectionism point to such introversion at a time when our world has never been more interconnected.

The insights in this report demonstrate why we need more women in leadership roles – for greater diversity of thought and perspective at the top. We need more leaders who understand transformation and uncertainty and can navigate change confidently, irrespective of gender. Leaders who see opportunity and can leverage disruption to deliver positive outcomes. This study highlights just how well-equipped women are to deliver on these challenges, as many are already doing.

Progress on achieving gender balance in leadership roles is taking too long. The FTSE Women Leaders Review has helped increase the proportion of women on FTSE 350 Boards from 9.5% in 2011 to 43%. However, that doesn't reflect the global picture – women CEOs still represent a minority segment of the business world with only 35% of leadership roles occupied by women in the U.K., and only 29 women CEOs in the FTSE 350 in 2023. Data from executive search firm Russell Reynolds shows that, of the 68 CEOs appointed by listed companies globally in Q1 2024, only five were women. At the current pace of change, it is estimated to take 88 years to achieve global gender parity.

In addition, CEO roles come at a higher risk for women. The “glass cliff” – appointing a woman to lead an organisation already in crisis, creating a cliff-edge scenario – is real. Women CEOs can expect a shorter tenure than men, and are four times more likely to last less than 12 months.

Of course, the goal is not to see achieving gender parity as an end in itself, but to embrace the diversity of perspectives more broadly as our route to a successful future.

And were we to achieve gender parity in leadership roles, would we then see businesses navigate disruption differently?

Disruption levels in
recent years
(/100)

70

2021

78

+11%

2022

76

-3%

2023

72

-5%

2024

3,000+ senior and C-level executives
Male: 2,417
Female: 582
Non-binary/Other: 2

About AlixPartners' Disruption Index – and this report

At AlixPartners, we conduct an annual survey of more than 3,000 C-level and senior executives around the world, looking at the challenges those executives identify, as well as the behaviours of those companies that are thriving in this disrupted world. We publish the findings in our annual Disruption Index, which we released earlier this year.

Our research enables us to calculate a single Disruption Score – tracking how much disruption exists, and how much it is impacting companies around the world. To calculate this, we take the complexity of disruption – i.e., the number of forces simultaneously affecting a company – and multiply this by the magnitude – i.e., how disrupted those companies have been, according to their leaders. We've been tracking this benchmark since 2021, and observe that, while it remains high, it has been gradually dropping since its peak in 2022.

This year, for the first time, we have examined the global findings through the lens of gender – enabling us to explore not only how business executives are responding to disruptive challenges, but how this might differ between female and male leaders. We share our findings in this report.

Five key findings

Female leaders:

1.

Expect more significant change to their company's business models in the next 12 months than their male counterparts.

2.

See more opportunity in disruption than male leaders, especially in the megatrends.

3.

Are as confident in navigating disruption as male leaders.

4.

Seek more personal and professional support beyond their existing strong networks to be successful, while more male leaders say they are personally falling behind in terms of knowledge and skills.

5.

Feel more pressure from stakeholders to take a stance on social and environmental issues than male leaders, particularly from investors, employees, and customers.

60%

of leaders feel optimistic about the future of their business, but this is down from 87% in 2023.

59%

of CEOs are worried about losing their jobs.

61%

of CEOs worry their company can't keep up with disruptive forces.

How leaders are navigating disruption

Our overall data set (combining responses from all genders) reveals that, while levels of disruption are reported at their lowest level since the pandemic, 61% of CEOs still worry their company can't keep up with disruptive forces, and 59% of CEOs are worried about losing their jobs. These proportions are down from 75% and 70% in 2023 respectively, but remain high.

60% of leaders also feel optimistic about the future of their business considering an existing or potential recession – but that level of optimism is significantly down from 87% in 2023.

Leaders told us the top three business areas facing the most disruption, and it is not unexpected that digital transformation tops this list. 63% of CEOs told us their company can't keep up with the rate of technological change, and nearly half (46%) say the pace of change is making employees' skills rapidly obsolete.

To understand how leaders are navigating disruption, we asked about their topmost business priorities, and it is not surprising to see cost management featuring highly given the inflationary and interest rate environments. Lastly, when it comes to personal skills and traits, leaders consider strategic thinking, timely decision-making and agility to be most important in handling disruption.

Top 3

Disrupted business areas:

1. Digital transformation
2. Operations
3. Supply chain

Business priorities:

1. Risk assessment
- =2. Cost management
- =2. Strategic investments

Leadership skills:

1. Strategic thinking
2. Timely decision-making
3. Agility in responding to changing market conditions

50%

more female leaders than male leaders expect significant change to their company's business model this year due to disruptive forces.

Female leaders see more opportunity in disruption.

Do female leaders view disruption differently?

Making up almost 20% of our sample, female leaders expect more significant change to their company's business model over the next year than their male counterparts.

Disruption: an opportunity or a threat?

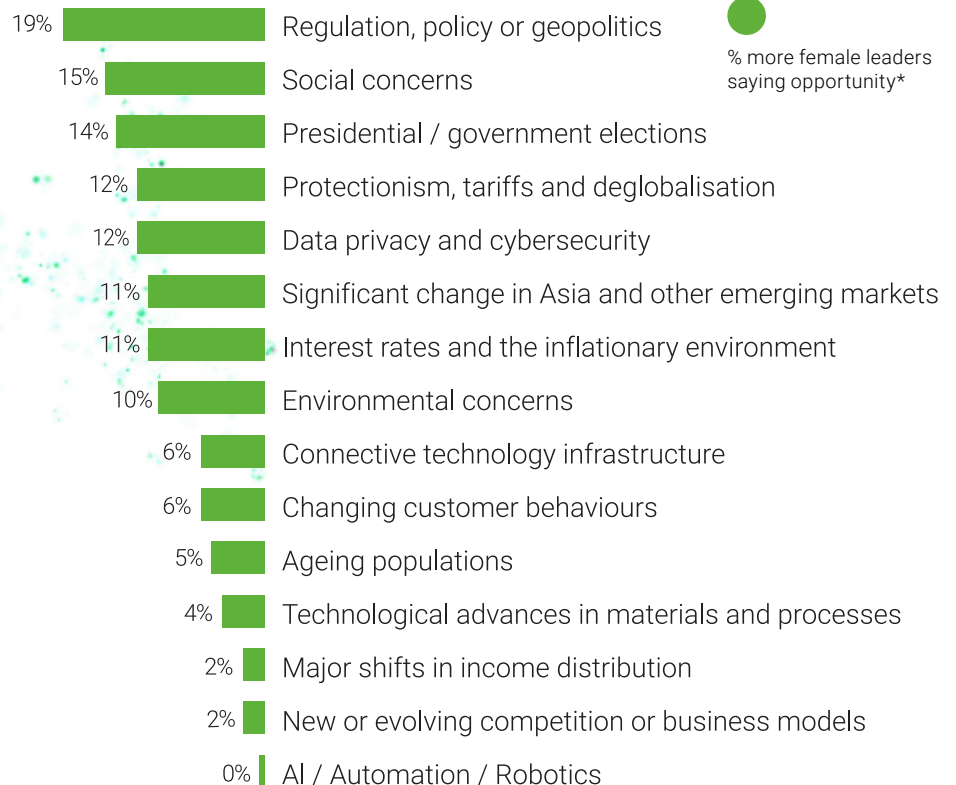
Our most striking finding was that female leaders see more opportunity in disruption than male leaders.

How do we know this? We asked leaders to rate 15 different disruptive forces as either an opportunity or a threat for their company over the next 12 months. For 14 of these forces, a greater percentage of female leaders consistently saw opportunity rather than threat – only AI was equally considered an opportunity by both female and male leaders. And for all 15 disruptive forces, a greater percentage of male leaders rated these as a threat.

Topping the list – i.e., where female leaders over-index in their opportunistic perspectives – are megatrends including regulation, policy, geopolitics, social concerns, elections across the globe, and protectionism.

Do these disruptive forces pose an opportunity or a threat for your company over the next 12 months?

*See appendix for the full set of responses from female and male leaders.



83%

of female leaders state that their natural leadership style thrives in a disrupted environment, vs 79% of male leaders.

Leading in disruption

When it comes to navigating and leading in disruption, female leaders are as confident as male leaders – slightly more so, in fact – and 13% less likely to worry about losing their job.

79% of female leaders feel optimistic about the impact GenAI will have on their company as a whole, vs 70% of men. And 57% of female leaders consider their company to be industry-leading in the use of GenAI applications, vs 47% of men.

74%

of female leaders seek support from personal and professional advisors, vs 67% of male leaders.

Staying ahead

But that doesn't mean female leaders don't worry about the challenges they face. 50% more female leaders than male leaders feel more anxious in their role this year than last year. And 68% of female leaders told us it is becoming increasingly challenging to know which disruptive forces to prioritise, vs 58% of male leaders.

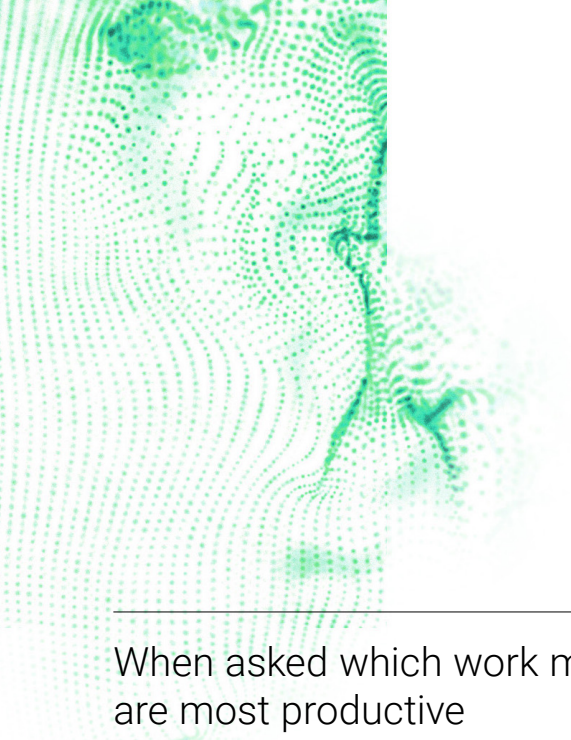
More female leaders tell us they seek support from personal and professional advisors to be successful (74% of female leaders vs 67% of male leaders), whereas 26% more male leaders say they are personally falling behind in terms of their knowledge and skills.

Female leaders are 13% less likely to worry about losing their job due to disruption.

Female leaders feel more pressure

More female leaders (66%) than male leaders (61%) told us they feel pressure to take a stance on social and environmental issues – particularly from investors, employees, and customers. Female and male leaders feel equal pressure to take a stance on these issues from governments and regulators.

Female leaders are more optimistic about GenAI.



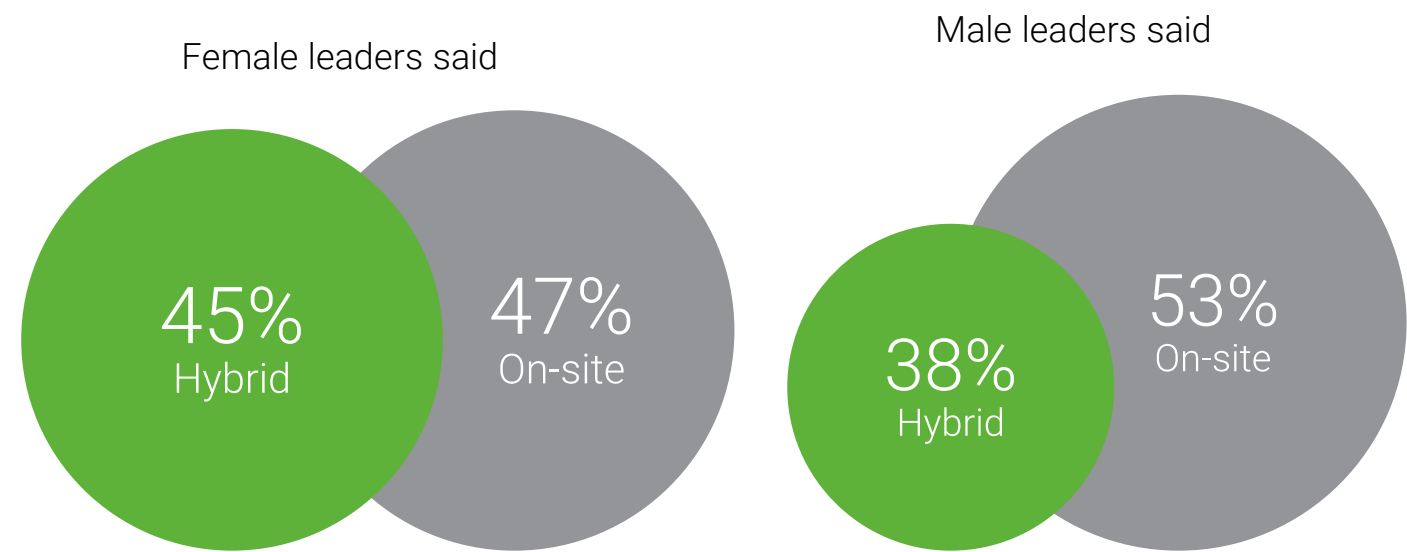
A new working world – or is it?

14% more female leaders than male leaders told us that shifts in workforce values and preferences are driving disruption within their company.

We asked leaders which work models they feel are most successful in driving employee productivity. Responses vary by country, with the U.S., U.K., and France preferring a hybrid model overall. Globally, female leaders are divided on whether a mostly on-site or hybrid work model is most productive (47% vs 45%), whereas male leaders more clearly favour a mostly on-site model over a hybrid model (53% vs 38%).

Lastly, 57% of male leaders state that remote work models have a negative impact on career advancement, vs 51% of female leaders.

When asked which work models are most productive



Overall response from all leaders, by country

	Total	U.S.	Canada	U.K.	Germany	France	Italy	Switzerland	Japan	China
Mostly remote	8%	9%	9%	10%	9%	5%	5%	5%	5%	11%
Hybrid	40%	47%	35%	46%	38%	55%	41%	37%	32%	33%
Mostly on-site	52%	44%	55%	44%	53%	40%	54%	57%	63%	56%



Kathryn Britten

Partner and Managing Director,
AlixPartners

The future for female leaders

Expecting more disruption on the horizon than their male counterparts, female business leaders demonstrate a remarkable ability to look beyond the challenges disruption presents and seize the opportunities. The findings in our report show that female leaders are not only more positive about disruption, but they are also confident in their capacity to steer their companies through it.

Of course, this may be because female leaders see disruption as a catalyst for needed change. A chance to rewrite the rules, challenge the status quo, and dismantle long-standing barriers. This mindset is particularly evident in how female leaders perceive the megatrends that could reshape our world, including in regulation, policy, geopolitics, social concerns, and elections across the globe this year. Female leaders see more opportunities in these areas than male leaders, recognising the potential for innovation and positive progress.

This resilient outlook may also stem from their personal journeys. Many female leaders will have had to overcome considerable obstacles to reach senior positions in predominantly male-dominated business environments. Their adaptability will have been honed through these experiences, making them well-equipped to handle uncertainties, identify and grasp opportunities, and overcome the persistent obstacles still present in the business landscape today.

Another distinguishing factor is female leaders' tendency to seek more support from personal and professional advisors. This approach provides validation – and enrichment – of their ideas, fostering a culture of collaboration, cooperation, and shared success. And by leveraging diverse perspectives, female leaders can devise more comprehensive strategies to address complex challenges.

For women in business, I consider these findings to be inspiring and empowering. They serve as a reminder that challenges are often opportunities in disguise, and that an optimistic outlook, coupled with resilience and adaptability, is key to successfully navigating an unpredictable world.

In seeking to shape a more inclusive business world, these findings strengthen the call to recognise and leverage the strengths and perspectives that women in leadership roles bring to the top table.

Appendix

AlixPartners' Disruption Index 2024: Gender insights

3,000 business executives in 9 countries:

U.S., Canada, U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, China, Japan

Across 10 industries:

Aerospace & Defence, Automotive, Consumer Products, Energy, Financial Services, Healthcare & Life Sciences, Media & Entertainment, Retail, Technology, Telecom & Cable

Global business executives:

3,000 total

300 per industry

200-600+ per country

Ages 25-65

Director level or above (50% at C-level)

Company revenue of \$100 million+
(50% from companies \$1bn+)

Have insight into disruption trends facing their industry

Do these disruptive forces pose an opportunity or a threat for your company over the next 12 months?

	% more female leaders than male leaders saying "opportunity"	Female leaders saying "opportunity"	Male leaders saying "opportunity"
Regulation, policy, or geopolitics	19%	51%	43%
Social concerns	15%	45%	39%
Presidential / government elections	14%	40%	35%
Protectionism, tariffs and deglobalisation trends	12%	48%	43%
Data privacy and cybersecurity-related issues	12%	55%	49%
Significant change in Asia and other emerging markets	11%	50%	45%
Interest rates and the inflationary environment	11%	42%	38%
Environmental concerns	10%	45%	41%
Connective technology infrastructure	6%	67%	63%
Changing customer behaviours	6%	55%	52%
Ageing populations	5%	40%	38%
Technological advances in materials and processes	4%	70%	67%
Major shifts in income distribution	2%	47%	46%
New or evolving competition or business models	2%	59%	58%
AI / Automation / Robotics	0%	67%	67%

About us

For more than 40 years, AlixPartners has helped businesses around the world respond quickly and decisively to their most critical challenges – circumstances as diverse as urgent performance improvement, accelerated transformation, complex restructuring and risk mitigation.

These are the moments when everything is on the line – a sudden shift in the market, an unexpected performance decline, a time-sensitive deal, a fork-in-the-road decision. But it's not what we do that makes a difference, it's how we do it.

Tackling situations when time is of the essence is part of our DNA – so we adopt an action-oriented approach at all times. We work in small, highly qualified teams with specific industry and functional expertise, and we operate at pace, moving quickly from analysis to implementation. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our clients until the job is done, and only measure our success in terms of the results we deliver.

Our approach enables us to help our clients confront and overcome truly future-defining challenges. We partner with you to make the right decisions and take the right actions. And we are right by your side. When it really matters.

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