

Addressing Menopause In the Workplace

● Companies can better retain female leaders by reducing the taboos around this natural phase of life

Tracy Gardner was in her late 40s when she began to feel unwell. Gardner, who at the time was president of J.Crew International Inc., recalls enduring intense hot flashes while she chaired packed meetings at the apparel maker. “I felt like I was living that scene in *Broadcast News*, where Albert Brooks’s character is sweating uncontrollably, soaking through his clothes on air during a news segment,” says Gardner, now 59, who works as a board director and executive adviser. “It was as if overnight, everything changed.” The shift was physical, mental and emotional, she says.

Gardner didn’t realize it right away, but she was heading toward menopause, defined as the phase after 12 consecutive months without a period. More specifically, she was experiencing perimenopause, the lead-up to a person’s final menstrual period in which the symptoms often associated with

menopause begin. Typically starting in someone’s mid- to late 40s and lasting seven to nine years, the symptoms can include hot flashes, erratic and sometimes heavy periods (known as flooding), night sweats, body aches, energy decline, brain fog, mood changes, sexual dysfunction and, most precarious to long-term health, significant sleep disruption. Any combination of them can harm self-confidence, memory and mental health.

By 2025 the number of postmenopausal women globally is expected to rise to 1.1 billion, according to the North American Menopause Society. An historical taboo around speaking about perimenopause and menopause—especially in the workplace—as well as a pronounced knowledge gap within society and among clinicians mean many sufferers don’t attribute their experience to this natural phase of life and struggle to cope.



“When I was going through it, no one spoke about menopause, and I hadn’t even heard the word ‘perimenopause,’ not even in private,” Gardner says, adding that because people’s symptoms can vary in number and severity, it was hard to unpack what was happening. “But I knew that I didn’t feel at the top of my game, and I didn’t love the exhausted person that was left for my family at the end of the day.”

To protect her mental health and establish a greater work-life balance while she was raising two young children, Gardner stepped down from her position at J.Crew in mid-2010, leaving behind a lot of money and a lot of perplexed peers. “I kept hearing, ‘Why would you give this up?’” she says. “All I could say was, ‘I hit a wall. I needed to shift things around, create boundaries.’”

Menopause often occurs right as women are moving into senior or executive leadership roles while simultaneously raising children, caring for elderly parents and potentially facing ageism. The corporate world isn’t the most hospitable place to navigate what can feel like a second puberty, says Michelle Jacobs, a co-founder and chief operating officer of Womaness, a brand of personal-care products and supplements targeted at alleviating menopause symptoms. “Like pregnancy, menopause can be difficult water to tread while working in environments with a lot of men, where you simply can’t say you’re falling apart, where women are often phased out, their work made invisible, even in their late 40s,” Jacobs says. “I don’t have one friend in their 50s who has remained in their corporate jobs. These are women who have run companies, but they’re all doing other things now—sitting on boards, starting businesses and usually working from home.”

Not everyone is in a financial position to shift gears this way, and those who don’t entirely leave the corporate scene because of perimenopause and menopause symptoms may struggle in silence. A study released by the Mayo Clinic in April found that of the 4,400 women age 45 to 60 it surveyed, 13% had experienced challenges at work related to menopause symptoms, and about 11% had missed workdays because of those symptoms. While more research is needed among a broader and more diverse sample, “The odds of having an adverse outcome due to menopause symptoms is approximately three times higher for Black women,” says Ekta Kapoor, assistant director of Mayo Clinic Women’s Health and the report’s senior author. And the annual cost to the US economy of all these missed days of work? Upwards of \$1.8 billion, according to the report.

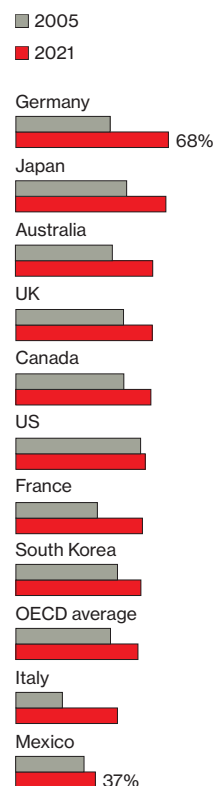
A separate assessment conducted by Elektra Health, a telemedicine startup for menopause care based in New York, found that 20% of women surveyed had left or were considering leaving a job because of menopause symptoms. A further 18% had forgone pursuing promotions as a result of them, and 44% felt they didn’t have enough support from their employers.

These studies come at a time when there’s been increasing coverage about perimenopause and menopause in mainstream media. Celebrities including Michelle Obama and Drew Barrymore have spoken about their experiences, and a growing crop of female-led startups is working to shake off the taboos while cashing in on what is shaping up to be a \$15 billion industry for menopause-related products.

While the narrative might finally be starting to shift more broadly, the issue is hardly discussed in the workplace. That’s starting to change in the UK, where the government recently appointed its first Menopause Employment Champion to generate greater awareness and promote the business benefits to supporting menopausal employees who stay in the workplace. Lee Chambers, the British business psychologist who leads Essentialise Workplace Wellbeing, has made it his mission to normalize menopause in business by helping companies implement strategies, run workshops and inclusion training programs, and encourage male allyship. “It’s a real hormonal journey that men don’t have a reference point for, but because the workplace has been built by men, for men, there is no consideration for this experience,” Chambers says.

The idea of paid menopause leave has been discussed in the UK and Australia, but some, including the Womaness founders, wonder if such a policy might risk further stigmatizing sufferers—particularly if there isn’t enough awareness within a company about the matter. “It certainly helps when there are women at the top of a company or team who are open about what they’re going through, but it’s unrealistic to expect everyone to feel comfortable doing so,” says Sally Mueller, Womaness co-founder and chief executive officer, who adds that women need to better recognize their symptoms and realize that there are products and therapies that can help. “From the workplace, I think they need compassion, safe spaces and flexibility in working hours,” she says. “A little in this journey can go a long way.” —*Lindsey Tramuta*

▼ Labor force participation rate for women age 55-64



THE BOTTOM LINE A lack of awareness and supportive policies regarding menopause in the workplace is causing women to step back from senior roles, costing the economy.