The Female Compiler Phenomenon:
Women Choosing Invisible Roles in Small Groups

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Gender in the Workplace Research Competition
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Does the Female Compiler phenomenon exist?

What is the motivation of Female Compilers?

What is the impact on women who take on the Compiler role?
The Compiler phenomenon exists and can make women’s contributions go unnoticed.

**Phenomenon:**
- In the MBA environment – and in the business world – women overwhelmingly take on the Compiler role.

**Motivation:**
- Women choose team roles based on where they believe they can *add the most value*. Focus group and executive interviews revealed additional explanations.

**Impact:**
- MBAs associate the Compiler role with *positive attributes but do not see it as critical to team success*. Executives believe this role is *nuanced*. Compilers contribute to organizational success, but women in this role must *flex additional skills*.
Research methodology included four key data sources:

**Primary Research Survey**
Online survey of 239 individuals including MBA students and professionals

**Focus Groups**
Four single-sex focus groups with current MBA students

**Executive Interviews**
In-person and phone interviews with nine executives, including men and women

**Literature Review**
Current research on gender, leadership and team dynamics
Women play the Compiler role almost five times more frequently than men.

Role Most Often Played in Small Group Projects

n = 184

- Male
  - Compiler: 4%
  - Operational Leader / Project Manager: 36%
  - Thought Leader / Strategic Direction Manager: 41%
  - Other: 19%

- Female
  - Compiler: 19%
  - Operational Leader / Project Manager: 31%
  - Thought Leader / Strategic Direction Manager: 16%
  - Other: 34%
However, the Compiler is not valued for contributions to team success

Which role is most important to team success?

n = 184

- Thought Leader: 41% Male, 32% Female
- Presenter: 5% Male, 6% Female
- Subject Matter Expert: 7% Male, 6% Female
- Operational Leader: 22% Male, 31% Female
- Drafter: 4% Male, 10% Female
- Data Analyst: 10% Male, 9% Female
- Compiler: 6% Male, 11% Female
Both men and women choose roles where they can add the most value.

Why do you choose the role you most often play in small groups?

n = 184

- Add most value: 68% (Male), 67% (Female)
- No one else will: 18% (Male), 21% (Female)
- External pressure: 2% (Male), 7% (Female)
- Other: 12% (Male), 6% (Female)
However, executives offered a more nuanced perspective on motivation:

"Women play this role more and I feel like I can count on women more than men to get the job done. Women are more detail oriented, conscientious, and really try to understand the needs of the client - in this regard they are much better than men."

- Male executive comment
MBA focus groups also revealed mixed reactions to the Compiler role.

Focus Group Video – YouTube

Focus Group Video – Mobile Me
Mixed research results leave the door open for positive implications.

Positive Considerations
- Compiler skills universally valued by executives
- Organizational skills can be critical to promotability
- Opportunity to showcase skills in project work

Negative Considerations
- Detracts from time spent on higher value, strategic activities
- Visibility varies, especially visibility to executives
- Can become seen as “doer” not strategic thinker

To increase promotability, or to increase perceived value to a small team, Female Compilers must **showcase their skills and abilities, push their thoughts forward, and “step into the spotlight”** to add value, not just passively or invisibly shape the project.
This gender phenomenon exists and has potential implications in the workplace.

**Phenomenon:**
- In the MBA environment – and in the business world – women overwhelmingly take on the Compiler role.

**Motivation:**
- Women choose team roles based on where they believe they can add the most value. Focus group and executive interviews revealed additional explanations.

**Impact:**
- MBAs associate the Compiler role with positive attributes but do not see it as critical to team success. Executives believe this role is nuanced. Compilers contribute to organizational success, but women in this role must flex additional skills.
Recommendations for women in MBA programs and in the workplace

MBA Students

- Define team roles, flex your style and take on different roles when working in small teams.

MBA Programs

- Incorporate these findings on team dynamics into the MBA Orientation and curriculum where applicable; provide forums for students to provide peer feedback.

The Workplace

- Provide mentorship opportunities and leadership development training that help employees flex their style and prevent getting “stuck” in certain roles.
Deeper Motivation
Respondent Demographics

Are You a Current MBA Student? (n = 237)

- Yes: 87%
- No: 13%

Survey Participants by Gender (n = 237)

- Female: 45%
- Male: 55%
Most Important Role to Team Success: MBAs vs. Professionals

"Most Important" Role to Team Success (Professionals Only)

- Thought Leader: 35%
- SME: 9%
- Presenter: 13%
- Ops Leader: 22%
- Drafter: 17%
- Data Analyst: 4%
- Compiler: 13%

"Most Important" Role to Team Success (MBA Student Only)

- Thought Leader: 31%
- SME: 5%
- Presenter: 6%
- Ops Leader: 5%
- Drafter: 8%
- Data Analyst: 11%
- Compiler: 8%

Professionals: n = 31 (23 women, 8 men)
MBA Students: n = 152 (66 women, 86 men)
Women are playing “COO” roles, men are playing “CEO” roles in group projects.

55% of respondents said that a woman played the compiler role in their last group project. Women are also more often the Ops Leader and Drafter.

61% reported that a man was the group data analyst. Men are also more often the Thought Leader and SME.
Motivation by Team Role

Why do you choose the role you most often play in group projects?

- Thought Leader: I can add the most value
- SME: I feel external pressure
- Presenter: No one else will do it
- Ops Leader: I can add the most value
- Drafter: I feel external pressure
- Data analyst: No one else will do it
- Compiler: I feel external pressure

Bar chart showing the percentage of participants who choose each role based on the given motivations.
Motivation by Team Role: Write-in Responses

**Female**
- Lack of confidence in data analysis skills
- Desire to ensure team meets goals
- Desire to ensure quality communications
- Belief that role highlights creative and problem-solving strengths

**Male**
- Fits personality
- “No-one else wants to do it, and I don’t mind.”
Women are less tolerant of risk

How Would You Describe Your Level of Risk Tolerance?

Male Mean: 2.7
Female Mean: 3.34
Women are less tolerant of risk across all team roles.

How Would You Describe Your Level of Risk Tolerance?

- Not Tolerant of Risk
- Very Tolerant of Risk

Roles:
- Compiler
- Data analyst
- Drafter
- Ops Leader (Project Manager)
- Presenter
- SME
- Thought Leader

Female
Male
Women desire more control over group projects

What Level of Control Do You Want Over A Group Project?

- Female Mean: 1.99
- Male Mean: 2.28

1 - very high level of control
2
3
4
5 - no desire for control

Female
Male
Women also desire a greater level of control in group projects.

Data Analysts (Male and Female) desire greatest level of Control in group projects. ‘Female Compilers’ rank third in desire for control.
Compiler is linked to positive attributes, but potentially invisible or negative impact

- “Some people prefer ‘front stage’ roles and some prefer ‘back stage’ roles, the Compiler is a ‘back stage’ role”.
  - Male focus group comment

- “When done well, this role is invisible.”
  - Executive comment

- “At first I didn’t mind being the Compiler for my all-male group; I liked to see how everything came together. Over time, I felt like the group’s attitude was: You don’t understand things as well – so you should be the Compiler.”
  - Female focus group comment

Top Five Adjectives to Describe the Compiler:

1. Detail oriented
2. Organized
3. Team player
4. Perfectionist
5. Analytical
**Small Team:** A team that is formed to accomplish a single, non-repeatable purpose, and in which team member roles are not dictated or defined by organizational titles or hierarchies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compiler</td>
<td>responsible for assembling others' work into the final deliverable; may include formatting, editing, ‘word-smithing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analyst</td>
<td>responsible for research, number crunching, and other analysis tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafter</td>
<td>responsible for developing sections of final deliverable, including written deliverable and PowerPoint slides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenter</td>
<td>responsible for communicating final deliverable to live audience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operational Leader / Project Manager</td>
<td>responsible for keeping the group on track and assignments completed on time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought Leader / Strategic Direction Manager</td>
<td>responsible for overarching strategic direction and ideation of group project</td>
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### Additional Survey Attributes For Compiler

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive (but not selected)</th>
<th>Negative (but not selected)</th>
<th>Write-In Responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Analytical</td>
<td>• Micro-manager</td>
<td>• Conciliatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creative</td>
<td>• Push-over</td>
<td>• Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strategic</td>
<td>• Controlling</td>
<td>• Thorough</td>
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Insights from Secondary Research

- **Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership** (Eagly and Carli, 2007, HBS). Female leadership styles tend to favor guiding projects “behind the scenes” or “invisibly” – potentially at the expense of the C-suite.

- **Do Women Lack Ambition?** (Fels, 2004, HBS). Successful women tend to minimize both their accomplishments and their progression to success.

- **The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why** (Tannen, D., 1995, HBS). Linguistic norms can prevent women from being “heard” in the workplace. Teams may also pose a challenge for women owning recognition: “when ideas are generated in the privacy of team, the outcome of the team’s effort may become associated with the person most vocal about the results”.

- **Ways Women Lead** (Rosener, J., 1990, HBS). Women favor “participatory” leadership style which can result in being more easily challenged, or appearing weak by subordinates.
Next Steps

Raise Awareness
- Personal Networks
- Club Affiliations
- Academic & Workplace Settings

Institutionalize Training
- MBA orientation
- Faculty education
- Mentorship programs