



THE FEMALE COMPILER PHENOMENON: WOMEN CHOOSING CRITICAL, BUT INVISIBLE ROLES IN SMALL GROUPS

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Executive Summary

Our research study seeks to understand how the interaction of small-team dynamics and female leadership traits promotes or inhibits women's success in the workplace. The genesis of this research project began as many business ideas do, over coffee in a break room. During casual conversations, several female MBA students complained that they often feel like their small group's secretary. When completing assignments in small groups, which usually include several men and one woman, in most cases the woman assumed responsibility for compiling the group's deliverable before it was turned in. The goal of our study is threefold: 1) to understand whether this anecdotal phenomenon actually exists, 2) if so, why women assume the Compiler role, and 3) what are the potential consequences of consistently playing the Compiler. Our research findings indicate:

- **Phenomenon:** In the MBA environment – and in the business world – women overwhelmingly take on the Compiler role.
- **Motivation:** Female survey respondents claimed to choose team roles, including the Compiler role, based on where they believe they can **add the most value**. However, focus groups and executive interviews revealed additional explanations to why people choose team roles, such as need for control, risk aversion, and need to be liked.
- **Impact:** MBAs associate the Compiler role with **positive attributes** (detail oriented, team player) **but do not see it as critical to team success**. Executives believe this role is **nuanced**: Compiler contributions are critical to organizational success, but women in this role must **flex additional skills** to reach senior management.

Compiler Defined: For the purpose of this research we defined the Compiler as the person responsible for assembling others' work into the final deliverable, whose tasks may include formatting, editing, or 'word-smithing'

Methodology

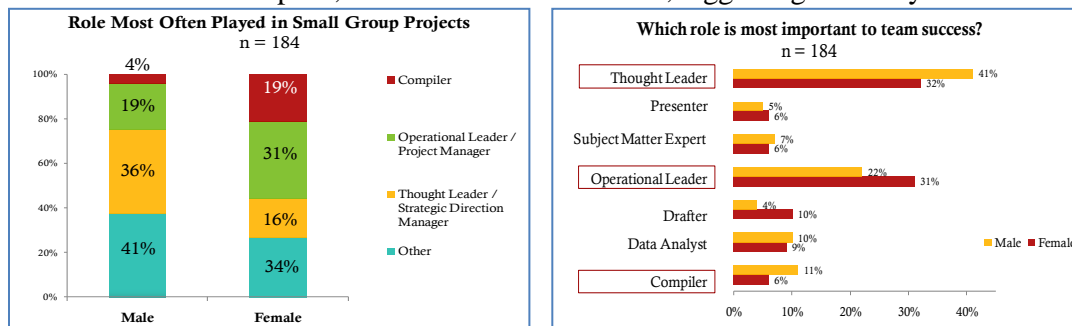
We conducted primary research using three distinct tools: online surveys, focus groups, and executive interviews. To quantify perceptions of gender roles on small teams, we surveyed 239 individuals including MBA students (full-time and part-time) as well as professionals. We then conducted 4 single-sex focus groups with current full-time MBA students to support survey data trends with qualitative elements. Additionally, we conducted in-person and phone interviews with 9 executives to understand executives' perceptions of gender and small team dynamics and determine the impact being a Compiler has on promotability.

Analysis

Our research demonstrated clearly that, in both the MBA environment and the business world, **the female Compiler phenomenon does indeed exist**. According to our survey data, when asked what role you most often play in small group projects, women report playing the Compiler role almost five times more frequently than men, 19% to 4%, respectively. Men report playing the Thought Leader role more than twice as often as women, 36% to 16%, respectively. Interestingly, women report playing the Operational Leader or Project Manger role more often than men, 31% to 19%, respectively, as well. The remaining 41% of male and 34% of female respondents report playing other roles, including data analyst, drafter, presenter, and subject matter expert.

Our research did not identify one single motivating factor explaining the phenomenon. Over two-thirds of both men and women appear to choose their small group roles based on where they think they can add the most value. Focus groups and executive interviews also pointed to well-known gender stereotypes related to control, risk aversion, and needing to be liked to explain individual motivations for taking on the Compiler role. One executive implied that women are simply better at that type of role stating, “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.”

Additionally, our research indicated that **the Compiler is considered much less critical to team success than other roles**; therefore, women’s contributions to small groups can go unnoticed. When asked which role is most important to team success, both men selected Thought Leader and women selected the Operational Leader. The Compiler, while not the least critical, lagged significantly behind the other roles.



Our survey revealed that the top five adjectives used to describe the Compiler are detail oriented, organized, team player, perfectionist, and analytical. These positive attributes, however, are offset by a sense that the Compiler’s contributions are often invisible, resulting in an overall negative impact from taking the role. One female focus group respondent observed that over time she got the feeling her group didn’t think she understood the substance of their projects and felt compelled to continue as the team Compiler. Some even described the Compiler role as a way to avoid “real work”. Executives identified similar positive and negative implications of being the Compiler, but overall stressed that to increase promotability and perceived organizational value, one must showcase other skills and abilities and step into the spotlight to add value, and not just passively or invisibly shape a project.

Recommendations & Next Steps

In conclusion, there are many potential extensions for our research, and we hope students, MBA programs, and the workplace more broadly will consider the following recommendations. Students working in small groups should try and define team roles, and then rotate through them, ensuring all participants have an opportunity to flex their style and practice leading in the risk-free school environment. MBA programs, including administrators and faculty, should be aware of the Compiler phenomenon and work to educate incoming students about team dynamics and create opportunities for all students to take on various roles. Finally, in the workplace, individuals must be wary of getting stuck in certain roles that are perceived to be less valuable or critical to overall success, and seek out mentorship and leadership development opportunities to improve promotability.