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59% of St. Louis women leaders have considered leaving their organization over an unclear path to leadership

Research by TEMPO St. Louis and Washington University-Olin Business School finds that among women without a clear path to advancement, 26% are weighing an exit right now and 39% of all respondents have considered leaving the region. St. Louis women leaders from diverse industries participated in the "Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience" survey ahead of a Nov. 18 public convening.

ST. LOUIS — St. Louis women don't lack ambition. They lack a map. That is the central finding of *Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience*, new research released today by TEMPO STL in partnership with Washington University in St. Louis Olin Business School.

The survey of 120 women across C-suite, executive, senior and mid-level roles found one factor that sharply separates the women who stay from the women who go. Among women who don't see a clear path to advancement, 26% are considering leaving their organization right now. Among women who do see that path, just 2% are.

"This data tells us something employers can act on tomorrow. Women in St. Louis are ready to advance and lead. When organizations give them a clear path, a sponsor and fair recognition, they stay. When they don't, they look for other opportunities, and 39% have already considered leaving the region entirely. These findings point to a question of regional competitiveness, and St. Louis employers have the power to answer it together," said Jennifer Dirks, President and CEO of TEMPO.

A region at risk of losing its leaders

The findings point to a talent drain that reaches beyond individual companies:

- 39% have considered leaving the St. Louis region to advance their careers. Written answers point to closed, long-standing networks and few local headquarters.
- 71% of women ages 45 to 54, the largest group surveyed and women in their peak leadership years, have considered leaving their organization, while27% are considering leaving now.
- 88% of women who don't feel recognized have considered leaving.
- 44% have held back from pursuing a promotion because of barriers or lack of support.

"The biggest barrier facing women leaders in St. Louis is the region's tightly knit, relationship-driven business culture, where long-standing (and largely male) networks still decide who gets sponsored, recommended for board seats, and tapped for top roles, often before a formal opening ever exists," wrote one executive respondent.

Ambition is high. Structure is missing.

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents feel encouraged to take on stretch assignments, and 86% say targeted leadership development would make them more likely to pursue advancement. But only 39% see a clear path forward, and only 38% say they are provided with sponsors. Just 6% strongly agree that a clear path exists.

Compared with their male peers, 62% of women say they receive less manager support, sponsorship, visibility or recognition. Visibility is the widest gap, at 43%. And 89% say their gender has limited their opportunities at least some of the time.

Overall, managing work-life demands are the top barrier to advancement (49%), and burnout is the top personal reason women hesitate to step up (39%). A third (34%) disagree that senior roles in their organization fit a sustainable personal life.

What would change the equation

The research names clear levers. **92% say compensation equity would influence their decision to pursue advancement,** the strongest factor measured. Leadership development, transparent promotion criteria and flexible work follow.

"*STOP relying on mentorship without sponsorship*," one C-suite respondent wrote. "*START making sponsorship an executive responsibility."*

"TEMPO is a data-driven collective voice for women leaders, and this research gives the region a starting line. The three supports that can help companies retain female talent — a clear path forward, a sponsor and fair recognition — are within every employer's reach. We want to work with St. Louis business leaders to put them in place," said Dirks.

"Through our work at Olin, we help women professionals build the knowledge, skills and relationships to advance throughout their careers, while preparing the next generation of women leaders," said Gisele Marcus, professor of practice in organizational behavior at Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis. "Our partnership with TEMPO helps us better understand the barriers women face and informs how we prepare both women and the organizations they will lead to create greater opportunities for advancement."

Key findings at a glance

Finding	Result
Considering leaving now: no clear path vs. clear path	26% vs. 2%
Have considered leaving their organization over no clear path to leadership	59%
Have considered leaving the St. Louis region to advance at some point	39%

Finding	Result
See a clear path to advancement	39%
Provided with sponsors	38%
Get less visibility for promotion than male peers	43%
Say compensation equity would influence them to advance	92%
Say leadership development would make them more likely to advance	86%

Join the conversation Nov. 18

TEMPO STL will convene business and community leaders on Wednesday, Nov. 18, 2026, to discuss the findings, practical solutions and shared accountability for advancing and retaining women leaders across the region. The event is open to the public.

Register: Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience

Date: Wednesday, November 18, 2026
Time: 4:00-6:00 PM

Location: Washington University | Emerson Auditorium – Olin Business School – Knight Hall

The full report is available at [link].

About the research

Voices of Women at Work: The St. Louis Experience surveyed 120 women in executive, C-suite, senior and mid-level roles across the St. Louis region from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, 2026, in partnership with Washington University in St. Louis Olin Business School. Most respondents are not TEMPO members, so the results reach beyond TEMPO's network. The St. Louis study follows *Voices of Women at Work: The Milwaukee Experience* conducted earlier this year and is part of TEMPO's commitment to being a data-driven voice on the issues shaping women's professional lives.

ABOUT TEMPO

TEMPO is a network of more than 500 executive women and nearly 300 emerging women leaders who have spoken up, risen above and defied conventions to succeed. Its mission is to further the impact of women leaders. TEMPO serves its diverse membership of executive, senior, and C-suite leaders through educational programming and professional development, networking opportunities, relationship building, and mentoring, with the goal of empowering women to achieve and sustain leadership roles. TEMPO's Emerging Women Leaders group represents the future generation of the organization. In September 2026, TEMPO, based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, expanded its impact with the launch of a chapter in St. Louis, connecting women leaders across both communities. For more information on TEMPO visit www.tempowomen.org.

ABOUT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Washington University in St. Louis is home to Olin Business School, where rigorous decision-making and a commitment to personal and societal values are central to developing leaders. With a history dating back to 1917, Olin prepares leaders to navigate complex challenges, make difficult decisions, and see them through. Through research, education, and innovation, Olin's faculty, students, and alumni contribute to meaningful impact on business and society.

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