Sometimes perception is stronger than reality. Ask most people if women are prominent players in businesses, and you'll get something akin to a shrug, if not an outright thumbs down. And yet women are playing an increasingly potent role in the business world. While the gender gap in wages remains, and while the number of Fortune 500 board seats held by women is still a fraction of those held by men, women are finding fewer barriers keeping them from heading companies.

South Florida is no exception when it comes to progress. Without the entrenched, centuries-old business networks of many other areas, newcomers of any sort have always found the highest reaches of power to be accessible. The unusually diverse makeup of the business world here has led to a tradition of acceptance for different cultures and sexual orientations.

"We do not see those barriers [in South Florida]. There is more focus than ever on having diverse slates of candidates, which includes women," says Bonnie Crabtree, managing director of the Florida office for executive search firm Korn/Ferry International. "It's a very positive environment for women in business at all levels." Crabtree finds this to be the case not only with local domestic clients, but also with Latin American companies. "As we do work in Latin America and South America, we are starting to receive more and more requests for, and openness for, senior women in business," she says.

One indicator of progress has been the quantity of court cases related to gender bias, which has fallen off substantially in recent years, say lawyers. "We still do see gender-based claims and claims based on equal pay allegations, but those have dramatically declined, as have the classic qui pro quo harassment cases," says employment attorney Lori A. Brown, managing shareholder of the Miami office of Littler Mendelson. They have been replaced with individuals' biases, or with policies and practices that unintentionally discriminate.

In fact, South Florida's international, multicultural business climate has proven advantageous for many women. "Women listen more than men," says Beatrice Rangel, senior advisor to the chairman of Miami-based Cisneros Group of Companies. "When you are dealing with a multicultural world, you have to listen a lot and pay attention to nuances. That facilitates further communications." Susan Kelley, president of marketing firm Kelley Swofford Roy and a board member of the World Trade Center Miami – as well as honorary consul of Finland – has numerous international clients, and finds the same advantage. "Patience and listening is an attribute of women that can be very helpful, and that may be why there are so many women in the communications area," she says.

In other ways as well, many women feel their gender has been an asset to their work. "I think women have a huge advantage in the workplace, especially smart women who know how to use their femininity appropriately," says Cori Zywowot Rice, president of Miami public relations firm Hill & Knowlton/SAMCOR. Before starting her own firm in 1996 (which she later sold to Hill & Knowlton), Zywowot Rice was head of global communications at Burger King, with a spot on its executive committee. "At BK, I broke the glass ceiling," she says – and never felt her gender was a disadvantage, even if she was often the only woman in the room at executive meetings. "The bottom line is that if you're a smart woman who performs in a business world that is predominantly male, you have an advantage, because most men basically like women," she says.

While Rangel agrees, she adds a cautionary note. "Of course, it all depends on how you handle your first encounter. [Men] will try to flirt with you, and if you follow the flirt, then you're done," she says. "However, if you tell them from the outset of the exercise that this is business and professional, then they follow suit. ... And once you earn their respect, it lasts for many many years."
That sense of respect is especially apparent in the growing number of women promoted to positions of responsibility. Simply put, when senior executive positions need to be filled, companies no longer seek only men. "I think that today businesses are under such pressure to perform, they can't afford to do anything but get the best talent they can," says Joyce Elam, executive dean of Florida International University's College of Business Administration. In fact, while there is no causality in the connection, a recent study by New York-based Catalyst — an advocacy group for women in business — shows that companies with the highest representation of women in top management substantially outperform companies with the lowest representation of women.

"The corporate world has no choice but to change," says Pat Moran, who retired last year as CEO of Deerfield Beach-based automotive giant JM Family Enterprises, and remains chairman of the company.

"I think that today, businesses are under such pressure to perform, they can't afford to do anything but get the best talent."

— JOYCE ELAM, EXECUTIVE DEAN OF THE FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

"Companies that embrace diversity are those that are going to be successful."

One example of the sea change in attitudes about gender came in the legal world. A decade ago, when the government began requiring women and minorities in the corporations it contracted with, many Fortune 500 companies increased their roster of female employees. Those employees, in turn, began looking for diversity among their suppliers.

It was an opportunity that attorney Mel Maguire, now a senior partner with Steel Hector & Davis in Miami, took advantage of. As more companies hired female attorneys for their in-house counsel, those attorneys wanted more female lawyers in their outside firms. But outside law firms kept sending men to get the business. "The law firms didn't catch on," says Maguire. "It was a lot of cluelessness, even when confronted with the fact that they were going to lose clients. My view was that this was an opportunity."

Then with Holland & Knight's Miami office, Maguire organized the firm's female attorneys to go out and win that business. It was part of a women's initiative she founded at the firm, an initiative focused on mentoring women to become "rainmakers" rather than just part of the system. "When I started practicing law 17 years ago, women pretty much were invisible in the firm. A lot has changed," she says. It's similar to the work done by such companies as JM Family, with programs for formal mentoring, management certifications and leadership development, and Deerfield-based Office Depot, which reaches out to both female employees and female business owners (who are potential customers) with various leadership development programs, conferences and management scholarships.

The Question of Size

While tremendous strides have been made in changing attitudes about women in the workplace, South Florida still falls short when it comes to the number of female running corporations.

Lynne Wines, president and CEO of Sunrise-based Union Bank, is one of the few women at the helm of a large public company in South Florida. When she took over as CEO four years ago (after 14 years with the company, beginning as the controller), Wines says there were a few eyebrows raised, more than just a new CEO would get. "I think that the sense of 'Wow, a female CEO,' which was so unique and unheard-of, added another layer of concern about the change," she says. She feels, however, that her performance—raising assets from $250 million when she took over to nearly $1 billion today—quickly made it a non-issue. And Wines expects to see more women following in her footsteps. "There are fewer women (in banking as CEOs) only because it takes time to move up the ranks. There needs to be an atmosphere of inclusiveness and welcoming women's contributions. And there is today, much more than there used to be," she says.

In the meantime, it is in the arena of small business where women in South Florida have an enormous foothold. According to The Center for Women's Business Research, more than 150,000 businesses in the tri-county area are majority owned by women. Depending on which county you're talking about, that represents 26 percent to 29 percent of the total number of privately owned companies in South Florida. The problem is, however, that fewer of these business go on to become large corporations than do male-owned firms—a phenomenon that has prompted Office Depot to focus its programs on helping women grow their businesses. It's an area that needs attention, and one that is still poorly understood, with explanatory theories ranging from women's aversion to risk to women's aversion to asking for things that they need to expand their businesses.

"Women aren't as willing to go out and talk to banks and ask for money. I, for one, was one of those," says Annette Taddeo, president and CEO of Miami-based language services provider Language-Speak, who is also on the national forum of the

"I've never really had the experience of being a woman playing a role in anything I've chosen to do."

— MELANIE MUSS, VICE PRESIDENT OF DEVELOPMENT, FONTAINEBLEAU HILTON RESORT
Women’s Business Enterprise Council. “Men look at money as a problem — if I lose it, so what? Women are much more careful.” Also, says Taddeo, it is still harder for women to get those loans. “Things are changing, but it is definitely not par to par,” she says.

In the venture capital arena, the issue hasn’t been gender barriers, but rather reluctance among women to look for funding, says Jeanne A. Becker, president of Coral Gables-based Becker Public Relations and executive director of the Florida Venture Forum from 1990 to 2003. “For women with the right management experience, there are tremendous opportunities today,” she says. “The capital markets are opening up and VCs have more venture capital to invest.” Becker says fewer than 10 percent of the presenters at the organization’s annual Venture Capital Conference are women. She speculates that perhaps women do not think big enough, or do not have the right mentors to help them build their businesses.

Lois Silverman, founder and chairperson of The Commonwealth Institute (TCI), a women’s business development organization based in Boston and Miami, agrees. “Women tend to be more cautious. They think they can do it themselves. They’re not looking at all of the huge growth men may be looking at,” she says. “Traditionally, their access to capital has not been very easy, so they’re not attuned to what may be out there. The other thing is that leaving the corporate world or working for an employer has given them some control over their lives. Seeking funding is an element of giving up control again.”

>> Issues That Remain

While it is becoming increasingly rare in South Florida, the phenomenon of gender discrimination is still something women experience. “It’s not that you’re never going to run into it. You will, but it’s becoming more of an individual thing than a system-wide issue,” says Peggy Nordeen, president and co-founder of Fort Lauderdale-based marketing communications firm Starmark International.

Today, such discrimination is far more subtle than it was 20, or even 10, years ago. “I talk to women lawyers or women in positions of leadership and I say to them, ‘Is there still a glass ceiling?’ And they say they have never experienced it,” says Caryn Carvo, president of law firm Carvo & Emery P.A., and former chairperson of Broward’s Women’s Council of Commerce (now part of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce).

“You look around and you say to yourself, ‘Well, the opportunities at hand aren’t interesting enough. ... Maybe your own vision produces more of an inspiration.”

— SUSAN KELLEY, PRESIDENT OF KELLEY Swofford ROY

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<th>% of Total Private Companies</th>
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Source: Center for Women’s Business Research. / * Majority owned, privately-held

Because such gender inequities may be unintentional or subliminal, they can be harder to confront. “If a woman is making more than she ever thought she would, she’s not pushing to see if the guy doing the job next to her, who is more mediocre, is making more,” Carvo points out.

There is also the hurdle of familiarity, with its resultant “old boys” network. Simply put, it is often easier for men to get to know other men, and for women to get to know other women. “For networking and things like that, I think women have more things in common to talk about. With women, it’s easier,” says Lexi Segre, president of Miami’s Organization of Women in International Trade, and principal of Axis Advertising. “I think men probably find the same thing. They feel more comfortable talking with other men.”

The result, though, can be a lack of high-profile projects for women. “I don’t feel there is an active prejudice among men,” Elam says. “I don’t think it’s on purpose. When a project comes along, it may simply be a matter of recommending the personnel you’re familiar with.”

Women have responded to those types of
continued from page 24
done,” Nordeen agrees. “Men like to do a lot of the deep sea fishing and the golf, and those are reasons why I got into the golf and the deep sea fishing,” she says.

“If a woman is making more than she ever thought she would, she’s not pushing to see if the guy next to her, who is more mediocre, is making more.”

— CARYN CARVO, PRESIDENT OF CARVO & EMMERY P.A.

Other women, confronted with a sense of being left out, have done the same thing as men who encounter career frustrations: they started their own firms.

Aida Levitan left a job as the City of Miami’s director of information and visitors to open a public relations firm (a precurso to advertising agency Sanchez & Levitan, which she recently merged with Bromley Communications). “Frankly, it was that famous glass ceiling. I could tell that by staying in business in a major organization, it would take me years and years to get where I wanted to get because of the difficulty in progressing further,” says Levitan, who is now vice chairman and chief communications officer for Bromley.

Susan Kelley left corporate America to start her own business in part because of what might be called a glass wall, rather than a glass ceiling. “Why did I start Kelley Swofford?” she asks. “You look around and you say to yourself, ‘Well, the opportunities at hand aren’t interesting enough.’ Or maybe the opportunities at hand don’t get the motor revved up. ... Maybe your own vision produces more of an inspiration.”

Often, of course, it is about the money. “I think the reason a lot of women are going into business is because in the business world they are not getting what they deserve in terms of dollars,” says Lan-
guale Speak’s Taddeo. TCI’s Silverman ticks off the reasons that come up most often in her research: “They’ve left because of the potential for greater financial rewards. They’ve left because of lack of parity in salaries. They’ve left because they want better control over their lives. They’ve left because they want to make a difference.” One answer she hasn’t found in her research is the motivation for spending more time with family. That one is reserved for men resigning top posts at large corporations.

>> When You’re Writing the Checks

In South Florida, as often as not, women have never found gender playing a role in their careers. Melanie Muss, vice president of development for the Fontainebleau Hilton Resort, is the fourth generation in her family’s development and hotel ownership business, and the first woman. She doesn’t feel like she is blazing a trail. “I’ve never really had the experience of being a woman playing a role in anything that I’ve chosen to do,” she says. “If you know what you’re talking about and you’re willing to learn from people who know more, it just doesn’t matter.” The only one of her siblings to enter the business, Muss acknowledges that learning the industry from the inside also earned her the respect of people she deals with. “Coming from a family of developers, I probably had a certain leg up on the credibility side,” she says.

It wasn’t always this way for women running a company. “Years ago, in the ’60s and ’70s, it was a pain in the neck,” says Remedios Diaz-Oliver, president of All American Containers, who founded the family-owned business. She recalls one major account, when someone from the company called and said they had a problem, and needed to speak with her boss. “I said, ‘No, no, I am the boss.’ And they said, ‘You must be the secretary, I want to talk to the man in charge.’” I said, ‘Well, I am the woman in charge,’” she recounts. When the company finally revealed its problem, Diaz-Oliver solved it within hours. “A week later they called and said, ‘Can I talk to the woman in charge?’” she says.

Even joining an established family business isn’t always a smooth path. Linda Gill, president and CEO of Fort Lauderdale’s Gill Hotels, was never expected to take over the family firm. While her older brother graduated from college and joined Gill Hotels as executive vice president, she instead worked her way up in the business. After positions inside and outside the company, she came back for good as the controller. “Really, that gave me my niche, because my father didn’t understand that area really well,” she says. After Gill’s brother died, she eventually ended up, in 1985, as executive vice president.

Although she had been running the company for years, Gill’s father didn’t relinquish the title of president until last year (at 89, he is still chairman of the board). “[Men from] my father’s era, they’ve been doing things for so long that it’s hard to change. But I do think I have some of their respect.”

— LINDA GILL, CEO OF GILL HOTELS

“There needs to be an atmosphere of inclusiveness, and welcoming women’s contributions. And there is today.”

— LYNNE WINES, CEO OF UNION BANK

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"If you’re a smart woman who performs in a business world that is predominantly male, you have an advantage, because most men basically like women."

- Cori Zywotow, President of Hill & Knowlton/Samcor

Gill, don’t treat a woman any differently – something she says she experienced in 1993 as the first female chairperson of the greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce. Working with a younger generation of men than she was accustomed to, says Gill, “They treated women as equals, and it was a wonderful experience.”

Like Gill, many women have found barriers coming down over the years. Developer Brenda Nestor, who left acting and modeling for a real estate career, found that when she first joined a large corporation, plenty of people tried to stymie her.

“I can’t even call it a glass ceiling. It was more of a concrete ceiling,” she says. Today, Nestor runs the company developing Windmill Reserve in Weston, and she finds that her gender is irrelevant. “It seems to be less of a factor in the real estate and building fields, except when you’re dealing with subcontractors, because they want to talk to a man most of the time.” Deals are done on a level where gender is not a factor, and even with the subcontractors, she’s paying the bills. “So they’re really not going to mess with you at that point,” says Nestor.

Some owners still find gender biases come into play. Karen Unger, president and CEO of Fort Lauderdale-based American Document Management, says that even though she is the head of the 170-person firm, and its majority shareholder, there are still people who pay more attention to her male partner. “I have had, even in the past year, professionals come in to talk with our firm … sit there and talk to him,” she says. When it’s a vendor, “They don’t get chosen.” But when it’s a potential client, says Unger, “Occasionally we have to grit our teeth and suck it up, so to speak. Luckily that happens less and less.”

Being part of the company’s ownership didn’t necessarily make it any easier for Pat Moran. When she was working her way through JM Family, there were plenty of people who doubted her abilities, Moran says. “I wasn’t a traditional ‘car guy,’ and there were some men who tried to intimidate me out of the business,” she says. “In response, I made sure that I was prepared. I did my homework, and wouldn’t allow myself to be caught off guard.” By the time she took over as CEO, says Moran, “Because I had worked for the company for quite a few years before I was appointed to a leadership position, I was able to develop strong relationships with our dealer customers, and with Toyota.”

>> The Last Frontier

Perhaps the last part of corporate America where women have not made substantial inroads is on corporate boards. A study by Catalyst found that only 13.6 percent of board seats at Fortune 500 corporations are held by women. That’s up from 1995, when it was just 9.6 percent, but leaves plenty room for improvement. In Florida, the average is slightly better, with 14.7 percent of board seats at Fortune 500 companies held by women.

“This has been the last frontier that women have had difficulty breaking into,” says Debbie Markoff, vice president of Women Executive Leadership (WEL), a Florida-based organization whose mission is to bring together qualified women and those boards. “Even though they have the pedigree and the qualifications, they weren’t being given the opportunities.”

In many cases, that lack of opportunity can be attributed to the absence of long-standing women’s networks. “In the past, the selection was based on a buddy system,” says Cindy Kushner, president and founder of WEL. As women have developed their own networking or become more entrenched in existing networks, and as more women have become CEOs, COOs and presidents of corporations, the number of women serving on corporate boards has increased.

The Sarbanes-Oxley act, which requires more diverse boards with more outside directors, has also opened doors, and WEL has found a more receptive attitude towards its work. “Today, corporate boards are expected to address issues of much greater complexity than ever before. The talents of diverse groups have to be engaged,” Kushner says. Markoff agrees, but she is more cautious. “I haven’t seen the floodgates open, but I do think this is an opportunity for women,” she says.

Of course, men and women are all creatures of habit, and as the idea of women running businesses becomes more routine, so will the opportunities become a matter of course. Already, most men are accustomed to dealing with female business owners. “I have mostly male clients, and I get along with them just as easily as I do female clients,” says Becker. “I can communicate with them at that executive level, and I think that’s what they’re looking for. ... Clients want to know that, as the head of their firm, they can talk to you as the head of your firm.” And that role comes gender neutral.