



DIVERSITY RESEARCH

From CMO to CEO.

Why the Ladder is Broken for Women in Digital & B2B Marketing

Women dominate marketing roles, yet the path to CEO remains systematically blocked — this is an examination of not just what is happening, but why.

Picture the typical digital marketing team at a B2B or SaaS company. The junior and midlevel roles are full of talented women leading content strategy, managing complex client accounts, and driving demand generation. Many of them aspire to the Chief Marketing Officer seat — traditionally seen as a stepping stone to the ultimate prize, the CEO role.

Look at who actually makes it to the CEO's chair, though, and the picture changes completely. The faces are overwhelmingly male. That's the paradox at the heart of digital and B2B marketing: women are well represented in the industry overall, yet systematically shut out of the pathway to the top job. This isn't a question of talent or ambition. The barriers are systemic, woven into how the industry operates and how leadership itself is being redefined — the traditional CMO role, once a proven route to CEO, is fading in influence, replaced by male-dominated "growth" and "revenue" positions with a clearer run at the top. Flexible working, meanwhile, has become a double-edged sword for the women who request it, and a national childcare and parental leave system creates barriers whether a woman earns too little or too much. What follows is an examination of not just what is happening, but why.

THE PIPELINE

The Vanishing Pathway: How the CMO-to-CEO Route Is Closing for Women

The statistics paint a stark picture. In UK marketing, 69% of junior positions are held by women. At mid-level the split is close to even — 52% women, 48% men. But at senior level the numbers flip: 71% of senior marketing roles are held by men, just 29% by women. That numerical advantage evaporates completely at the top — as of 2024, women held just 9% of CEO roles in the FTSE 100.

Women fill the junior ranks. Men take the senior ones.

Gender split of UK marketing roles, by level

Junior

69%

31%

Mid-level

52%

48%

Senior

29%

71%

Women Men

69%

of junior UK marketing
roles are held by
women



29%

of senior marketing
roles are held by
women, down from
52% at mid-level



9%

of FTSE 100 CEO roles
were held by women
as of 2024

The junior "Men" share is the remainder of the 69% held by women.

The picture is particularly stark in B2B. Women make up just 30 to 40% of B2B marketing leaders in the UK and US, with even fewer at boardroom level. In B2B sales roles — which work hand in hand with marketing — women represent 40% of mid-level employees, dropping sharply to just 31% at senior level. It suggests the B2B environment presents its own, additional barriers to women trying to reach leadership.

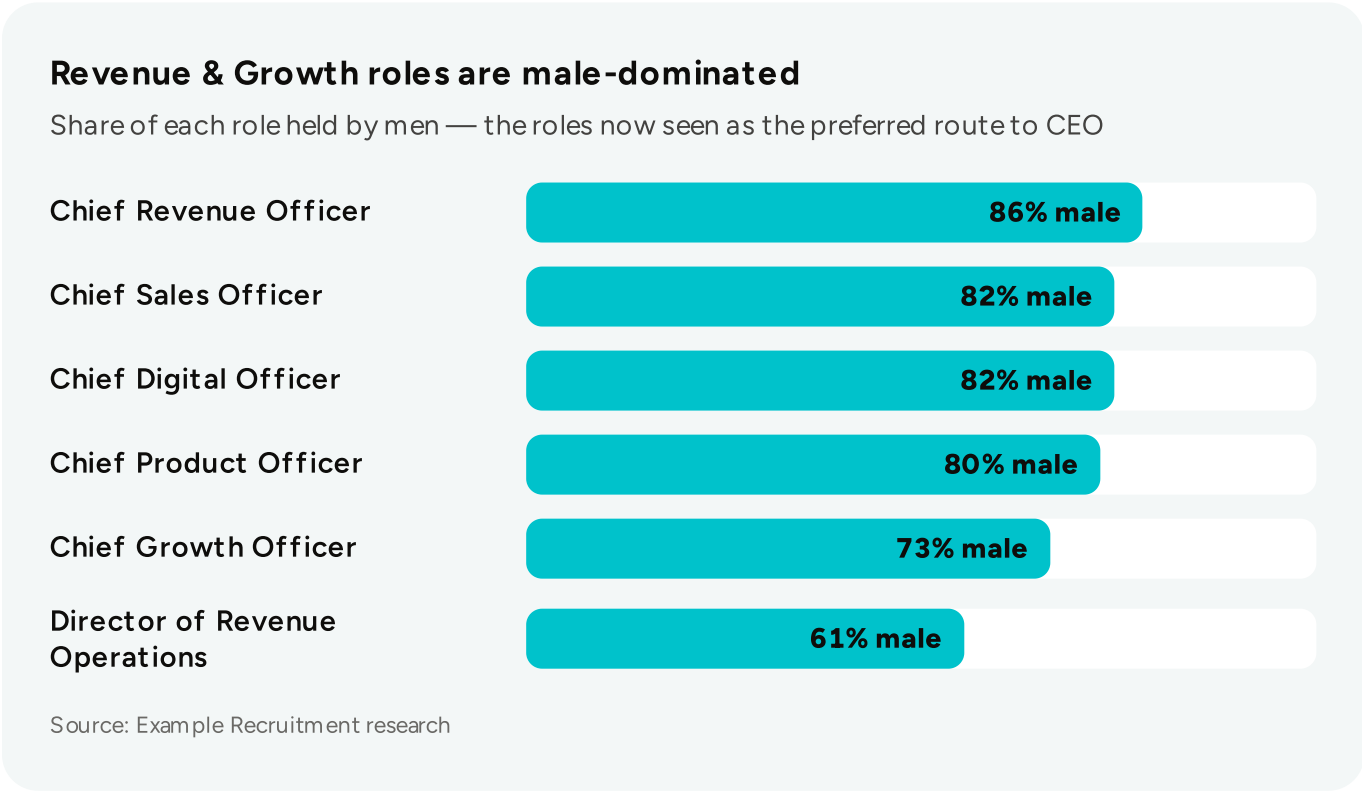
The Decline of the CMO and the Rise of Revenue Roles

The traditional stepping stone for a senior marketer — the CMO role — is declining in influence: CMO hires have dropped 28% since 2023. That decline appears to be disproportionately hitting women, who had achieved a real degree of gender balance in the CMO seat, at 53% female.

28%

drop in CMO hires since 2023 — the seat where women had reached a real degree of gender balance.

In its place, organisations are creating and prioritising a new suite of executive roles focused on growth, revenue and commercial strategy — roles seen as closer to the bottom line, and now the preferred route to CEO. These emerging roles are heavily male-dominated, while the roles women are concentrated in skew brand and culture.



Brand & Culture roles are female-dominated

Share of each role held by women

VP Diversity & Inclusion

70% female

Chief Brand Officer

53% female

Chief Marketing Officer

53% female

Source: Example Recruitment research

(Chief Communications Officer is also female-majority, though the source data doesn't give it an exact figure.) This shift suggests the CMO role is splintering rather than disappearing outright. Under pressure to deliver short-term results and revenue, businesses are moving responsibilities into roles aligned with sales, growth and commercial strategy — and those are the roles that now sit on the direct path to CEO.

WHO GETS THE TOP JOB

The CEO Pipeline Problem

Because male-dominated roles now sit closer to revenue, transformation and commercial strategy, they give men a clearer route to the top job, widening the gender gap at executive level. Women, concentrated in CMO, Chief Brand Officer and Chief Communications Officer roles, find themselves in positions that are static or losing influence — with less direct paths to CEO.

CMO



CEO

A direct transition from pure marketing leadership to CEO is exceptionally rare for women.

The Unseen Barriers: Why Women Are Steered Away From Revenue Roles

Once a woman in digital or B2B marketing has children, the impact on her career is measurable and severe. Women carry out an average of 60% more unpaid work than men, including childcare and household duties — and once a woman has children, she is often perceived as less committed to her career. The statistics bear that penalty out starkly.

42%

average drop in a woman's monthly earnings five years after her first child (£1,051/month)

£65,618

average total earnings lost over five years following the birth of a first child

67%

of women say childcare duties have cost them pay rises, promotions or development

This isn't simply about time out of the workforce — it's about assumptions made about women's ambition and availability once they become mothers. Women who request or use flexible working are often seen as less serious about their careers, a stigma that doesn't apply equally to men. The result: 1.5 million women are kept out of the labour market by caring responsibilities, compared with just 230,000 men — making women seven times as likely to stand outside the workforce. For digital and B2B marketing, that represents a massive loss of talent and experience.

CHOICE OR BIAS?

The Steering Problem: How Women End Up in Different Roles

The concentration of women in brand and communications roles, and men in revenue and growth roles, raises an important question: are women choosing these paths, or are they being steered towards them? The data suggests the latter — 94% of women in B2B SaaS report having faced gender discrimination in their careers, which makes clear that bias plays a significant role in shaping career trajectories.



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FLEXIBLE WORKING

The Double Bind of Workplace Flexibility

For many women in digital and B2B marketing, flexible working isn't a perk but a necessity — yet the reality in the UK falls far short of demand. Research from King's College London found 45% of women, compared to just 25% of men, report wanting to work flexibly specifically to manage childcare. Around one in three flexible working requests are turned down. And for those who do secure flexible arrangements, particularly part-time hours, a career penalty often follows: the same King's College London study found women in part-time roles significantly less likely to feel they'd progressed in their careers — part-time work read as a sign of lower commitment, stalling careers and limiting advancement.

CHILDCARE & PARENTAL LEAVE

The Systemic Squeeze: How UK Policy Undermines Working Mothers

The challenges women face at work are compounded by a national support system that is ill-equipped for the realities of modern family life. The two most significant structural failures: the exorbitant cost of childcare, with its contradictory threshold system, and an imbalanced parental leave system.

The UK has some of the most expensive childcare in the world, worsened by a support system that creates an 'earnings trap' at both ends of the income scale. To qualify for the government's 'free' childcare hours, each parent must earn a minimum income equivalent to 16 hours a week at the National Living Wage — roughly £2,539.68 per three-month

period. That creates a catch-22 for women wanting to re-enter the workforce in a junior or part-time role: if they can't earn enough to meet the threshold, they can't access the childcare support they need to work in the first place.

“A woman earning £95,000 might find that accepting a promotion to £105,000 actually leaves her family worse off — a direct disincentive to advance her career.”

At the other end of the scale, if either parent earns over £100,000 in adjusted net income, the entire family loses all entitlement to funded childcare hours and the Tax-Free Childcare scheme — a sudden cliff edge that can make a promotion for a senior female marketing director financially unviable. This is particularly pernicious in digital and B2B marketing, where senior salaries often hover around exactly that threshold.

The parental leave system compounds it. The UK's is one of the most imbalanced in Europe: mothers are entitled to up to 52 weeks of maternity leave, fathers to just two weeks of paternity leave. That stark difference reinforces traditional roles — women as primary caregivers, men as primary breadwinners — and has a real impact on women's careers. A long absence from a fast-moving industry like digital marketing can leave women feeling out of touch with the latest trends and technologies, making it harder to re-enter the workforce and progress.

One of the most imbalanced systems in Europe

Statutory leave UK parents are entitled to

Maternity leave (mothers)

52 weeks

Paternity leave (fathers)

2 weeks

Source: Example Recruitment research

VISIBILITY

The Missing Role Models: A Story Told in Scarcity

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the broken CMO-to-CEO ladder is the sheer difficulty of finding women who've made that climb in B2B and SaaS. An extensive search for case studies reveals a telling pattern: the women who do reach CEO in tech have almost always come from a product, sales or operations background, or founded their own company. A direct transition from pure marketing leadership to CEO is exceptionally rare for women.



This scarcity of role models is a problem in itself. It creates a self-fulfilling prophecy where the lack of visible female leaders reinforces the idea that it is not a viable path.

Women cannot be what they cannot see. The absence of clear examples of women who've successfully navigated this path makes it harder for others to follow — and for companies to imagine a marketer, and a woman, in the top job.

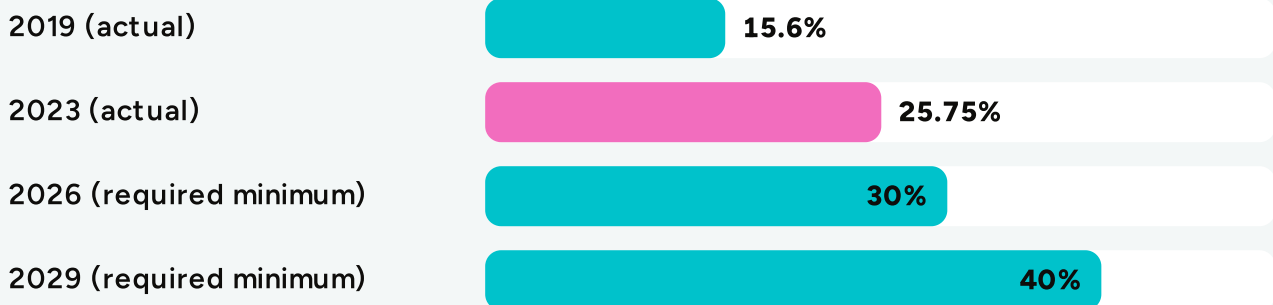
LESSONS FROM FRANCE

What Works: Lessons From Europe

European countries have proven that bold policy can deliver real results. France offers a particularly instructive example: in 2021 it passed the Rixain law, extending gender quotas beyond boards to executive committees. Companies with more than 1,000 employees must now have at least 30% women in their executive committees by 2026, rising to 40% by 2029. The results have been dramatic — female representation in executive committees rose from 15.6% in 2019 to 25.75% in 2023. When companies are required to actively seek out and promote female talent, they can, and do, find it. The law has forced companies to look beyond their traditional networks and unconscious biases.

Quotas work

Female representation on French executive committees — actual, then the Rixain law's required minimums



The Rixain law's minimums apply to companies with more than 1,000 employees.

WHAT COMPANIES CAN DO

A Blueprint for Change: How Digital and B2B Marketing Companies Can Lead the Way

The challenges are significant, but not insurmountable. Digital and B2B marketing companies, with their focus on innovation and data-driven decision making, are uniquely positioned to lead the way toward a more equitable industry. Here is a blueprint for change.

- Set internal quotas for revenue and growth roles — ambitious, transparent targets for female representation not just on boards, but in the Chief Growth Officer, Chief Revenue Officer, Head of Demand Generation and Head of Product Marketing roles that actually make up the CEO pipeline.
- Revolutionise parental leave — go far beyond the statutory minimum and offer equal, fully paid parental leave for both parents. It's the single most powerful tool for changing workplace culture long term; Havas UK offers 6 months fully paid equal parental leave for all parents.
- Build a bridge from marketing to CEO — formal sponsorship programmes where senior leaders advocate for women's progression, and rotational assignments that provide real P&L responsibility.

- Foster supportive communities — safe spaces for female leaders to network and share experiences, to combat isolation and build solidarity.
- Demand diverse recruitment slates — mandate that executive search firms present a 50/50 gender-balanced slate of candidates for every senior leadership position, forcing a wider, more equitable search.

A FEMALE-LED TREND

A New Model: The Rise of the Fractional CMO

Faced with these structural barriers, many senior female marketers are forging their own paths. The rise of the fractional CMO — a seasoned marketing leader working for multiple companies on a part-time or project basis — is a direct response to the rigid structures of the traditional corporate world. It lets women retain senior-level expertise and strategic influence while gaining the flexibility so often denied them in full-time roles.

This is a female-led trend: fractional executive positions have tripled since 2018, and fractional executives are more likely to be women than their full-time counterparts. It isn't a retreat from ambition — it's a redefinition of it. Women are building portfolio careers that give them control over their time and let them work across a diverse range of companies, which represents a real opportunity for businesses to access top-tier marketing talent they might otherwise lose.

3×

Fractional executive positions have tripled since 2018 — and fractional executives are more likely to be women than their full-time counterparts.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Opportunity Ahead

The story of women in digital and B2B marketing doesn't have to end with a broken ladder. The path forward exists, and it's already being walked by companies brave enough to try something different. France has shown that quotas work. Havas UK has proven that

equal parental leave changes culture. The fractional CMO movement shows that women aren't giving up on leadership — they're reimagining it on their own terms.

What's striking isn't just the barriers women face, but the opportunity companies are missing. Lose talented women at every rung of the ladder and you're not just losing individuals — you're losing diverse perspectives, commercial acumen, and the kind of leadership that understands half your customer base. The companies that figure this out first won't just be doing the right thing. They'll have a genuine competitive edge.

“Women haven't lost their ambition. They've simply refused to accept a system that asks them to choose between career and family, between flexibility and progression, between who they are and who they're expected to be.”

The question now is whether the industry will meet them halfway. Will digital and B2B marketing companies recognise that the old pathways are broken and build new ones? Will they look at their revenue and growth roles and ask why they're 80% male? Will they offer the support that makes it possible for women to stay, to progress, to lead? The answers will determine which companies thrive in the next decade — and which are left wondering where all the talent went.



Example Recruitment — marketing-led headhunters for SaaS and FinTech startups and scaleups in New York and London.

Read the live report and get in touch at theexample.co/reports/from-cmo-to-ceo