

Career Prospects for Management Candidates in Japanese Companies : A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of DEI Configurations

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1. Introduction

Despite decades of progress in women's labor force participation, persistent gender disparities remain deeply entrenched in the workplace. Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in traditionally male-dominated occupations and leadership positions (Joshi et al. 2024; Heilman, 2012). These inequalities are not merely a matter of numbers but reflect systemic disadvantages: women are more likely to encounter discrimination and restricted access to organizational privileges compared to men (Cho & Mor Barak, 2008; Triana et al. 2015), and these disadvantages are reinforced by stereotypes that not only undermine perceptions of women's capabilities but also create structural barriers to their career advancement (Heilman et al. 2024).

In Japanese companies, the gender gap is pronounced, with few women in managerial roles despite legislative support. While work-life balance (WLB) initiatives exist, their impact on women's career development and ability to demonstrate competence remains underexplored (Sato, 2023). Although women's labor force participation has increased, gaps in promotion persist. Research is needed to understand how organizational contexts and the use of WLB initiatives affect women's career prospects, including the advancement of management candidates.

The study examines the conditions that clarify internal career prospects for women aspiring to management. Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), this study explores how combinations of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) factors influence the perceived career prospects of management candidates in Japanese companies. The findings aim to advance theoretical understanding of DEI integrations across levels and offer practical guidance for reducing the gender gap in management.

2. Literature review and research questions

(1) Career Prospects

A key question is under what conditions career prospects for management candidates can be articulated for promotion. Career success is often evaluated subjectively, focusing on individuals' self-assessments of their achievements (Heslin, 2005). For management candidates, the likelihood of promotion tends to increase when their current roles are closely aligned with both their long-term career

plans and the organization's career development pathways (Reiche et al. 2011).

A forward-looking perspective is therefore essential, as each career stage presents unique challenges that require preparation for the next stage. Recently, the appeal of managerial roles has declined due to the so-called "unwillingness-to-manage syndrome," which reflects concerns about the burdens of supervising subordinates and balancing work with family responsibilities (Kanai, 2005). Although this syndrome is not specific to gender, it does not appear to diminish men's motivation to pursue management, as men are generally expected to follow an uninterrupted career trajectory.

Against this backdrop, it is critical to consider how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives influence employees' perceptions of internal career prospects. DEI-related practices may play a key role in clarify or constraining the career pathways available to potential management candidates, particularly for women.

(2) Diversity

Diversity refers to the staffing composition of an attribute within a particular group unit (e.g. workplace, board, or organization as a whole) (Lambert & Bell, 2013). According to Kanter (1977), when the overall staffing composition in the workplace consists of 65% or more and 35% or fewer women, the majority does not necessarily become the dominant force simply due to their numbers. If the workforce composition becomes more balanced—meaning that no group falls below 35%—the influence of demographic characteristics diminishes, and power is more likely to depend on individual abilities rather than group attributes. For management candidates, the level of diversity in the workplace can affect their career prospects, as the opportunity to demonstrate competence may be a key factor in advancing to the next stage of their careers.

At the group level, diversity can both help and hinder group processes. Based on social categorization and social identity theories, individuals categorize others as in-group or out-group members, which can create subgroups and lead to conflicts, poor communication, and lower job satisfaction (Pelled, 1996; Reicher et al. 2010). Thus, diversity is a double-edged sword (Milliken & Martins, 1996). Most research has focused on group-level outcomes and processed, leaving it unclear which organizational initiatives are most effective for leveraging the positive effects of diversity (Nishii et al. 2018; Roberson, 2019).

(3) Equity

In diversity research, fairness is often framed as corrective fairness, addressing interpersonal discrimination, whereas equity emphasizes systemic change at the organizational level to rectify structural injustices (Dwertmann et al. 2016; Bernstein et al. 2020). A key example is the disproportionate burden of childbearing and childcare on women, which limits their time, human capital accumulation, and career advancement, creating time poverty (Sen, 1992). More broadly, women, racial

minorities, and other marginalized groups face systemic barriers to high-impact roles and professional progression (Le et al. 2021; Roberson & Scott, 2024).

In the Japanese employment context, long-term, membership-based employment contracts support skill development and stability (Hamaguchi, 2011), but disadvantage employees who take childcare leave, often delaying promotions and reducing compensation relative to peers (Sato, 2023). Addressing these inequities requires organizations to remove structural barriers and enable full participation across all levels (Boehm et al. 2014).

(4) Inclusion

Inclusion refers to the unique condition in which individuals are able to demonstrate abilities that others in the workplace may not possess, while also being recognized for their contributions. (Shore et al. 2018) Even when staffing is unbiased and fairness is ensured, women and minority employees may not always have opportunities to fully showcase their abilities (Nishii, 2013). Previous research indicates that inclusion can have a positive effect on performance (Dwertmann & Boehm, 2016). Shore et al. (2011) examined inclusion in work groups and found that employees' sense of respect depends on whether their dual need for belongingness and uniqueness are met. They identified four states defined by the levels of belongingness and uniqueness: inclusion (high belongingness and high uniqueness), assimilation (high belongingness and low uniqueness), differentiation (low belongingness and high uniqueness), and exclusion (low in both) (Shore et al. 2011, pp.1265-1266). This framework emphasizes that workplace inclusion arises not only from feeling valued and connected to the group, but also from having one's distinct qualities recognized (Shore et al. 2011; Chung et al. 2020). Such recognition is likely to enhance perceptions of internal career prospects, as individuals who are both accepted and respected become more visible and are regarded as stronger candidates for advancement.

(5) Work-Life Balance

Although institutional frameworks for maternity and childcare leave have been established, significant practical challenges remain in their implementation. Research has shown that the use of work-life initiatives can enhance employees' motivation for promotion (Frits & van Knippenberg, 2018). However, most studies have focused primarily on the relationship between the availability of such policies and promotion prospects, without fully considering other influential factors. Additionally, many employees report dissatisfaction stemming from low awareness of available policies or difficulties in accessing them, even when they wish to utilize such support (Casper et al. 2025). In recent years, male employees have also been encouraged to take childcare leave, reflecting broader efforts to promote gender equality in caregiving roles. Nevertheless, research on how men's use of these policies affects their motivation for promotion remains limited. Furthermore, the relationship between the uti-

lization of WLB policies and employees' internal career prospects has relatively little scholarly attention overall.

From the review above, the research questions are posed as follows.

RQ1: What configurations of DEI-related conditions contribute to clarifying the career prospects of management candidates?

RQ2: How do the configurations influencing career prospects differ between female and male management candidates for management positions?

3. Literature review and research questions

(1) Analytical method

This paper explores the combined effects of multiple factors to confirm phenomena specific to Japanese by using the QCA method. Fuzzy set QCA (fsQCA) was chosen to derive condition constructs that elucidate the career prospects of management candidates. It can be applied to elucidate causal complexity across multiple levels, including individual, group, and organizational levels (Mellor, 2021; Misangyi et al. 2017). This also enables us to examine the conditions that clarify the career prospects of management candidates across various individual, group, and organizational factors.

(2) Case selection

The research sample consisted of 32 management candidates (16 men and 16 women), selected by HR managers from five companies that each employed 1,001 or more individuals (Table 1). This equal distribution was designed to enable comparative analysis across gender lines while ensuring representativeness. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 40 years and represented diverse functional areas, including Software Engineering, Personnel, Finance, Sales, Marketing, Design and Research & Development. Demographic data collected included age, occupation, and experience with maternity/parental leave (yes/no and duration).

The company representative was asked to provide the research collaborators with an interview guide that included the study's purpose and confidentiality statement. Quantifiable background questions were collected prior to the interviews, which were conducted in a semi-structured format from September to November 2021, either in one-on-one sessions between the researcher and a research collaborator or with a company representative present. Before these interviews, company representatives were also asked about the company's internal promotion system and related policies.

Table 1. List of Research Participants

Company	Gender	Occupation	Internal career	Maternity/Parental leave	Company	Gender	Occupation	Internal career	Maternity/Parental leave
A 13persons	Femal	SE	2 steps	Maternity /Parental	C 6persons	Femal	Finance	1 step	None
	Femal	SE	2 steps	Maternity /Parental		Femal	Finance	2 steps	None
	Femal	SE	2 steps	None		Femal	Finance	2 steps	None
	Femal	SE	1 step	None		Male	Finance	2 steps	None
	Femal	SE	1 step	Maternity /Parental		Male	Finance	2 steps	None
	Femal	SE	2 steps	Maternity /Parental		Male	Finance	2 steps	None
	Femal	SE	2 steps	Maternity /Parental	D 5persons	Femal	Sales	2 steps	None
	Male	SE	2 steps	None		Femal	Design	2 steps	None
	Male	Personnel	2 steps	None		Femal	Design	2 steps	Maternity /Parental
	Male	SE	1 step	None		Male	Design	1 step	None
	Male	SE	2 steps	Paternity leave		Male	Design	1 step	None
B 5persons	Femal	R&D	1 step	None	E 3persons	Femal	Marketing	1 step	None
	Male	R&D	1 step	None		Femal	Marketing	1 step	None
	Male	R&D	1 step	None		Male	Marketing	1 step	None
	Male	R&D	1 step	None	Note: Age (31~40)				
	Male	R&D	1 step	None	Internal career Step1: Initial promotion stage required to reach management				
					Step2: Next promotion stage required to reach management				
					Maternity/Parental leave is whther or not the woman used the system at her or his company.				

(3) Variable measurement

A comprehensive binary data table was created from the quantifiable data on workplace diversity provided through the pre-interview questionnaires. Next, all interview data were transcribed and content analyzed. Any discrepancies between the pre-interview questionnaires data and the interview data were corrected, and the binary data table was finalized (Table 2) .

(4) Resulting variable

Career prospects were queried with reference to Reiche et al. (2011), who assessed employee's perceptions of the alignment between their current assignment and their broader career plan, as well as the alignment between individual and organizational career plans. In this study, career prospect was operationalized as a binary outcome variable derived from interview data. Respondents who indicated that they aspire to a managerial position (i.e., aim for promotion into management) were coded as 1. Respondents who stated that they do not wish to take a managerial role and prefer to remain in their current position were coded as 0. These binary outcomes were plotted and subsequently used as the outcome condition in the QCA analysis. Thus, "1" represents managerial career intention, whereas "0" represents preference for the current position.

(5) Conditional variable

Next, diversity, equity, and inclusion criteria as causal conditions were derived. In addition, WLB status was added to the condition structure, as family situations may not clarify career prospects in the organization.

Diversity

Diversity was operationalized as a causal condition based on demographic information provided in the face sheet. After data collection, respondents were coded as “1” if they met the specified diversity criterion and as “0” otherwise. These binary codes were incorporated into the QCA as condition variables. For workplace diversity, the criteria used to define workforce composition included the number of women and men. For women, a workplace (or section) ratio of 35% or higher was coded as 1, and a ratio of less than 35% was coded as 0. For men, a ratio of 35% or higher was coded as 1, while a ratio of less than 35% was coded as 0.

Table 2. Truth Table

Conditional variable				Case	Outcome	Consistency
Diversity	Equity	Inclusion	WLB		Career prospect	
1	0	1	1	3	1	1
1	0	1	0	1	1	1
0	0	1	1	1	1	1
0	1	1	1	1	1	1
1	1	1	1	3	0	0.666667
0	1	0	0	4	0	0.25
0	1	0	1	5	0	0.2
0	0	0	1	6	0	0
1	1	0	1	6	0	0
0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1	0	0	1	1	0	0

Equity

Equity refers to fairness and the creation an environment that enables everyone to reach their full potential. To ensure equitable opportunities for all, interviews examined whether appropriate support was provided for each individual’s situation. The criterion for equity was established by determining if individuals were given a fair opportunity to exercise their abilities, resulting in a score of 1. Conversely, if fair opportunities were not provided, a score of 0 was assigned.

Inclusion

Regarding perceptions of workplace inclusion, participants answered two questions: ① Can you describe experiences at work where you felt included, respected, or that you strongly belonged?

② Can you describe experiences at work where you felt excluded, overlooked, or marginalized?

Based on the overall balance of responses, participants were coded as having reported more inclusion experiences (assigned a score of 1) or more exclusion experiences (assigned a score of 0).

Work-life balance

A score of 1 was assigned if management candidates reported that their career prospects were clear, taking into account both work and life considerations related to their prospective leadership. A score of 0 was assigned if they indicated that their prospects were less clear, or if they preferred to maintain their current situation rather than pursue a leadership position.

4. Findings

(1) Truth table

The columns represent the main conditions and outcome, while the rows show different patterns of these conditions (Nakanishi, 2024). Table 2 illustrates how specific patterns of clear outcomes are indicated by 1. The first row shows three individuals with the condition pattern Diversity:1, Equity:0, Inclusion:1, and Work-life Balance (WLB):1; all three have clear career prospects. In the fifth row, three individuals have the pattern is Diversity:1, Equity:1, Inclusion:1, and WLB:1. Although all conditions are present, the career prospects outcome is 0, meaning two out of three cases have clear career prospects, and one does not. This indicates that one case is unclear.

(2) Sufficiency analyses for the career prospects

Table 3 presents sufficiency analyses of the overall (1, 2), female (3, 4), and male (5, 6) case studies. For the overall cases, (1) the presence of diversity, absence of equity, and presence of WLB lead to career prospects; or (2) the absence of diversity, presence of inclusion, and WLB lead to career prospects. For the female case (3) the presence of equity and the absence of inclusion lead to career prospects; or (4) the presence of diversity, absence of equity, presence of inclusion, and WLB lead to career prospects. For the male case, (5) the presence of diversity and the presence of WLB lead to career prospects; or (6) the presence of diversity and the presence of WLB lead to career prospects.

Based on the above results, gender differences were observed, indicating that men and women may approach DEI & WLB differently and prioritize different element. This analysis indicates that organizational DEI & WLB initiatives may elicit different needs and responses.

Table 3. Configuration of factors affecting career prospects

	All		Women		Men	
Receipt	1	2	3	4	5	6
Diversity	●	⊗		●	●	
Equity	⊗	●	●	⊗		
Inclusion		●	⊗	●		●
WLB	●	●		●	●	●
Consistency	1		1		1	
Raw Coverage	0.4	0.2	0.333	0.333	0.571	0.143
Unique Coverage	0.4	0.2	0.333	0.333	0.714	0.286
Solution consist	1		1		1	
Solution coverage	0.6		0.667		0.857	

Note: All diagrams show complicated solutions. Black circles (●) represent a condition's presence, star (⊗) represents absence, and blank spaces indicate "don't care" situations where a condition may or may not be present.

5. Discussions

When there is no diversity bias and WLB is sufficient, career prospects are clear, even if perceived inclusion is not necessarily high. Career prospect also tend to be clear when inclusion, equity, and WLB are adequately ensured, even if diversity remains insufficient. While previous studies have emphasized the importance of promoting both inclusion and diversity in the workplace, they have not clarified the extent to which each aspect should be prioritized. This study found that adequate workplace diversity leads to clearer career prospects, even in the absence of high perceived inclusion.

At the same time, the findings indicate that higher inclusion clarified career prospects when workplace diversity was low. In women's circumstances, an inversion of the combination of equity and inclusion was observed. Specifically, prospects for promotion were high when effective equity existed within the HR system, even if perceptions inclusion in the workplace were low (Case 3). In contrast, career progression within the organization was clear when there was no prejudice against diversity and inclusion was high, even though equity was not strongly perceived (Case 4).

Furthermore, Cases 5 and 6 revealed that career prospects are clearer when either sufficient diversity and WLB (Case 5) or sufficient inclusion and WLB (Case 6) exists. These results align with traditional Japanese human resource management, where fostering inclusion and clear career prospects appear to be more easily accomplished in homogeneous workplaces with a predominantly male workforce.

6. Conclusion

(1) Theoretical contributions

Even though many companies are currently working to promote DEI, few studies have examined how combinations of these measures can effectively impact an individual's career. This study addressed this gap. The theoretical contributions of this study lies in its attempt to integrate factors across different levels—including individual, workplace, and organizational—while leveraging the characteristics of each concept through QCA. Although the analysis was not fully comprehensive, this approach offers a new way to capture the complex interplay of DEI-related conditions shaping career prospects.

(2) Practical Contributions

From a practical perspective, this study provides insights into how DEI promotion can be effectively linked to individual career outcomes. The findings showed that no single condition configuration simultaneously combined diversity, equity, and inclusion. In practice, equity—defined here as the fairness of organizational HR systems that support career development—plays a particularly critical

role for women. When such equity is established, meaning that the organization provides career-supportive HR systems and an environment suited to individual circumstances, women can advance into management positions without managers having to deliberately emphasize inclusion in candidate selection. By contrast, when equity is lacking and promotion opportunities are highly competitive, managers must actively structure the workplace to promote inclusion. These findings suggest that the development of women managers depends on aligning fair and supportive HR systems with workplace-level managerial practices, offering organizations concrete guidance for designing HR policies and management approaches that foster women's career advancement.

(3) Limitations of the study and future research

This study has two main limitations and directions for future research. First, the factors clarifying management career prospects may overlap with other DEI-related conditions not examined here. Future research should compare these findings with other DEI datasets and integrate diversity and career research using alternative condition configurations.

While the present data were drawn from management candidates across five companies with different job categories, future research could focus on management candidates in the same job category within a single company. Such an approach would provide clearer insights into how that company's HR system and diversity initiatives influence aspirations for promotion.

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A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of DEI Configurations

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Abstract: This paper investigates the conditions under which the perceived internal career prospects of management candidates in Japanese companies become clear at the individual, group, and organizational level. Drawing on interviews and qualitative data from 16 female and 16 male management candidates in large Japanese companies, the study applies qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). The results indicate that career prospects often remain ambiguous, even when diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and work-life balance (WLB) conditions are satisfied, and that the factors shaping perceived career prospects differ between women and men. While QCA proves effective for analyzing the impact of DEI at multiple levels, expanding the sample size could improve the model by allowing for the inclusion of additional variables. Notably, by utilizing QCA, this research identifies the specific combinations of DEI conditions that influence internal career prospects a contribution not addressed in previous studies. Overall, the study provides a new perspective on how DEI and WLB conditions affect the perceived internal career prospects of management candidates.

Keywords: career prospect, management candidates, DEI, WLB, QCA