

CASE STUDY



Westville Investment - Paving a more inclusive and equitable road to career advancement

A case study is an instructional method about a situation or event. At its best, it zeros in on a problem or issue so that students can observe, analyze, summarize, and/or offer recommendations. Case studies are usually based on real-world challenges by real organizations.

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Westville Investment is a large investment firm with a wide clientele. While the company is bearing fruit from inclusion initiatives at lower levels, it's having problems delivering on representation in the upper ranks. An internal assessment study found that while 70% of Westville's entry-level jobs were filled by females, the majority of senior level leaders were white men. Westville's leadership team recognized the need to address this talent pipeline issue and engaged a team of Rotman Business Design MBAs to investigate.

This case study is the product of the Rotman business design team's work, which involved 68 industry interviews, 45 of which included private, in-person interviews with employees throughout the organization, representing both new and seasoned employees. While Westville initially set out to address gender inequality in its upper ranks, the goal shifted to more inclusive access for both men and women.

Key Facts

- Westville Investments (name changed for anonymity) based in Canada
- Provides corporate and investment banking and capital markets services to corporate, institutional and government clients globally

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The challenge

Many people at Westville feel comfortable at work, and love what they do. But career advancement at Westville is not only seen as a reward for work well done, but also as the product of figuring out a puzzling pathway to promotion.

“My career progression is like a Rubik’s cube - challenging but attainable and very rewarding,” says one respondent.

Some employees are frustrated and feel that organizational politics, not performance, determines who gets a promotion. Others complain that there are moving goalposts for advancement, and that there always seems to be an excuse for turning down a promotion. Westville is a leader in gender equity, at least in entry level and lower manager positions. But once you look at more senior leaders, you notice how few women occupy these roles.

The human-centred design approach

Westville’s CEO and leadership team decided they needed to address the underrepresentation of women at the executive leadership level. They wanted to understand the factors which led to that situation, and by extension understand how they might increase the recruitment, retention, promotion and overall satisfaction of women in leadership positions.

Understanding that it was fundamentally a human-centred challenge, they engaged a Rotman Business Design internship team to investigate. This team employed the three-step Business Design Methodology involving:

1. Need finding (insight development)
2. Problem framing (reframing and prototyping)
3. Problem solving ((strategic solution)

The Business Design team’s need finding activities involved leading interviews with Westville employees, professionals in adjacent industries, subject matter experts on organizational behaviour, experts in finance industry diversity and inclusion (D&I), group discussions with senior Westville leaders, and literature reviews of academic journals, white papers, and industry articles.

From those investigations, the team identified the following themes/issues for further inquiry:

A lack of clarity and consistency.

While Westville employees love their jobs, their career pathway is unclear.

A team of individuals.

Many Westville employees find the culture uncollaborative and unsupportive.

A climate of uncertainty and anxiety.

Factors range from anxiety over future reorganizations within the firm, to uncertainty around an individual’s standing due to a lack of feedback, reviews and coaching, and a lack of empathy for employees who experienced personal trauma.

A lack of organizational justice.

There’s confusion over evaluation methods and rewards, the perception that women were judged by different standards than men, and the sense that promotion is based on factors other than quality of work, such as the power of an employee’s team lead.

A sense of pride and loyalty to the firm.

Despite the company’s flaws, employees seemed highly vested in wanting to make it a better place to work.

From the Finding stage, the team moved on to a Framing stage that involved further interviews across the entire organization to discover deeper themes. They found employee perceptions that Westville had issues with:

- competing models for how to get ahead.
- moving goalposts for advancement.
- inconsistency in leaders’ approachability to connect and network.
- career pathway challenges are shared across genders.

A follow-up workshop with a subset of employees in the organization led to a key insight:

The underlying issue faced by the organization was not one of gender diversity, but rather a challenge with overall inclusion. Those who were successful tended to have similar personal, educational and social backgrounds. For everyone else, regardless of gender or race, it was very difficult to achieve desired career progression.

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Context: Moving up at Westville

The consensus among many employees interviewed is that the road to the top at Westville is littered with potholes, and that for women, those potholes can more resemble sinkholes. While some employees (mainly men) have success powering through the bumps, others tend to struggle, and some just pull off the road.

Here are some of the issues, needs and factors that surfaced in those interviews:

- A lack of commitment to making processes around hiring and promotion fair. Some employees felt Westville executives explained away why there were so few senior women leaders and didn't take their experiences and beliefs seriously.
- Inconsistent development plans. On his first day, Duncan, a Westville employee was introduced to everyone on the floor. By day two, he joined colleagues for drinks, and he was quickly matched up with a "buddy" at the firm who could help him navigate the politics and processes. But he says onboarding for women is not usually like that.
- An emphasis on working long hours. "We have a high-performer bias that we need to challenge," says Charles, a Westville VP. "If someone puts in extra hours to achieve success, are they better than the person who is equally successful but puts in fewer hours?"
- Limited tolerance for work-love balance. Gustaf joined the firm from Scandinavia where he noticed women were able to find jobs that offered more flexibility to pursue a partner and/or start a family. He thinks Westville needs to make women feel more valued, and that taking on greater job responsibility won't compromise their life outside work.
- A bias toward production and 'mathyness'. "It's run like a dairy farm - let's milk these cows and make sure they don't get sick or escape the pens," says Edward. "I think there is a perception that this is a very 'mathy' business, and that men are more 'mathy.' But if you genuinely believe and express why diversity is good in the first place, everyone will buy in."
- No road map for promotion. "Who are the sponsors? It's all behind closed doors," says portfolio manager Noel. "People leave because their love for the job and great compensation aren't there anymore, especially when there are a lot of great competitors with better work environments."
- Rival offers trump performance as a way to be promoted. "I feel the company is very reactive, and only responds when you have an offer from another firm," says Viola. "If I do good work, someone should tap me on the shoulder. That might mean recognition, validation, promotions or raises."
- Compensation without context. "I think they just manipulate the quantitative part of the bonus to balance the average bonus payout," says Edward. "If you have good numbers, they use the qualitative to bring you back within range. If you have a bad year, they use the qualitative to boost you up."
- Maternity leave as liability. When Candace took maternity leave, she worked hard to stay connected and participate in bi-weekly meetings. When she came back, she was surprised that the team hadn't planned well for her return.
- Stereotype of the underqualified, "pushy" woman. Nancy, who had five years of experience before starting as an intern at Westville, says her boss keeps assuming she's an undergraduate. And when she brings up any concerns, she senses her boss feels she's being aggressive or pushy.
- It can be a struggle to fit into male culture. When Nancy joined, men asked if she minded that they curse a lot. She recognizes there's an advantage to building a connection with the men, so she has added Marvel movies and Star Wars to her pop culture lexicon.

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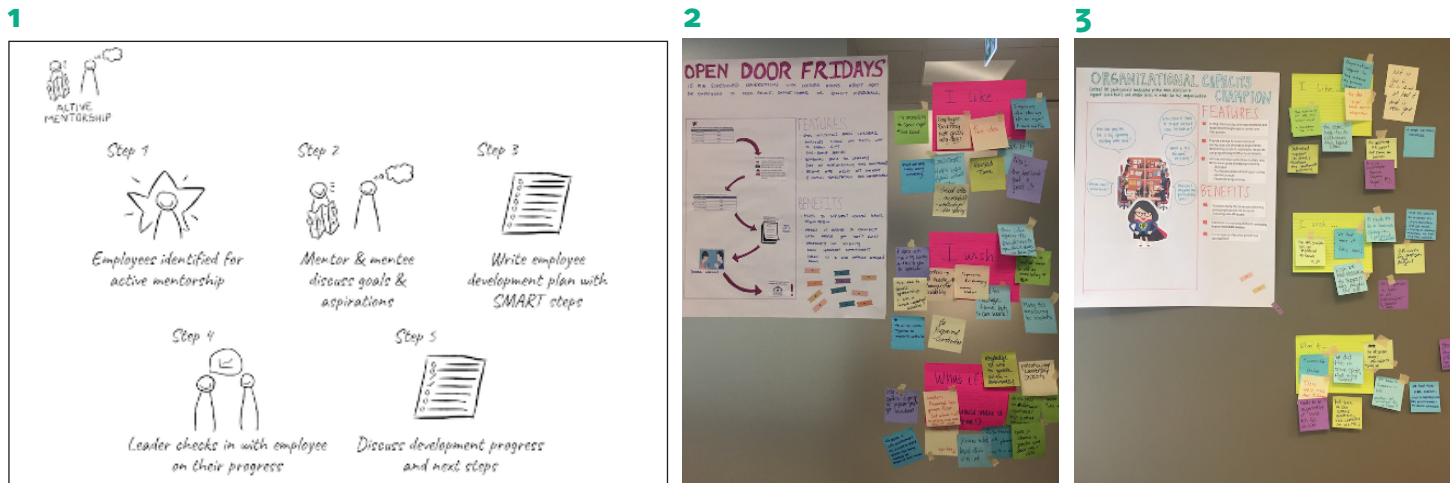


Image: 1. Active Mentorship Prototype sketch; 2. Open Door Friday concept prototype sketch; 3. Organizational Champions program prototype sketch

The solution

The insights from the team’s research reframed of the original challenge from gender inequality at the upper ranks, to the need for more inclusive access for both men and women. Arriving at solutions for Westville followed the development of personas - reflecting different employee experiences in the organization - at co-creation sessions with employees. The sessions then developed How Might We statements, which were used to produce ideas for possible solutions from those employees.

The Business Design Team developed solution prototypes based on those ideas, and presented them in an open house roadshow over two days where employees could drop by, interact with the prototypes and provide feedback.

Incorporating feedback from the roadshow, the team selected three top prototypes, tested them again with a select group of employees, then fine-tuned them based on discussions with members of Westville’s leadership team.

The leadership team agreed to the following three actions, based on those prototypes:

1. **Open Door Fridays.** Senior level leaders block off and make time available on their calendars for employee-led discussions from employee across all levels of the organization
 - Articulation of a series of SMART goals which would define success
 - The formation of an Advisory Board to keep the leadership honest and on track
 - Regular, publicly communicated progress updates
2. **Active Mentorship.** Leaders at all levels actively mentor employees two levels below on the organizational chart, providing coaching and development advice
 - An immediate pilot of one of the three final prototypes
3. **Stretch Opportunities.** Leaders provide stretch opportunities to employees so that they can gain experience with, and exposure to, ongoing and new business decisions.
 - A plan for subsequent pilots and iterations based on feedback
 - A full-scale employee experience program for all employees, designed and introduced within 12 months

But how to ensure that these actions happen?

Westville’s entire level Leadership team met to review the project from the start, all the way through to the final prototypes.

They then co-designed an implementation plan that included the following agreed milestones:

- A public commitment to the inclusion initiative

Results: What’s happened since

By the time this case was written, Westville had successfully piloted the Open Door Fridays and Active Mentorship programs, and within the first few months, had redesigned those programs based on initial feedback. The senior leadership team intended to continue the staged implementation of elements of the plan.