

Longitudinal Study by Stanford University Finds reachIRE Leadership Program Improves Skills and Increases Likelihood of Retention for Women in STEM

The world of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is evolving rapidly, driving innovation and playing a pivotal role in shaping our future. However, the gender gap in STEM presents unique challenges for advancing women, and the lack of diversity deprives organizations of the perspectives, talents, and leadership styles that women bring to the table.

While many initiatives aim to bridge the gap by improving hiring practices, it's equally important to address the high rates at which women leave STEM jobs. In fact, more than half are [likely to quit before the age of 35](#) – a trend that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with millions of women exiting the workforce altogether.

“Retaining women at work is crucially important right now. Otherwise, we’re going to just keep widening the gap more and more. We’re going backward.”

SHELLEY CORRELL, Sociology Professor at Stanford University & Professor of Organizational Behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business

In March 2020, Stanford’s VMware Women’s Leadership Innovation Labs evaluated the effects of a longitudinal intervention – [reachIRE’s Leadership Program](#) – to develop soft skills among early-career women. The study referenced that research shows that soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, resilience, and the ability to influence others and build strategic networks are more important than hard skills in predicting career success.

The group of women at a North American biotechnology firm began meeting with coaches and peers through the virtual platform, and the six-month intervention focused on developing

soft skills – interpersonal abilities such as negotiation, influencing coworkers, and strategic networking.

Over the six-month period, researchers found that the group of early-career women who participated in the reachIRE Leadership Program experienced significant improvements in their perceived soft skills – an average increase of 9% over pre-pandemic levels. Compared with a decrease of about 3.5% for a matched control group, the average effect was nearly 13%. The skills development also exceeded the results for a control “mixed group” of men and women. Notably, the program not only buffered against soft skill decay during the pandemic, but also facilitated skill growth.

The study also found that:

- The increased self assessments of soft skill competencies increased the likelihood of retention
- The group participating in the leadership program received better performance reviews from their managers than the control group

The study noted that such initiatives are particularly important in an environment with hybrid work in which it is likely that soft skill development is more challenging.

These findings underscore the significance of soft skill development initiatives, particularly for early-career women in STEM, offering valuable implications for retaining a diverse and skilled workforce in the face of evolving workplace dynamics.

[To read the full study, click here.](#)