

# CBJ

Corridor Business Journal

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## What's ahead for working women?

Pandemic forever changed workplace cultures for women — both positively and negatively



**HER WAY**  
THE CLIMB  
UPWARD

Members of the Des Moines chapter of FemCity, a networking and social group for working women, are shown at a recent meeting. CREDIT VIA ERIN HUIATT, FEMCITY

By Richard Pratt  
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The details vary slightly, but the numbers don't lie.

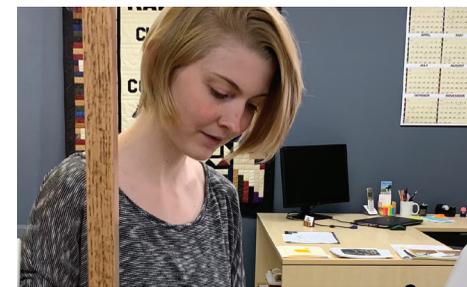
Politico reported that as of late July, 1.8 million women had left the workforce nationwide since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a Fortune article in January: "Women accounted for all of U.S. job losses in December (2020), dramatically underscoring the pandemic's unrelentingly disastrous impact on working women ... Actually, it's even worse than

that. Technically, women accounted for more than 111% of jobs lost last month. The U.S. economy lost a net 140,000 jobs in December, the first month since April that total payrolls declined. But women lost 156,000 jobs overall during the month, while men gained 16,000 jobs, according to an analysis by the National Women's Law Center (NWLC)."

And a June article from HRDive took it a step further. "Women have suffered the majority of pandemic-related job losses: More than 5.4 million net jobs from April

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### Rural Iowa growth

A handful of small Iowa towns grew their populations according to the 2020 census.

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### Spare Time coming to CR

The former Gordmans store in Cedar Rapids to be a new entertainment venue this fall.

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### First in Iowa

The Coralville Marriott has been reflagged as the Hyatt Regency.

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### New IC attractions

Retail stores, restaurants, a bowling alley and schools, coming to downtown Iowa City.

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### Next Week

The CBJ will recap the Coolest Places to Work event. Watch for the Corporate Meeting & Event Planner.

Corridor Business Journal  
2345 Landon Road, Ste. 100  
North Liberty, IA 52317

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PART V



Tiffany O'Donnell, CEO of the Cedar Rapids-based group Women Lead Change, is shown in the group's headquarters in downtown Cedar Rapids. CREDIT RICHARD PRATT

### HER WAY

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through the end of 2020, according to a January 2021 report from the (NWLC). A report NWLC released the following month noted an additional 275,000 women leaving the workforce in January, making women's participation in the workforce the lowest it's been since 1988."

But what's the path forward? Will women continue to struggle to gain traction as the nation's economy lurches through an uneven pandemic recovery — a recovery now being challenged anew by a worrisome rise in severe COVID-19 cases, primarily from the virus' Delta variant, and breakthrough infections among the previously vaccinated? Will those who left the workforce find a way to return, either to full- or part-time positions, or will their departures become longer-term, perhaps even permanent?

As the Corridor Business Journal wraps up its five-part series, "Her Way: The Climb Upward," we speak with leaders of organizations spearheading the effort to improve and expand women's roles and participation levels in the new economy — one that's been forever changed by an historic public health crisis and a resultant sea change in the composition and structure of the modern workforce.

### LEGISLATIVE ACTION HELPS, BUT CHILD CARE ISSUES REMAIN

One of the key issues impacting the availability of women in the workforce — a shortage of available and affordable child care options, the subject of Part 2 of our "Her Way" series — was addressed in some measure by the Iowa Legislature during the 2021 session.

The Legislature passed three child care-related bills, ranging from changing tax credits to increasing the number of children in unregulated child care facilities, in response to bipartisan calls for urgent action to address the issue.

But a key issue was not resolved: Al-

lowing more Iowans to be eligible for help with child care expenses. Advocates are seeking to raise the income eligibility level to receive child care assistance from 145% to 185% of the federal poverty level. Doing so would ease the substantial burden of child care costs, they say, making it financially feasible for more women to work outside the home.

Tiffany O'Donnell is CEO of Women Lead Change, a Cedar Rapids-based organization "dedicated to the development, advancement and promotion of women, their organizations, and to impacting the economy and future workforce." She acknowledged that despite recent legislative action, the child care crisis remains a barrier for women seeking to advance their careers.

"I think the challenge that child care has right now is workforce," she said. "We have examples in Cedar Rapids where we've lost 200-plus slots because a daycare had to close due to staffing issues. There are organizations who recognize that imperative. Ideally, we'd have some sort of a public-private partnership, or we can even have communities and companies come together to create child care for women, because it certainly remains a big barrier. And (with our kids back in school), it's going to be really interesting to see what women can do in a remote environment, because we know we were balancing so much before, and if we don't have to homeschool or take care of young children, imagine what we can do remotely."

Erin Huiatt is president of the Des Moines chapter of FemCity, a national organization focused on networking, seminars and other tools designed to help women succeed in the business world. She agreed that child care remains a critical, and largely unresolved, issue.

"Now that school is back in session, even though we did this a year ago, women are having to make those decisions again about whether they're keeping their children home," she said. "(If they do), that's going to take away time working on their business, or they may have to quit altogether. So those cons, even though I don't think they're as talked about now

as they were a year ago, they're definitely still happening. Those decisions are being made about what's going to be best for their family. And a lot of these women had great ideas. They started great things."

### SOME WOMEN'S CAREERS THRIVED DURING PANDEMIC

While countless women faced a wealth of challenges in both their personal and professional lives during the pandemic — and many have yet to recover — some have found ways to thrive.

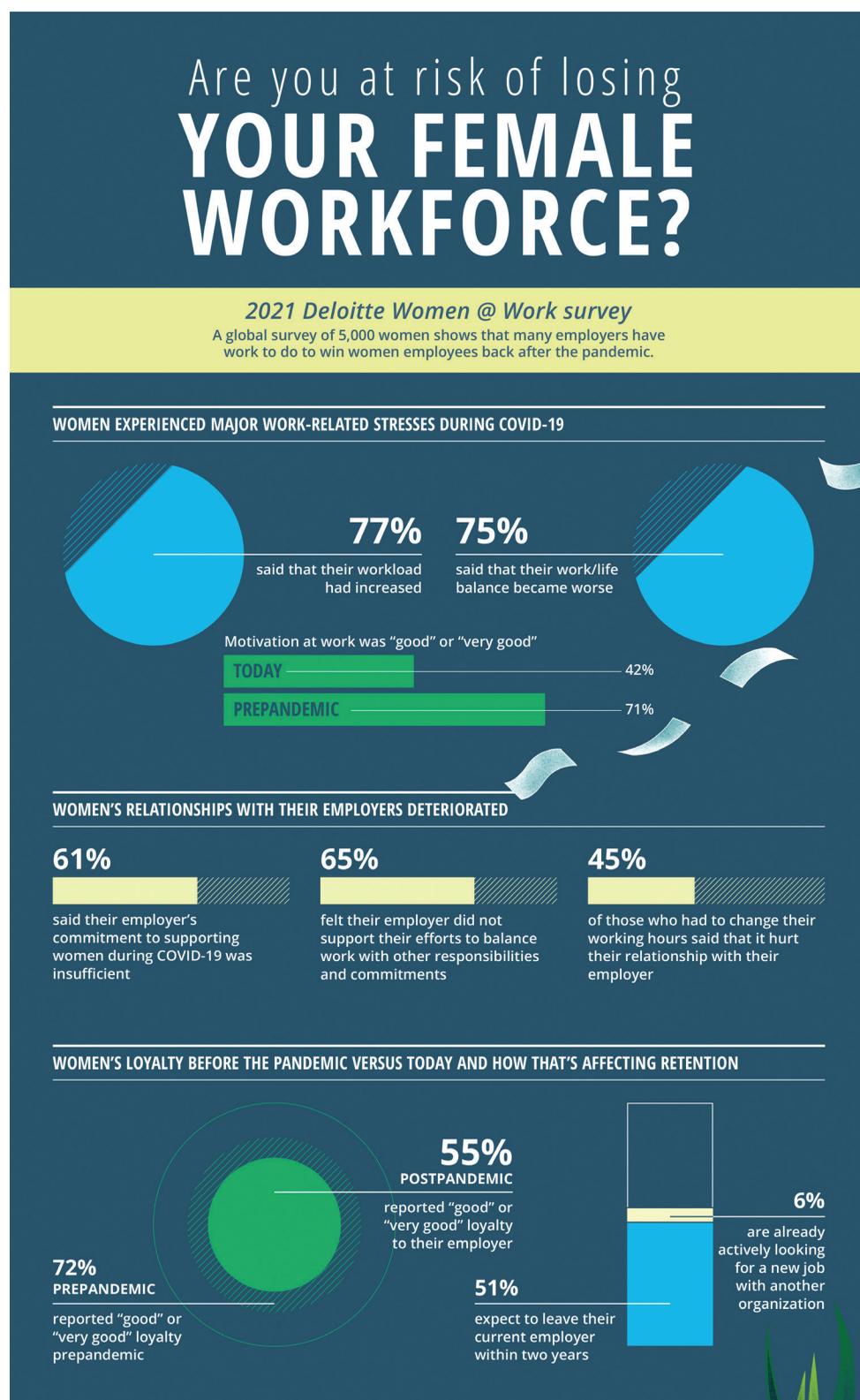
Ashley Leverty, a store market manager for Lenscrafters in northeast Cedar Rapids, is the current president of the Cedar Rapids-based Professional Women's Network, which was founded in 1979 to "assist wom-

en in their upward mobility in the professional and business world ... women helping women strengthen professions, develop networks, and exchange knowledge."

She said in recent months, she's been reconnecting with numerous women in her professional networks who have changed positions, or companies, since the pandemic began — many moving forward in their careers as a result.

"They're finding the different opportunities other companies are offering, realizing how certain businesses handled the whole pandemic," she said. "I think that's the most eye-opening. I wouldn't necessarily say (the pandemic) was a bad thing for females in general. Women are just resilient. If something's not working, we're going to figure out what works and push through."

Ms. O'Donnell noted that Women Lead



SOURCE: DELOITTE "WOMEN @ WORK" SURVEY, 2021

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PART V

Change recently published a white paper, in conjunction with the University of Illinois-Chicago, on the challenges facing professional women in the pandemic era. One of the study's surprising findings, she said, was that many women advanced their careers, even during the pandemic's disruptive peak.

"One of the questions we asked is, has your workload decreased or increased, and for many of them, their workload did increase," she noted. "And they were actually able to flex their abilities. So we've seen promotions come out of this as well – women having an opportunity to show what they could do."

### STRIVING TO AVOID COVID-19 SETBACKS

Optimism has reigned supreme in recent months, as COVID-19 vaccination rates have risen, and employees have grown more comfortable with returning to their workplaces and socially interacting.

Yet the surge in recent coronavirus cases, mostly involving the more contagious Delta variant, has raised concerns that in-person restrictions and mask requirements may return.

Ms. Leverty said she'll take each new challenge as it comes, again focusing on flexibility.

"Working in the medical field gives me the mindset that we're taking the right precautions," she said. "But we just don't know. It's a common theme through the last year and a half. That's just the way we're going to have

to do it. I'd love to have everything planned out, but I can't foresee that. If we have to wear masks, we'll wear masks, and if we have to social distance, that's what we'll do. We'll need the flexibility to be prepared for anything and everything. We have no idea what's going to happen next. That's just the reality."

Ms. O'Donnell said she's hoping any new pandemic-related challenges won't lead to setbacks in the progress that's been made on workplace flexibility and career re-training opportunities.

"I just worry that while the good news is, we've done it before and we know how to do it, our white paper also showed us that 80% of the people that we surveyed had mental health challenges," she said. "My concern is that if we are thrown back into this, the effects could feel exponentially worse. We've just had a taste of this. Going backwards now would (set us) more than two steps back from a mental health perspective. I just pray that's not the case."

### NEW OPPORTUNITIES, INTERACTION MODELS MOVING TO FOREFRONT

As a retail entity, Lenscrafters couldn't allow employees to work remotely long-term, even as pandemic restrictions tightened. Even so, Ms. Leverty said she was surprised — pleas-

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**"We'll need the flexibility to be prepared for anything and everything. We have no idea what's going to happen next. That's just the reality."**

- Ashley Leverty, President of Professional Women's Network



Members of the Professional Women's Network (PWN) gathered in 2019 to celebrate the group's 40th anniversary. CREDIT ASHLEY LEVERTY



# People you can bank on

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Vice President,  
Commercial Real Estate



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— SCOTT FRIAUF, PRESIDENT AT RINDERKNECHT

## WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PART V



**“But then you get backlash from people who don’t believe that you’re doing the right thing. That’s the biggest challenge — how to be socially responsible and (try to) make everybody happy, which of course you can’t do.”**

- Erin Huiatt, President of FemCity Des Moines Chapter



FemCity members are shown at a recent social gathering. CREDIT ERIN HUIATT

## HER WAY

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antly so — at the adjustments to policies and procedures adopted by her employer, especially since women comprise the store’s entire workforce.

“I had to be a little bit more flexible,” she said. “When we started to furlough people at the beginning (of the pandemic), we were very selective on how we did it, who was able to take care of their children, maybe a little bit more of, hey, this is going to be a furlough, a little less of a burden on them. And bringing them back, it was the same conversation. Do you feel safe going forward? Do you have child care? Will you need help? Just being a little more understanding if someone says their child is sick, or even if an (employee) themselves is sick, to tell them, do not come. I’ll figure it out without you.”

Lenscrafters has also stressed the importance of local networking, Ms. Leverty said.

“Even being with a large corporation, I’ve seen them tell people, ‘you need to network within your own communities,’ which is rare, and I’ve never seen a large corporation do it,” she said. “But they’re realizing that people need that human

connection, that local outreach.”

Ms. Huiatt said the biggest single topic discussed at FemCity’s networking meetings in recent months has been the notion of social responsibility. “A lot of people have brick and mortar shops,” she said. “So what does that look like with masks and all the things that are going on in our world, whether you own a business or not? It’s definitely taking a hit to business owners because they’re trying to do the right thing. But then you get backlash from people who don’t believe that you’re doing the right thing. That’s the biggest challenge — how to be socially responsible and (try to) make everybody happy, which of course you can’t do.”

Ms. O’Donnell said she’s been encouraged by the opportunities presented by remote work, and the resultant feasibility of hybrid work models.

“We saw the opportunity to work remotely as a real benefit to women in the workplace, because we’ve been clamoring for that kind of flexibility for a long time,” she said. “The pandemic pushed all of us to see what remote work looked like, and we saw some great results. We’re still seeing that, as some companies now decide to maybe not even go back, ever. Initially, no one imagined it would last this long,

and we saw this as a tremendous opportunity for women. It has benefited women from a flexibility standpoint. That being said, due to the amount of time that we’ve been working remotely, there are challenges. We’ve seen the data now that we’ve got millions of women that have dropped out of the workforce or stepped back.”

Yet Ms. O’Donnell said she foresees many of those women returning to the workforce — albeit not in the same role, or even the same field, as when they stepped away.

“What we’re seeing is women re-career-

ing more than ever before, learning new skills that weren’t in their previous industry,” she said. “We’re seeing that actually as an opportunity for companies and communities to recognize the imperative to upskill people, to retrain people. The pandemic prompted businesses to accelerate their automation, accelerate their AI. How are we as companies and a community upskilling and training people to be ready for these jobs of the future? Women will be taking part in those opportunities, because that’s where the opportunities will be.” CBJ

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**MARKET AFTER DARK**

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Cedar Rapids Downtown Farmers Market Aerial Photo Courtesy The Gazette