The gender pay gap: Why C-suite accountability matters more than ever

Source: hr-zone | **Author:** Sandi Wassmer | **Published:** April 27, 2026 | **PMS Relevance:** PMS RELATED | **Type:** Opinion/Commentary | **Geography:** Global

Source URL: https://hrzone.com/bridging-the-gender-pay-gap-why-c-suite-accountability-matter

Executive Summary

This article addresses the persistent gender pay gap in the UK, arguing that the primary obstacle to progress is misplaced organisational accountability rather than a lack of data or reporting mechanisms. The author contends that gender pay gap reporting has become an HR-owned compliance exercise, disconnected from genuine senior leadership engagement and strategic decision-making. Key evidence cited includes the observation that male graduates out-earn female peers within five years of leaving university, the existence of mandatory reporting for organisations with over 250 employees, and the continued underrepresentation of women in senior and high-paying roles in sectors such as technology and finance. The article also references research indicating that men negotiate salaries and request pay increases more frequently than women. The author concludes that closing the pay gap requires visible C-suite ownership, continuous rather than annual pay auditing, transparent pay structures, and targeted interventions such as returner programmes and inclusive recruitment. The piece frames pay equity as both a moral and business imperative, linking it to employer brand, retention, and productivity outcomes.

Key Insights

1. Gender pay gap reporting is frequently treated as an HR compliance task rather than a C-suite strategic responsibility, limiting its effectiveness as a driver of change.

2. The gender pay gap is rooted in structural factors including occupational segregation, caregiving-related career interruptions, and low senior-level female representation — not solely unequal pay for equal work.

3. Intersectionality is identified as an under-examined dimension, with factors such as ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background compounding pay disparities beyond gender alone.

Practical Takeaways

- Organisations moving from annual pay gap reporting to continuous pay auditing are positioned to identify disparities earlier and track progress more meaningfully over time.

- Senior leaders who can articulate the specific drivers of their organisation's pay gap, set measurable reduction targets, and report transparently on progress signal a shift from compliance to genuine accountability.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article presents a coherent structural argument distinguishing between HR-led compliance and C-suite strategic ownership, which reflects a genuine and widely documented organisational challenge. The identification of intersectionality as a necessary analytical lens adds nuance beyond standard gender pay gap discourse. Limitations: The article is almost entirely assertion-based. With the exception of a general reference to research on salary negotiation behaviour and a brief mention of a TUC report, no empirical studies, datasets, or specific statistics are cited to substantiate its claims. Figures such as 'male graduates out-earning peers within five years' are stated without a named source. The actionable insights section essentially restates the article's arguments without adding new evidence or specificity. Biases: The article adopts an explicitly normative stance, framing C-suite inaction as the central barrier to progress. This framing, while defensible, may underweight external structural factors — labour market conditions, legislative gaps, sectoral pay norms — that senior leaders cannot unilaterally address. The piece reads as advocacy rather than analysis.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organisations conducting annual gender pay gap reporting as a compliance requirement, with HR teams leading data collection, analysis, and narrative preparation while senior leaders review and sign off without deep engagement. Some organisations are described as implementing pay audits, inclusive recruitment practices, flexible working policies, mentoring and coaching programmes, and returner programmes, though these are presented as aspirational rather than as documented case examples.

Strategic Implications

The article signals a trend toward framing pay equity as a leadership governance issue rather than an HR operational matter, which has implications for how accountability is structured within performance management systems. The emphasis on continuous pay auditing over annual reporting cycles points toward an emerging expectation for real-time or quarterly monitoring of compensation equity as a standard leadership metric. The intersectionality argument suggests growing pressure on organisations to extend pay gap analysis beyond gender to include ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background, potentially expanding the scope of mandatory reporting obligations in the UK.

Validation Status: passed
