

APAC Special Report – Redefining Leadership

Key Insights

- Compared to five years ago, leaders today have worked in 2 times more domains – with experience in more industries, functions, and companies is becoming more important.
- Women going into leadership roles are more likely to benefit from working in more industries.
- Leaders are recognising and prioritising gaining AI literacy skills - actively engage with and understand the technology themselves, in order to pave the way for more informed decision making and agile change leadership.

Pei Ying CHUA

Head Economist, APAC
Economic Graph Research Institute
LinkedIn

APAC Special Report – Redefining Leadership

Overview

The traditional ladder to leadership is being replaced by a dynamic and flexible framework that better reflects the evolving nature of work and organisational needs. Today's leaders emerge from diverse experiences, roles, and skills, breaking away from the rigid, linear progression of the past. This shift acknowledges that leadership is not a one-size-fits-all journey but a multifaceted process shaped by innovation, collaboration, and adaptability. By redefining leadership pathways, organisations can unlock the full potential of their talent, foster inclusivity, and build a resilient workforce equipped to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

The LinkedIn Economic Graph is a digital representation of the global economy based on data from LinkedIn's platform. The Economic Graph is used to identify emerging trends and provide insights into economic and professional development. This report by LinkedIn's Economic Graph Research Institute studies leadership trends across the APAC region, focusing on senior leaders (VP or C-Suite) at large organisations with more than 1,000 employees.

The findings reveal a shift from traditional, linear career progressions to pathways shaped by the demand for broader, more versatile experiences across multiple domains (industries, functions, or companies) - furthermore, it suggests that experience across multiple countries is not as pertinent compared to experiences across multiple domains. We also find an increased emphasis on growing AI literacy and acquiring soft skills.

By examining these insights, we not only illuminate the career trajectories of today's leaders but also provide actionable, data-driven recommendations for cultivating the next generation of leaders.

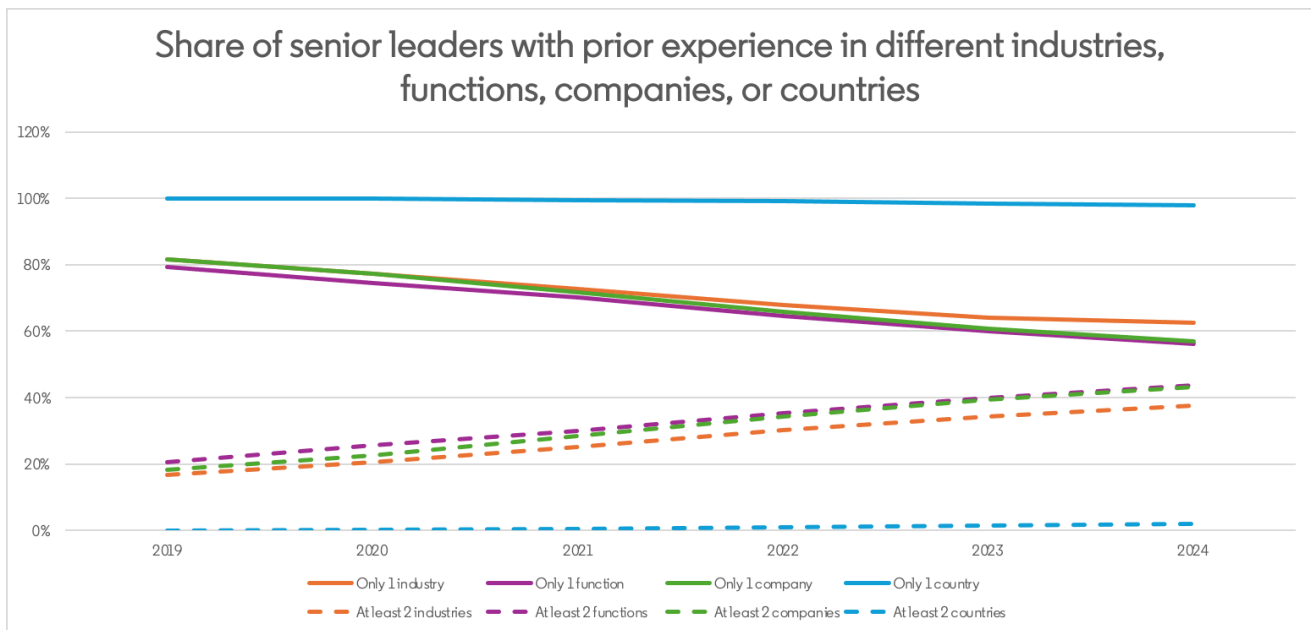
APAC Special Report – Redefining Leadership

Compared to five years ago, leaders today have worked in more domains.

Experience in more industries, functions, and companies is becoming more important.

Our research reveals that across APAC, it is now over twice as common for leaders to have worked in at least two different industries, functions, or companies - signalling a strong preference for versatile, cross-functional expertise. The share of leaders who have worked in at least two different industries has grown from 17% in 2019 to 38% in 2024; the share of leaders who have worked in at least two different functions has grown from 21% in 2019 to 44% in 2024; and the share of leaders who have worked in at least two different companies has grown from 18% in 2019 to 43% in 2024.

We also analysed the number of leaders who have work experience in at least two different countries, and found that while experience in more countries has also become more common, the effects are far less prominent. Less than 2% of leaders have worked in two or more countries - this is relatively small compared to the share of leaders who have worked in two or more industries, functions, or companies.



Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph

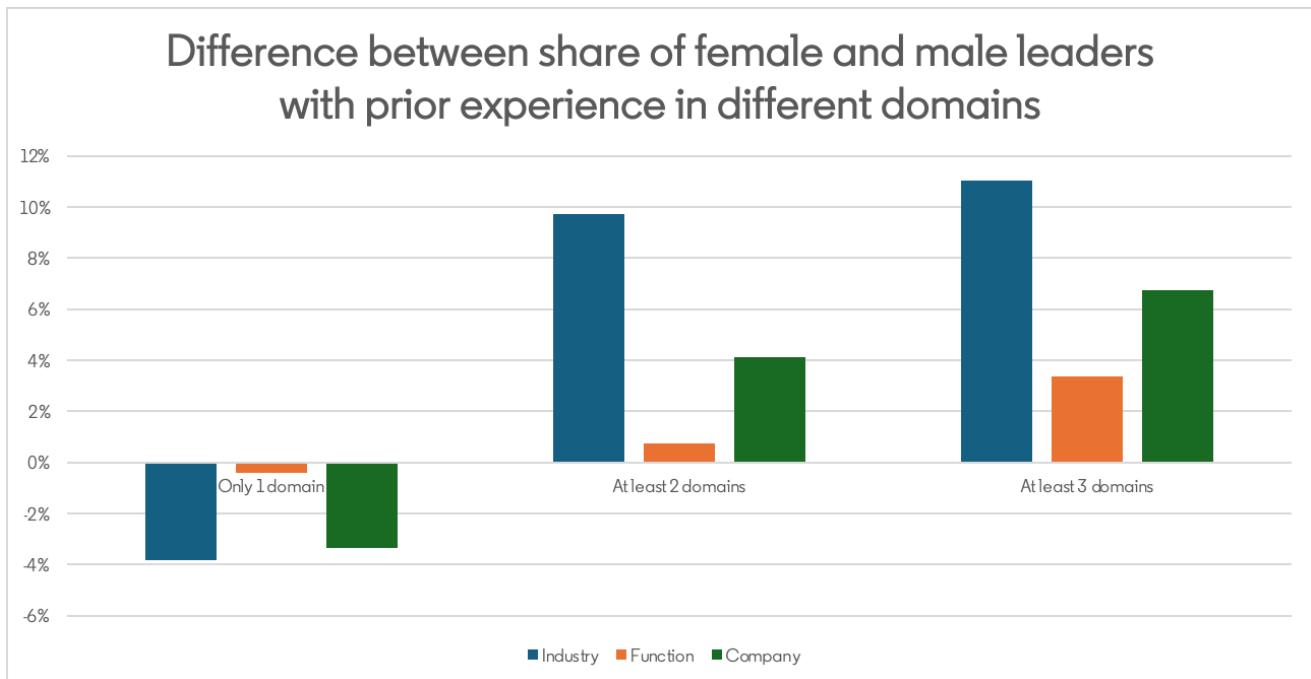
Notes: Median share of senior leaders with prior experience in different industries, functions, companies, or countries. The countries included in this analysis are Australia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

APAC Special Report – Redefining Leadership

Women are more likely to benefit from working in more industries.

The Economic Graph Research Institute’s research has previously recognised the existence of gender gaps in leadership. Our research on gender trends in leadership highlights that this disparity often begins at the earliest stages of career advancement, with fewer women moving from individual contributor roles into managerial positions—a phenomenon often referred to as the “broken rung” in the ladder.

When we look at prior experiences of leaders of both genders, we notice that females tend to benefit from having more diverse experiences, in particular from working in more industries. The share of female leaders who have experience in at least two industries, functions, or companies is higher than that for males by 9.7%, 0.7% and 4.1% respectively. This difference becomes even greater when looking at leaders who have experience in at least three domains - rising to 11.0% for industries, 3.4% for functions, and 6.7% for companies respectively.



Source: LinkedIn Economic Graph

Notes: Median difference between the share of female versus male senior leaders with prior experience in different industries, functions, or companies. The countries included in this analysis are Australia, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the Philippines.

C-Suites of the future will need a new suite of skills

AI literacy is rising among business leaders

As AI becomes more deeply embedded in our daily professional lives, developing AI literacy - the fundamental ability to understand and confidently use AI tools - will be essential for staying relevant and adding value. Scaling AI adoption is key for businesses to unlock growth in 2025, and it's critical for business leaders to inspire and lead this change by example.

Globally, we've found that 3 times more C-suite executives are adding AI literacy skills to their profiles, compared to two years ago. This number is consistent in Singapore and India, and even higher in Australia at 5 times more.

Moreover, globally, leaders are also 1.2 times more likely to add AI literacy skills compared to the rest of the workforce, indicating that senior leaders are not only championing AI adoption but are also equipping themselves to lead by example in an AI-driven world. This is slightly more pronounced in Australia (1.3 times), while slightly lower in India (1.1 times), and notably, there is no difference in Singapore.

Looking deeper, it's important to note that both Singapore and India also have a higher share of C-suite executives and non-C-suite professionals with AI literacy skills - over 1.5 times that of the global average. This suggests that Singapore and India may not show a significant gap in the rate of AI literacy development between C-suite and non-C-suite roles because AI skills are already more prevalent across their workforces. The smaller differential in these countries does not indicate a lack of C-suite commitment to AI, but rather reflects a more AI-literate talent base overall.

Our findings show the commitment of C-suite leaders to upskilling themselves in AI literacy - the most effective leaders are those who don't simply delegate AI initiatives - they actively engage with and understand the technology themselves, in order to pave the way for more informed decision making and agile change leadership.

APAC Special Report – Redefining Leadership

Soft skills remain important.

In the ever-changing landscape of work, soft skills have become an essential pillar of effective leadership. As new tools and technologies emerge, the value of human-centred abilities like emotional intelligence, communication, adaptability, and conflict resolution remains undeniable. These skills are key to fostering collaboration, building trust, and navigating the complexities of interpersonal dynamics.

Over the past five years, there has been a notable shift in the growth of skills among senior leaders, with soft skills gaining particular prominence in the last year. The fastest growing soft skills among leaders includes:

- Communication
- Negotiation
- Presentation
- Problem Solving
- Strategic Thinking

In a world where automation increasingly handles routine tasks, the ability to lead with empathy, inspire creativity, and manage change is more critical than ever, underscoring the enduring relevance of soft skills in modern leadership.

Takeaways: Strategies for building the next generation of leaders

In this rapidly evolving world of work, leadership is being redefined by complexity, agility, and cross-domain expertise. As the pace of change accelerates, it's clear that traditional pathways focused on linear progression and narrow expertise are no longer enough. Organisations need to rethink how they identify, grow, and support future leaders - focusing on adaptability, inclusivity, and AI literacy as core capabilities.

1. Prioritise and enable versatile career pathways - Our data shows a clear shift: today's leaders are more likely to have worked across multiple industries, functions, and companies than ever before. Encouraging talent mobility, both laterally and across sectors, enables emerging leaders to build the kind of broad, adaptable skillsets that modern leadership demands. This shift towards career versatility not only enhances decision-making but also fosters a deeper understanding of business complexity.

2. Close the gender gaps in leadership progression - Addressing the “broken rung” remains critical. Women continue to face barriers at the first step into management, which in turn limits representation at senior levels. However, our findings suggest that diverse professional experiences, especially across industries, can be a key accelerator for women's leadership progression. Organisations should actively create pathways for women to access a broader range of roles and industries, and support this through mentorship, sponsorship, and equitable promotion practices.

3. Double down on AI literacy - With three times more C-suite executives globally adding AI literacy to their profiles compared to two years ago, it's clear that leaders are no longer just overseeing AI strategies - they're participating in them. Building AI literacy across the leadership team ensures companies are not only future-proofed but also led by individuals who understand the practical capabilities, limitations, and implementation considerations of AI.

4. Integrate Human-Centred skills into leadership development - As technology evolves, so too must the human side of leadership. Communication, negotiation, strategic thinking, and emotional intelligence are emerging as key differentiators in a tech-enabled environment. The most effective leaders will be those who combine digital understanding with the ability to motivate, influence, and build trust - skills that cannot be automated.

As the leadership landscape continues to evolve, the most successful organisations will be those that invest in building diverse, well-rounded, and forward-looking leadership pipelines. By embracing a more holistic approach, one that blends technical proficiency with human insight, and values experience across domains and demographics, companies can cultivate leaders who are not only equipped to navigate today's challenges but also ready to shape tomorrow's opportunities.

Methodology

Data and Privacy. This body of work represents the world seen through LinkedIn data, drawn from the anonymized and aggregated profile information of LinkedIn's 1+ billion members around the world. As such, it is influenced by how members choose to use the platform, which can vary based on professional, social, and regional culture, as well as overall site availability and accessibility. In publishing these insights from LinkedIn's Economic Graph, we want to provide accurate statistics while ensuring our members' privacy. As a result, all data show aggregated information for the corresponding period following strict data quality thresholds that prevent disclosing any information about specific individuals.

Executives / Senior Leaders. In this report, executives / senior leaders are defined as LinkedIn members who have direct reports and leadership responsibilities for one business function or unit or for the entire business function. They are in C-Suite level or VP-level type roles. This report only analyses executives / senior leaders from large companies.

Large Companies. A company's size is determined by the 12-month average number of LinkedIn members who listed an active position in the listed company for the 12-month period of October 2023 to October 2024. We limit this analysis to large companies (1,000 or more global employees).

Gender Classification. Gender identity isn't binary and we recognise that some LinkedIn members identify beyond the traditional gender constructs of "man" and "woman." If not explicitly self-identified, we have inferred the gender of members included in this analysis either by the pronouns used on their LinkedIn profiles, or inferred on the basis of first name. Members whose gender could not be inferred as either man or woman were excluded from any gender-centered analysis.