(REVIEW ARTICLE)

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Addressing gender-specific challenges in project and event management: Strategies for women entrepreneurs

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Abstract

This review paper explores the gender-specific challenges faced by women in project and event management, highlighting key issues such as workplace culture and bias, limited access to resources and networks, and work-life balance difficulties. It identifies strategies for overcoming these barriers, including personal and professional development, building supportive networks, and implementing inclusive organizational and policy changes. The paper underscores the need for a comprehensive approach involving individuals, organizations, and policymakers to foster gender equality in the industry. It also emphasizes the potential positive impact of these strategies on enhancing diversity, innovation, and overall industry growth.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Project Management; Event Management; Workplace Bias; Networking

1 Introduction

Project and event management are vital components of the modern economy, encompassing various activities from planning and coordinating events to overseeing complex projects across various industries (Allen, Harris, & Jago, 2022). These roles require a unique blend of leadership, organizational, and communication skills, making them essential in corporate and entrepreneurial settings. There has been a noticeable increase in women entering these fields in recent years, driven by broader societal changes and initiatives to promote gender diversity and inclusion in the workforce. Women entrepreneurs are increasingly stepping into roles traditionally dominated by men, bringing fresh perspectives and innovative project and event management approaches. This shift reflects changing societal norms and highlights the importance of fostering an inclusive environment that encourages diverse leadership styles and ideas (Greenwell, Danzey-Bussell, & Shonk, 2024).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the growing presence of women in project and event management, they continue to face a unique set of challenges that can hinder their professional growth and success. These challenges are often gender-specific and rooted in longstanding societal norms and biases in the workplace. Women frequently encounter barriers such as gender bias, which can manifest in subtle yet impactful ways, including unequal access to opportunities, pay disparities, and limited representation in leadership positions (Cho, Park, Han, Sung, & Park, 2021). Additionally, the balancing act between professional responsibilities and personal life, often exacerbated by societal expectations, places extra burdens on women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. These issues are further compounded by the lack of supportive networks and mentorship opportunities, which are crucial for career development and advancement in these fields. Such challenges not only affect individual women but also have broader implications for organizational diversity and the overall innovation capacity within the industry.

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1.2   Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of this paper is to explore and understand the gender-specific challenges women entrepreneurs face in project and event management. This exploration aims to shed light on the systemic issues contributing to these challenges, providing a comprehensive overview of the factors at play. In doing so, the paper seeks to identify and propose effective strategies that can be implemented to overcome these barriers, thereby supporting the growth and success of women in these fields. The scope of the paper includes a detailed analysis of workplace culture, access to resources, and the role of personal and professional development in addressing these challenges. Additionally, the paper will discuss the importance of organizational and policy changes in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for women. By addressing these areas, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on gender equality in the workplace and offer practical solutions that individuals and organizations can adopt. Ultimately, this research seeks to empower women entrepreneurs by providing them with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate and succeed in the competitive fields of project and event management.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Historical Context

Broader societal trends, including traditional gender roles and labor market segmentation, have shaped women's historical involvement in project and event management (Lindsey, 2020). In these fields' early stages, project management was overwhelmingly male-dominated, particularly in industries like construction and engineering. This gender imbalance mirrored wider societal norms, where men occupied most professional and leadership roles while women were often confined to domestic or administrative positions (Ford, Atkinson, Harding, & Collinson, 2021).

In event management, while women were more present, they were typically involved in planning social or community events, which were seen as extensions of their traditional roles in household management. These roles were often undervalued and lacked formal recognition as professional careers. The scope of event management expanded significantly in the latter half of the 20th century, incorporating corporate events, large-scale public gatherings, and specialized events like conferences and trade shows. Despite this expansion, the professionalization of event management and recognition of it as a viable career path for women were slow to develop (Azad & Pritchard, 2023).

The feminist movements of the mid-20th century began to challenge these traditional roles, advocating for women's rights to equal opportunities in all spheres of life, including the workplace. This era saw a gradual increase in women entering higher education and professional fields, including project and event management. However, women often faced significant barriers, such as gender discrimination and limited access to professional networks, which restricted their career advancement.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed further changes as societal attitudes towards gender roles evolved and more women entered the workforce in various roles, including management and leadership positions. However, this period also highlighted persistent challenges, such as the "glass ceiling," where women could see but not attain senior leadership roles, and the "glass cliff," where women in leadership positions were more likely to be placed in precarious situations with a high risk of failure (Bruckmüller, Ryan, Rink, & Haslam, 2014; Sabharwal, 2015).

2.2   Current Trends

Today, the participation of women in project and event management is increasingly recognized, though gender disparities remain significant. Industry reports and academic studies indicate a growing presence of women in these fields, particularly in entry-level and mid-level positions. However, women continue to be underrepresented in senior management and leadership roles.

The Project Management Institute (PMI) and other industry bodies have documented the increasing involvement of women in project management, noting that while progress has been made, women still face barriers to advancement. These barriers include gender bias, a lack of mentorship opportunities, and fewer networking chances than their male counterparts. The PMI reports that women are more likely to work in industries with lower project budgets and less complexity, which can limit their experience and exposure to high-profile projects (Lloyd-Walker, French, & Crawford, 2016).

Event management has seen a significant rise in female entrepreneurship, with many women starting their event-planning businesses. This trend is partly driven by the flexible nature of event management, which can appeal to those seeking to balance work and family responsibilities. Additionally, the skills required in event management—such as

organizational abilities, attention to detail, and interpersonal skills—are often culturally aligned with traditional female roles, although this alignment can sometimes reinforce limiting stereotypes (Dzubinski, Diehl, & Taylor, 2019; Eyo-Udo, 2024).

Despite these advances, challenges persist. Women are still less likely to hold senior roles, and the industries with the most prestigious and highest-paying positions remain male-dominated. For example, women's participation is particularly low in large-scale infrastructure projects and international corporate events. Moreover, the gender pay gap remains a significant issue, with women often earning less than men for similar roles and responsibilities (S. Afolabi, 2024; S. O. Afolabi, Owoade, Iyere, & Nwobi, 2024).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated these disparities. Women in project and event management have faced increased job insecurity, workload, and pressure, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. The shift to remote work has offered some flexibility but has also blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, often increasing the burden on women. The pandemic has underscored the need for more robust support systems and equitable policies to support women in these fields (Craig & Churchill, 2021).

2.3 Identified Challenges

The literature identifies several key challenges women in project and event management face, often rooted in broader societal and cultural biases.

2.3.1 Gender Bias and Stereotyping

Gender bias remains a pervasive issue. Women in these industries often face stereotypes that question their leadership abilities and technical skills. This bias can manifest in various ways, from being passed over for promotions to receiving less critical or high-profile projects. Such biases are not always overt; they can be subtle and systemic, often reflected in the evaluation criteria for performance and the language used in feedback and job descriptions.

The "glass ceiling" concept illustrates how women may advance to a certain level within an organization but then face invisible barriers to further progression. This is often due to gender bias, lack of mentorship, and exclusion from informal networks where key decisions are made. Moreover, women who do break through these barriers often encounter the "glass cliff," where they are placed in leadership roles during times of crisis, increasing their likelihood of failure and reinforcing negative stereotypes (Bruckmüller et al., 2014; Sabharwal, 2015).

2.3.2 Work-Life Balance

Balancing work and personal life remains a significant challenge, particularly for women who often bear a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities. The demands of project and event management—such as irregular hours, travel, and the need for constant availability—can be especially challenging. This pressure is compounded by societal expectations that women should prioritize family and caregiving duties over their careers.

The lack of flexible working arrangements and supportive workplace policies exacerbates this issue. While some organizations offer parental leave and flexible hours, these are not universally available and may not be utilized due to fear of career repercussions or stigma associated with taking advantage of these benefits. Women often face a "double bind," where they are penalized professionally for prioritizing family responsibilities but also face societal judgment if they appear too career-focused (Animashaun, Familoni, & Onyebuchi, 2024; Nguyen, 2015).

2.3.3 Limited Access to Networks and Mentorship

Access to professional networks and mentorship is critical for career advancement, yet project and event management women often find themselves excluded from these opportunities. Traditional networking spaces and events can be dominated by men, creating an environment where women may feel unwelcome or out of place. This exclusion can limit their access to information, opportunities for collaboration, and visibility within the industry.

Mentorship is another area where women face challenges. While having a mentor can provide valuable guidance and support, finding mentors—particularly female mentors in senior positions—can be difficult in male-dominated industries. The lack of female role models can also affect the aspirations of younger women entering the field, as they may struggle to see a clear path to leadership (Adebayo, Paul, Jane Osareme, & Eyo-Udo, 2024; Read, Fisher, & Juran, 2020).

2.3.4 Organizational Culture and Practices

Organizational culture plays a significant role in shaping women's experiences in the workplace. Cultures that are competitive, hierarchical, or nost supportive of diversity can create environments where women feel marginalized or undervalued. This can be particularly true in sectors where project and event management intersect with more traditional industries, such as construction or engineering, where conservative attitudes towards gender roles may persist.

Organizational practices such as recruitment, performance evaluation, and promotion criteria often reflect unconscious biases that disadvantage women. For example, criteria emphasizing long hours or constant availability may disproportionately impact women, who are more likely to have caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, informal social activities critical for networking and career advancement may not be inclusive, further isolating women from important career development opportunities.

2.3.5 Economic and Structural Barriers

Economic factors and structural barriers also play a role in the challenges faced by women in these fields. Women are more likely to work in sectors of the economy that are less secure or lower-paying, which can limit their ability to access the same level of resources and opportunities as men. This is particularly relevant in event management, where many women operate as freelancers or small business owners and face funding, marketing, and business growth challenges.

The broader economic environment, including wage gaps and employment instability factors, further exacerbates these challenges. Women, particularly women of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often face multiple layers of discrimination and disadvantage, which can compound the difficulties they face in advancing their careers (Adikaram & Razik, 2023; Obi, Okechukwu, & Egbo, 2017).

2.3.6 The Impact of Intersectionality

Intersectionality—the idea that individuals experience discrimination differently based on overlapping social identities—adds another layer of complexity to the challenges faced by women in project and event management. Women who are also members of other marginalized groups, such as racial or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, or people with disabilities, may face compounded discrimination and barriers. For instance, women of color may experience both gender and racial discrimination, affecting their access to networks, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities. Similarly, LGBTQ+ women may face additional biases related to sexual orientation or gender identity, further complicating their professional experiences. Recognizing and addressing these intersecting factors is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies to support all women in these fields (Horner-Johnson, 2021; Ivanov, 2024).

2.3.7 The Role of Leadership and Corporate Governance

The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership and corporate governance roles is both a symptom and a cause of gender disparities in project and event management. Leadership is crucial in setting the tone for organizational culture, policies, and practices. A lack of diversity at the top can result in policies and practices that are not inclusive or supportive of gender diversity. Conversely, increasing the representation of women in leadership positions can positively impact the entire organization. Women leaders can serve as role models, mentor other women, and advocate for policies that support diversity and inclusion. They can also help challenge stereotypes and biases by demonstrating that women can excel in leadership roles (Alli, Lin, Thorndyke, Parekh, & Núñez, 2021).

2.3.8 Global and Regional Differences

The challenges faced by women in project and event management can vary significantly depending on the regional and cultural context. For example, women in some countries may face more pronounced gender discrimination and legal barriers, such as restrictions on employment opportunities or access to education. In other regions, cultural norms and expectations may significantly limit women's career opportunities.

Globalization and the international nature of many projects and events can also present unique challenges and opportunities. Women working on international projects may face different cultural attitudes towards gender and must navigate complex cross-cultural dynamics. At the same time, globalization can also provide opportunities for women to break into new markets and networks (Bowdin, Allen, Harris, McDonnell, & O'toole, 2012).

2.4   Conclusion

The literature on gender-specific challenges in project and event management underscores the complexity and multifaceted nature of women's issues in these fields. While there has been progress in increasing women's participation and visibility, significant barriers remain, including persistent gender bias, work-life balance challenges, limited access to networks and mentorship, and structural and economic obstacles.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes personal and professional development for women, the creation of supportive networks and mentorship opportunities, and significant changes at the organizational and policy levels. This approach should also consider the intersectional nature of these challenges, recognizing that women from different backgrounds may face unique and compounded barriers. Ultimately, achieving gender equality in project and event management will benefit individual women and enhance the overall diversity, creativity, and effectiveness of these industries. By leveraging the talents and perspectives of all individuals, organizations can foster a more inclusive and dynamic professional environment that drives innovation and growth.

3   Gender-Specific Challenges in Project and Event Management

3.1   Workplace Culture and Bias

In project and event management, as in many other industries, workplace culture and gender bias play significant roles in shaping women's professional experiences and advancement opportunities. These biases often manifest in both overt and subtle ways, creating an environment where women may feel undervalued, overlooked, or even excluded. For instance, women in these fields frequently encounter skepticism regarding their capabilities, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the "prove it again" bias. This bias requires women to repeatedly demonstrate their competence and qualifications, often more so than their male counterparts, to gain the same recognition and opportunities (Je, Khoo, & Yang, 2023; Olutimehin, Ofodile, Ejibe, Odunaiya, & Soyombo, 2024b).

Additionally, workplace culture in many organizations continues to reflect traditional gender norms that undervalue the contributions of women. This can be seen in the persistence of gendered job roles, where women are often funneled into administrative or supportive positions rather than leadership or technical roles. Even when women achieve leadership positions, they may face challenges related to stereotype threat, where they feel pressure to conform to traditional gender expectations or risk being perceived negatively. This can lead to self-censorship, where women may downplay their achievements or avoid asserting their ideas, further perpetuating gender disparities in the workplace (Rouhanizadeh & Kermanshachi, 2020). Moreover, predominantly male leadership in these industries can create an "old boys' club" atmosphere, where informal decision-making and networking happen in male-dominated spaces. Women may be excluded from these crucial conversations, impacting their visibility and access to career advancement opportunities. This exclusion can be particularly pronounced in industries where project and event management intersect with traditionally male-dominated sectors like construction, engineering, or finance (Animashaun et al., 2024; Ezeh, Ogbu, Ikevuje, & George, 2024).

3.2   Access to Resources and Networks

Access to resources, including financial support, mentorship, and professional networks, is crucial for project and event management career development. However, women often face significant disparities in accessing these resources, hindering their entrepreneurial and professional growth. Financial resources, such as projects or business venture funding, are often less accessible to women due to systemic biases in lending practices and investment communities. Research has shown that women entrepreneurs, including those in project and event management, receive less venture capital funding than their male counterparts. This disparity is attributed to biased perceptions of risk and competency and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles within financial institutions (Avnimelech & Rechter, 2023; Fackelmann & De Concini, 2020).

Mentorship and professional networks are equally critical for career advancement, providing guidance, support, and access to opportunities. However, women frequently find themselves at a disadvantage in these areas. Male-dominated networks can be less welcoming or accessible to women, who may lack the same level of informal connections that men often build through social or professional settings. This lack of networking opportunities can limit women's visibility and career progression, as networking and informal relationships influence many job opportunities and promotions (Snellman & Solal, 2023). The scarcity of female mentors and role models in senior positions further compounds this challenge. Without visible examples of successful women in project and event management, aspiring female professionals may struggle to find mentors who understand their specific challenges. This mentorship gap affects career

development and contributes to a lack of confidence and a sense of isolation among women in these fields (Coleman, 2020).

3.3 Work-Life Balance

Balancing professional responsibilities with personal life is a challenge that disproportionately affects women, particularly in the demanding fields of project and event management. These industries often require long hours, high levels of commitment, and the ability to manage stress and unpredictability—factors that can be difficult to reconcile with family and personal responsibilities. The traditional expectation that women should be the primary caregivers in the family adds a layer of complexity, often placing women in the position of having to make difficult choices between their career aspirations and personal lives.

Many organizations' lack of flexible working arrangements and supportive policies exacerbates this issue. While some companies have begun to adopt more family-friendly policies, such as remote work options or flexible hours, these are not yet widespread and are often limited to certain organizational roles or levels. Even when such policies exist, a cultural stigma can be associated with using them, with employees fearing that they will be seen as less committed or competent (Beauregard, Adamson, Kunter, Miles, & Roper, 2020; Kossek & Lee, 2021).

Furthermore, the impact of these work-life balance challenges extends beyond individual women to affect the overall diversity and inclusivity of the industry. When women are forced to leave the workforce or reduce their hours due to caregiving responsibilities, organizations lose valuable talent and diversity of thought, which are critical for innovation and growth. This attrition also perpetuates the underrepresentation of women in senior roles, as fewer women can gain the experience and visibility needed to ascend to leadership positions (McDowall, 2023).

The issue of work-life balance is also closely linked to broader societal norms and expectations. In many cultures, the ideal of the "ideal worker" who is always available and fully dedicated to their job is still prevalent, making it challenging for women and men to pursue a more balanced approach to work and life. Changing these norms requires organizational policy changes and a cultural shift towards valuing diverse working styles and recognizing the importance of work-life balance for overall well-being and productivity (Adebayo et al., 2024; Ejibe, Olutimehin, & Nwankwo, 2024).

4 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

4.1 Personal and Professional Development

One of the most critical strategies for overcoming gender-specific challenges in project and event management is focusing on personal and professional development. Women in these fields often face unique obstacles that require tailored approaches to skill enhancement, confidence building, and leadership training. Developing these areas can help women navigate the industry's complexities and position themselves for success (Cigala, Roder, & Kreibich, 2021).

Skill enhancement is foundational to professional growth. Women should seek opportunities for continuous learning through formal education, workshops, or on-the-job training. Key skills in project and event management include project planning, budget management, risk assessment, negotiation, and communication. By mastering these skills, women can enhance their credibility and effectiveness. Additionally, pursuing certifications, such as the Project Management Professional (PMP) or Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), can provide formal recognition of their expertise and commitment to the field (Adebayo et al., 2024; S. O. Afolabi et al., 2024).

Confidence building is equally crucial, as many women experience self-doubt or imposter syndrome, particularly in male-dominated environments. Confidence-building strategies include seeking mentorship, engaging in public speaking opportunities, and actively participating in industry forums. These activities can help women articulate their values, assert their ideas, and establish themselves as leaders. Leadership training programs specifically designed for women can also be highly beneficial. These programs often address navigating workplace dynamics, strategic decision-making, and effective communication. They also provide a supportive environment where women can share experiences and strategies for overcoming common challenges (Darnell, 2023; Szilak, 2023).

Another critical aspect of personal and professional development is self-advocacy. Women must learn to negotiate effectively for better roles, salaries, and resources. This includes understanding their worth in the marketplace, setting clear career goals, and articulating their achievements and potential contributions to employers and stakeholders. Self-advocacy also involves building a personal brand, which can be enhanced through professional networking, public speaking, and publishing articles or blogs on industry-specific platforms (Beauregard et al., 2020; Darnell, 2023).

4.2   Building Supportive Networks

Networking and mentorship are powerful tools for career advancement and overcoming the challenges faced by women in project and event management. Building supportive networks provides access to valuable resources, opportunities, and advice essential for professional growth. However, women often find themselves excluded from traditional networks, which tend to be male-dominated.

Creating and leveraging supportive networks involves actively seeking and participating in professional associations, industry conferences, and networking events. Women-specific networks and organizations can be particularly beneficial, as they provide a space to share experiences, challenges, and strategies unique to women in the industry. These groups often offer mentorship programs, where experienced professionals guide less experienced women, offering insights into career development, work-life balance, and navigating workplace challenges.

Mentorship programs are crucial for providing guidance and support, especially in fields where women are underrepresented. Mentors can help mentees set realistic career goals, navigate complex work environments, and develop necessary skills. They also provide a model of successful career paths and demonstrate that leadership and high-level positions are attainable for women. Mentorship should be seen as a two-way street, where mentors and mentees learn and grow from the relationship (Adesina, Iyelolu, & Paul, 2024; Olutimehin, Ofodile, Ejibe, Odunaiya, & Soyombo, 2024a).

In addition to traditional networking and mentorship, digital platforms offer new avenues for building connections. Online communities, social media groups, and professional networking sites like LinkedIn allow women to connect with a broader audience, share knowledge, and find mentorship opportunities (Kalina, 2022). These platforms can be especially useful for women who may not have access to in-person networking events or want to connect with a more diverse group of professionals. It is also important for women to advocate for and support each other in the workplace. This can involve championing the achievements of female colleagues, providing constructive feedback, and working together to create a more inclusive work environment. By building a strong community, women can collectively challenge discriminatory practices and push for greater gender equality in the industry (Madsen, Townsend, & Scribner, 2020).

4.3   Organizational and Policy Changes

While individual efforts are important, organizational and policy changes are crucial for creating a more equitable environment for women in project and event management. Companies and policymakers play a significant role in shaping workplace culture and practices that support gender equality.

Organizations should implement inclusive policies that promote diversity and address gender bias. This includes adopting transparent recruitment, promotion, and pay practices to ensure that women have equal opportunities for advancement. Companies should also provide training on unconscious bias and create channels for reporting and addressing discrimination or harassment. Establishing clear diversity goals and monitoring progress can help organizations stay accountable and committed to gender equality. Flexible working arrangements are another essential component of supportive workplace policies. Offering remote work, flexible hours, and part-time positions can help employees balance work and personal responsibilities. This flexibility is particularly important for women, who often bear the brunt of caregiving duties (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). By providing these options, companies can retain talented employees and create a more inclusive workplace culture.

Anti-discrimination measures are also crucial. Companies should have clear policies against discrimination based on gender, race, age, sexual orientation, and other factors. These policies should be communicated clearly to all employees and enforced consistently. Creating a safe and respectful workplace is essential for all employees to thrive (McGinnity, Quinn, McCullough, Enright, & Curristan, 2021). Policymakers also have a role in supporting gender equality in the workplace. Governments can implement regulations that promote equal pay, protect against discrimination, and support work-life balance. For example, policies that mandate paid parental leave and affordable childcare can help women maintain their careers while fulfilling caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, encouraging transparency in corporate governance and promoting women in leadership positions can set a positive example and drive broader cultural change (Adelekan et al., 2024; Bornstein, 2021; Eyo-Udo, 2024).

In summary, overcoming the gender-specific challenges in project and event management requires a comprehensive approach that includes personal and professional development, building supportive networks, and implementing organizational and policy changes. By addressing these areas, we can create a more inclusive and equitable industry

that values and supports the contributions of women. This benefits individual women and enhances the diversity and innovation of the industry as a whole.

5 Conclusion

The exploration of gender-specific challenges in project and event management reveals significant barriers that women face, including workplace culture and bias, limited access to resources and networks, and the complexities of work-life balance. These challenges are deeply rooted in societal norms and institutional structures that often undervalue women's contributions and hinder their career advancement. The paper highlights the importance of personal and professional development, supportive networks, and organizational and policy changes as key strategies to address these challenges.

Implementing these strategies has far-reaching implications for the industry. Organizations can tap into a broader talent pool by fostering an inclusive environment, driving innovation, and improving decision-making processes. Women's increased participation and leadership in project and event management can also challenge existing stereotypes and inspire future generations to pursue careers in these fields. Additionally, addressing gender disparities can enhance workplace morale and productivity, benefiting individuals and organizations.

A multifaceted approach is necessary to continue addressing these challenges. This includes encouraging further research to understand the evolving dynamics of gender in the workplace and the effectiveness of various interventions. Policymakers and companies must collaborate to develop comprehensive policies that promote gender equality, such as equitable pay practices, flexible working conditions, and anti-discrimination measures. Moreover, community support, including mentorship programs and professional networks, is crucial in empowering women to navigate and succeed in these industries.

A collective effort is needed to create a more equitable and inclusive environment in project and event management, ensuring women have the opportunities and support they need to thrive. This will benefit women and enrich the industry as a whole, leading to a more diverse and dynamic professional landscape.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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