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Normalizing Sponsorship: The Unspoken Pathways to Advancement in High-Tech

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Abstract: Sponsorship already operates through reference calls, meetups, calibration sessions, stretch assignments, demo slots and quiet introductions. Because it is informal and opaque, access skews toward the well-connected. This study draws on qualitative interviews with leaders and senior professionals in Israeli high-tech and uses item-level survey data (N = 219) as a supporting complement. The findings map the everyday places where sponsorship lives and show how it can be normalized through light-touch routines that are fair, auditable and hybrid-work friendly. The paper offers a practical taxonomy (access, risk-shielding, credit and visibility, brokerage, capital allocation) and converts each into concrete practices: sponsor-of-record rotations, sponsor minutes in calibration, referral-equity scripts, meetup-sourcing logs, authorship and credit checklists, and demo rotations. Treating sponsorship as organizational infrastructure reduces leakage, improves perceived fairness and makes advancement less dependent on proximity to power.

Keywords: Sponsorship, women in technology, career advancement, organizational routines, gender equity, high-tech

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INTRODUCTION

Advancement in high-tech rests on more than individual skill. Careers move with the flow of information, the ease of access to decision-makers, the way evidence is assembled in evaluation, and the visibility and advocacy that convert contribution into opportunity. Granovetter's (1973) strength-of-weak-ties thesis established that opportunity information travels through acquaintances more than close contacts, because distant ties bridge otherwise disconnected clusters and deliver non-redundant information. Burt (2005) extended this insight with the concept of structural holes: people who sit between disconnected groups broker information flow and influence who enters consideration. Together, these foundational network theories predict that access to career-relevant information is unequal by design, concentrated among those who occupy brokerage positions, and that even small differences in network position compound into large disparities in opportunity over time.

These flows do not operate in a vacuum. Homophily, the tendency for similar individuals to associate, concentrates ties along gender, ethnicity and educational background (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), which means that the informal channels carrying opportunity tend to favor those who already resemble current power-holders. Cultural matching reinforces this pattern at selection: Rivera (2012) showed that elite-firm evaluators weigh cultural similarity alongside competence, favoring candidates whose leisure activities, communication style and career markers mirror their own. Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) adds a further layer: women who enact agentic leadership face backlash because agency violates prescriptive gender norms, making advocacy for such women appear riskier and reducing the likelihood that potential sponsors will step forward. Taken together, network concentration, cultural matching and role-congruity penalties create a compounding inequality in which opportunity, evaluation and advocacy all skew along the same lines.

This paper focuses on sponsorship. The term is used here to distinguish active advocacy from general advice. Mentors guide. Sponsors name people in the room, broker introductions, attach visible credit to work, and share reputational risk when a stretch task could go sideways. Ibarra, Carter, and Silva (2010) documented that men receive more advocacy than women even when formal mentoring is equalized, and that this advocacy gap accounts for a substantial portion of the promotion differential. Hewlett (2013) formalized the mentor-sponsor distinction, arguing that career acceleration depends on someone willing to invest political capital in nominations, introductions and protection. Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) connected this to leadership development, showing that programs without visibility and credit mechanisms systematically under-deliver for women. Recent economics research reinforces the point: Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2023) demonstrated that informal interaction with male managers yields higher pay and promotion returns for men than for women, quantifying the gendered returns to the very social contact that sponsorship channels.

The gap in this literature is practical specificity. Existing scholarship explains the mechanisms through which sponsorship matters but provides limited guidance on where it actually operates in everyday organizational routines and how it can be made visible, fair and auditable. The present study addresses this gap by mapping the specific decision surfaces where sponsorship lives in high-tech organizations: reference calls, meetups, performance calibration, stretch assignments, demo slots and bylines. The paper calls this move normalizing sponsorship.

The idea is straightforward. Sponsorship already exists inside ordinary routines. When these practices are private, advantages pool around those already close to power. When they are surfaced and lightly structured, opportunity widens while pace and discretion are preserved. Framing sponsorship as organizational infrastructure that can be designed and maintained follows logically from social capital theory (Burt, 2005), from evaluation-bias research showing that accountability reduces disparate outcomes (Castilla & Benard, 2010), and from leadership-development evidence that visibility mechanisms shift promotion rates more than skill-building alone (Ely et al., 2011).

To ground the argument, the study reports qualitative evidence from 24 semi-structured interviews with leaders and senior professionals in Israeli high-tech. Participants worked in both a startup and a large technology company. Company names are masked throughout. The interviews asked where names first appear in consideration, who speaks in evaluation meetings and what carries weight, how credit and visibility are distributed in everyday rituals, and what seniors actually do when they sponsor. A broader quantitative survey (N = 219 women in Israeli high-tech) provides a supporting complement at the item level, offering triangulation on the frictions that the qualitative data surface.

The contribution is twofold. First, the paper offers a mechanism-to-practice synthesis that links established theory on networks (Granovetter, 1973;

Burt, 2005), homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), cultural matching (Rivera, 2012), evaluation bias (Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Benard, 2010), role congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and gendered interaction returns (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023) to the specific decision rituals where careers are made. Second, it translates that synthesis into a minimal set of routines that make sponsorship visible and fair without adding weight. The routines are deliberately small: sponsor-of-record assignments, referral-equity scripts, sponsor minutes in calibration, demo rotations, byline checks before releases, and risk-shielding notes on stretch assignments. These moves do not replace informal judgment; they make its effects legible.

Two boundary conditions are worth stating upfront. First, the paper does not argue that process should replace judgment. High-tech work requires discretion and speed. The routines proposed are light precisely so they can sit inside fast cycles. Second, the paper does not claim that sponsorship alone addresses structural inequality. It is one practical lever among several. The data show that making existing advocacy visible and shareable is a tractable step that organizations can take now. If advancement depends on how names, evidence and credit move, then sponsorship is the conversion mechanism that turns contribution into opportunity. Because that mechanism already operates inside ordinary routines, the route to fairness is to normalize it: making weak-tie entry points and brokerage pathways visible so that private access becomes transparent and auditable (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Network Theory: Weak Ties, Structural Holes and Opportunity Flow

The theoretical base for this paper begins with the observation that opportunity information does not travel evenly. Granovetter's (1973) weak-tie thesis showed that novel job leads arrive disproportionately through acquaintances rather than close contacts, because distant ties bridge otherwise isolated clusters. The mechanism is informational: strong ties move within the same social circle and therefore carry redundant information, whereas weak ties connect to distinct clusters and carry non-redundant, novel intelligence about openings, projects and decision-makers. For sponsorship, the implication is that the acquaintance who mentions a candidate's name in a staffing conversation may be more consequential for career advancement than a close colleague who already shares the same information universe.

Burt (2005) formalized and extended this insight through the structural-holes framework. An actor who spans a gap between two otherwise disconnected groups occupies a brokerage position that yields three advantages: early access to diverse information, the ability to control the timing and framing of that information, and reputational gains from being the person who connects others. Burt's empirical work in a large electronics firm demonstrated that managers who bridged structural holes received earlier promotions, higher compensation and stronger performance evaluations, net of human capital and tenure. The structural-holes perspective predicts that whoever occupies brokerage positions in an organization's informal network effectively controls which names, evidence and narratives reach decision-makers, a role that maps directly onto sponsorship.

Lin (1999) integrated these network perspectives into social capital theory, proposing that career outcomes depend not only on what a person knows (human capital) but on the resources embedded in the person's social network and the capacity to mobilize those resources through purposive action. Lin distinguished between accessed social capital (the resources available in principle) and mobilized social capital (the resources actually activated for a specific purpose). For sponsorship, this distinction is critical: a woman in high-tech may have accessed capital through a broad professional network but lack the mobilized capital that comes from a senior leader actively deploying their own reputation on her behalf.

Inside firms, opportunity flow is further shaped by referral networks. Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore (2000) demonstrated that employee referrals yield higher-quality matches and faster hiring, but the benefits of referral depend on who refers whom: dense, homogeneous networks reproduce existing demographic composition, while bridging networks diversify it. Their analysis showed that the referral premium (better retention, higher performance) accrued primarily when the referrer had direct knowledge of both the candidate and the role, a condition that structurally favors those already embedded in the dominant network. These findings ground the practical claim at the heart of this paper: if the routine surfaces where names first enter consideration (meetups, referral calls, staffing conversations) are left wholly informal, opportunity concentrates among the already connected.

Homophily, Cultural Matching and Selection Bias

Networks themselves are structured by homophily: the documented tendency for people to associate with those who share demographic and social characteristics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). McPherson and colleagues reviewed decades of evidence across friendship, marriage, organizational membership and professional advice-seeking, showing that similarity breeds connection across race, gender, age, education and organizational rank. The principle operates at baseline: without deliberate intervention, informal channels reproduce the demographic profile of existing power-holders. For sponsorship, homophily predicts that when sponsors choose proteges through informal affinity rather than structured process, advocacy flows along lines of demographic and cultural similarity.

Rivera (2012) conducted a landmark ethnographic study of hiring in elite professional service firms (law, consulting, investment banking) and demonstrated how cultural matching operates as a selection criterion. Evaluators routinely weighted cultural similarity alongside competence, favoring candidates whose leisure activities, communication style, humor and career trajectory mirrors their own. Rivera documented that interviewers frequently described fit as "someone I would want to be stuck in an airport with," a criterion that privileges social-class background and cultural capital over job-relevant qualifications. The implication for sponsorship is direct: when sponsors choose proteges informally, cultural matching predicts that advocacy will flow toward those who most resemble the sponsor, not those who most need the advocacy.

Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism adds a structural dimension. When members of a demographic group constitute fewer than roughly fifteen percent of a work group, they become tokens: visible, scrutinized and burdened by performance pressures that do not apply to the majority. Tokens face three perceptual distortions, visibility (heightened attention to their actions), polarization (exaggerated differences from the majority) and assimilation (being forced into pre-existing stereotypical roles). Kanter showed that these dynamics increase the perceived risk associated with advocating for a token: a sponsor who backs a woman in a male-dominated engineering team exposes herself to the same visibility pressures. The tokenism framework thus predicts that sponsorship will be least available precisely where it is most needed, in numerically skewed settings.

Together, homophily, cultural matching and tokenism create a triple filter that concentrates informal advocacy among the well-represented. McPherson and colleagues' baseline homophily drives who enters the sponsor's awareness, Rivera's cultural matching determines who the sponsor finds compelling, and Kanter's tokenism raises the cost of action for both sponsor and protege. Any organizational intervention that aims to normalize sponsorship must disrupt all three filters: expanding the naming pool, standardizing evaluation criteria and reducing the visibility penalty attached to advocacy for underrepresented candidates.

Evaluation Bias and the Limits of Merit

A third theoretical pillar concerns how contribution is assessed and how the gap between performance and recognition opens. Goldin and Rouse (2000) demonstrated that introducing blind auditions in orchestras substantially increased the probability that women advanced through preliminary and final rounds. The design exploited a natural experiment: some orchestras adopted screens before others, and within-orchestra comparisons showed that the screen eliminated roughly seventy-five percent of the gender gap in advancement. The finding established that ostensibly merit-based evaluations were sensitive to identity cues: when evaluators could not see the performer, they weighted the performance more equitably.

Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, and Handelsman (2012) extended this finding to academic science. In a randomized, double-blind experiment, science faculty evaluated identical application materials for a laboratory manager position. When the application was attributed to a male candidate ("John"), faculty rated the candidate as significantly more competent, more hireable and worthy of a higher starting salary (by roughly four thousand dollars) than when the same materials were attributed to a female candidate ("Jennifer"). The effect held for both male and female evaluators, indicating that bias operates at the level of internalized cultural schemas rather than individual prejudice. For sponsorship, this finding implies that the evidence a sponsor presents in a calibration session will be weighed differently depending on the protege's gender, even when the evidence is identical.

Within firms, Castilla (2008) found that even after controlling for performance ratings, organizational merit, job level and department, women and minorities received smaller merit-pay increases. Castilla termed this the paradox of meritocracy: the presence of formal merit procedures can create an illusion of fairness that reduces scrutiny and thereby allows bias to operate unchecked. Castilla and Benard (2010) tested this experimentally, showing that managers who were reminded of their organization's commitment to meritocracy actually increased discriminatory behavior in reward allocation, a pattern they attributed to moral credentialing: the meritocratic label satisfied the manager's self-image as fair, removing the motivation to monitor for bias. These findings predict that sponsorship without transparency will replicate existing disparities: if the evidence that enters calibration and promotion committees depends on who speaks, whose narrative is believed and which accomplishments are deemed "noteworthy," then advocacy functions as the critical relay between contribution and recognized performance.

Heilman (2001) documented the mechanism through which evaluation bias operates at the role level. The lack-of-fit model proposes that when a woman occupies a role that is perceived as male-typed (engineering leadership, VP R&D, CTO), negative performance expectations arise from the perceived mismatch between the attributes associated with the person and the attributes associated with success in the role. These expectations bias evaluation: ambiguous performance is read as confirmation of inadequacy, and strong performance is discounted as an exception. Heilman further showed that when women succeed in male-typed roles, they are penalized on likability and interpersonal qualities, creating a no-win dynamic in which competence and warmth become inversely correlated for women. This dynamic directly affects sponsorship: a potential sponsor who advocates for a woman in a technical leadership role must expend additional argumentative effort to counter the lack-of-fit presumption.

Role Congruity, Backlash and the Cost of Advocacy

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) offers a mechanism-level explanation for why sponsorship skews by gender. The theory integrates social-role theory with expectation-states theory, proposing two forms of prejudice against female leaders: (a) a descriptive prejudice, in which women are perceived as lacking the agentic traits associated with leadership, and (b) a prescriptive prejudice, in which women who display agentic traits are evaluated negatively for violating gender norms. The theory predicts that women who display assertiveness, self-promotion and decisive authority face backlash precisely because these behaviors conflict with the communal expectations that prescriptive norms attach to femininity. This backlash raises the cost of visibility for women and, critically, raises the perceived risk for potential sponsors: backing an assertive woman is itself read as a risk if the organization's implicit norms penalize female agency.

Rudman and Glick (2001) provided experimental evidence for this mechanism. In a series of studies, self-promoting women were rated as equally competent to self-promoting men but significantly less likable and less hireable. The penalty applied specifically to agentic self-presentation, not to competence: evaluators acknowledged the woman's qualifications but declined to recommend her because she seemed "too aggressive" or "not a team player." Rudman and Glick termed this the backlash effect and demonstrated that it functioned as a social penalty that enforces prescriptive gender norms. For sponsorship, the backlash effect means that a woman who makes her own accomplishments visible (a behavior that is required for promotion in most high-tech firms) may lose the likability capital that makes sponsorship attractive to a potential advocate.

Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers (2016) added a further complication: under identity-threat conditions, some senior women distance themselves from junior women, adopt masculine self-descriptions and endorse rather than challenge gender-stereotypical standards. This phenomenon, labeled the queen bee effect, arises not from individual pathology but from a systemic dynamic in which women who have succeeded in male-dominated environments internalize the norms that facilitated their own advancement and resist identification with a gender group that is stigmatized in that context. The queen bee effect further narrows the pool of available sponsors for women: it predicts that in highly male-dominated settings, the few senior women present may be less rather than more willing to advocate for junior women.

Taken together, role congruity, backlash and the queen bee phenomenon create a triple penalty for women seeking sponsorship. The agentic behavior needed to attract a sponsor triggers backlash (Rudman & Glick, 2001), the lack of fit between female identity and leadership roles generates negative performance expectations (Heilman, 2001), and the few senior women who might serve as same-gender sponsors may distance themselves from the advocacy role (Derks et al., 2016). This penalty structure explains why mentoring (low-risk, private, advisory) is abundant for women while sponsorship (high-risk, public, reputational) is scarce (Ibarra et al., 2010). Normalizing sponsorship requires reducing the cost of advocacy: making it routine, visible and expected rather than discretionary, exceptional and risky.

Mentorship, Sponsorship and Leadership Development

The advancement mechanism at the center of this paper is the distinction between mentoring and sponsoring. Ibarra, Carter, and Silva (2010) found that women in large multinational firms were over-mentored and under-sponsored: they received ample advice on career navigation, self-presentation and skill development but lacked the active advocacy, brokerage and risk-sharing that convert capabilities into advancement. Their analysis of a global talent program showed that men with equivalent performance ratings were promoted at higher rates than women, and that the gap was attributable not to effort or ability but to the presence of a sponsor who actively pushed for the protege in promotion discussions. The finding relocates the gender gap from a supply-side problem (women lack skills) to a demand-side problem (organizations lack structures that make advocacy equitable).

Hewlett (2013) codified the mentor-sponsor distinction in a framework that has shaped subsequent research. Mentors advise; sponsors act. A sponsor invests political capital in a protege's advancement through four behaviors: nomination (putting the protege's name forward for visible assignments), introduction (brokering access to senior networks), protection (absorbing blame when the protege takes risks) and credit allocation (ensuring the protege's contributions are visible to decision-makers). Hewlett's survey data showed that having a sponsor was the single strongest predictor of asking for a pay raise, negotiating a stretch assignment and obtaining a promotion, stronger than performance ratings, self-confidence or years of tenure. For women, the sponsor gap was especially consequential: women without sponsors were far more likely to stall at mid-career, not because of capability deficits but because their contributions were invisible to the people who made promotion decisions.

Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) connected sponsorship to leadership development, arguing that conventional leadership programs fail women because they treat leadership as a set of portable skills detached from the identity dynamics, social contexts and second-generation biases that shape how women's leadership is perceived and evaluated. Their framework predicts that sponsorship-like mechanisms, co-presenting, co-authorship, stretch roles with senior backing, public recognition of contributions, are the active ingredients that shift promotion outcomes, because they work on the identity and visibility dimensions that skill-building alone does not reach.

Recent economics research adds causal evidence. Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2023) used quasi-random variation in manager assignments in a large financial services firm to show that informal interaction with male managers (measured by smoking breaks and social lunches) yielded substantially higher pay and promotion returns for men than for women. Male employees who were assigned to a male manager and had informal social contact earned sixteen percent more and were promoted thirty-four percent faster than female employees with equivalent contact. The finding isolates the interaction mechanism: it is not that women refuse to network but that the returns to networking differ by gender and by the gender composition of the relationship. Mengel (2020) documented a complementary pattern, showing that women's networking effort in a large professional setting translated into weaker career payoffs than equivalent effort by men. Together, these findings converge on a single prediction: the social infrastructure of sponsorship, left informal, reproduces inequality. The organizational challenge is to make it visible, accountable and routine.

Synthesis: From Theory to Organizational Practice

Taken together, these theoretical foundations portray advancement as a chain that links information flow (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2005), social capital mobilization (Lin, 1999), referral and access (Fernandez et al., 2000), homophily-driven network concentration (McPherson et al., 2001), cultural matching at selection (Rivera, 2012), evaluation bias under weak accountability (Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Heilman, 2001; Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), role-congruity backlash (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001), identity threat and in-group distancing (Derks et al., 2016), and the mentor-sponsor gap (Ibarra et al., 2010; Hewlett, 2013; Ely et al., 2011). Each link in this chain operates through everyday organizational practices: a reference call, a calibration meeting, a stretch assignment, a demo slot, a byline decision.

The literature shows that these practices are simultaneously the places where sponsorship already happens and the places where inequality is reproduced. Homophily determines who enters the candidate pool. Cultural matching shapes who survives first-round screening. Evaluation bias opens a gap between contribution and recognition. Role-congruity backlash penalizes the agentic behavior that sponsorship requires. And the mentor-sponsor distinction means that even well-intentioned organizational support may stop short of the advocacy that moves careers. The implication is practical: rather than creating new formal programs, organizations can normalize sponsorship by adding light-touch structure to the routines that already carry it.

Balanced sourcing after meetups (disrupting homophily at the naming stage), consistent reference questions (standardizing the evidence that enters evaluation), brief sponsor pitches in calibration (making advocacy visible and expected), risk-shielding notes on stretch assignments (reducing the backlash cost of high-profile risk-taking) and clear checks on authorship and bylines (ensuring credit follows contribution), all grounded in the theoretical architecture reviewed above, constitute the normalization framework this paper develops and tests against qualitative and survey evidence from Israeli high-tech.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, interpretivist design to understand how sponsorship operates in everyday organizational practice and how it can be normalized. The approach is abductive, moving between established theory on networks, cultural matching and role congruity and what participants described in situ, refining a practice-focused framework as analysis progressed. A broader quantitative survey (N = 219 women in Israeli high-tech) provides a supporting layer at the item level, offering triangulation on the frictions that the qualitative data surface.

Setting and Participants

The empirical setting is Israeli high-tech. Using purposive and snowball sampling, the study recruited people positioned close to staffing, evaluation and promotion decisions. The qualitative corpus comprises 24 semi-structured interviews: 19 leaders (VP R&D, HR director, DEI lead, software manager, CEO, head-hunter; 17 women, 2 men) and five senior professionals (all women) with roughly four to fifteen years of experience across product, engineering and operations. This composition offers multiple vantage points on how opportunities are sourced, how credit is assigned and where advocacy is made visible. Interviews were conducted in person or via video and lasted approximately one hour.

Data Collection

The interview guide centered on the day-to-day surfaces where sponsorship lives: reference calls, meetups, stand-ups, code reviews, demos, and decision nodes such as staffing, calibration and promotion boards. The interviewer elicited concrete episodes, including naming someone in the room, brokering a stretch assignment, co-presenting a demo, shielding risk after a failure, and deciding authorship. Hebrew interviews were translated into English and checked by a bilingual researcher for meaning equivalence.

The quantitative complement is a survey of 219 women across the Israeli high-tech sector, using an adapted version of a validated gender-barrier instrument (47 items organized across multiple barrier constructs). This paper draws selectively on individual survey items and on open-ended responses, treating them as a diagnostic layer that preserves specificity without importing the full analytical architecture of the broader study. Item-level results are retained because they offer finer-grained evidential support than composite scores would.

Ethics

All participants gave informed consent for audio recording, anonymized quotation and aggregate reporting. Materials were stored in an encrypted workspace and identifying details were removed or generalized, with quotes attributed only by role, seniority and, where relevant, gender. Ethical clearance was obtained from the supervising institution.

Analysis

Analysis followed a staged thematic approach. After familiarization and memoing, a codebook was built combining deductive anchors from the literature (weak ties and brokerage, homophily and cultural matching, mentorship versus sponsorship, role-congruity pressures) with inductive codes emerging from the data (for example, "sponsor minutes," "stretch ledger," "demo rota," "referral-equity script"). Two researchers independently coded an initial subset and reconciled boundaries through discussion, documenting decisions to preserve an audit trail. Codes were then grouped into higher-order themes: where sponsorship appears, how it functions and how it might be normalized through simple scripts, rotations and guardrails. Throughout, the analysis sought negative cases, role-based divergences (HR versus engineering) and intersectional tensions, especially around the perceived reputational risk of advocating for minoritized proteges.

Trustworthiness

Credibility rests on triangulation across roles and rituals, a maintained memo and codebook trail, and reflexive notes on the primary researcher's positionality as a senior engineering lead, an asset for process fluency but a possible bias toward normalizing existing practices. The quantitative survey's item-level patterns serve as a further triangulation source, confirming that the frictions described in interviews extend beyond the qualitative sample.

Limitations

Limitations include the single-country focus, the qualitative design's limited statistical generalizability and potential recall or self-presentation bias. The quantitative complement does not directly measure sponsorship quality, and its cross-sectional design precludes causal claims. The multi-role qualitative sample, decision-node focus and mechanism mapping support analytic generalization to similar high-skill, network-dense settings.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Access Through Relationships

Interviewees described how names first appear in consideration. The entry point for roles, stretch tasks and nomination lists was not a job board; it was a relationship, a conversation, or a shared army or university cohort.

A product director explained: "When I look for a lead, first I go to people I know. Then I ask them who they know. By the time a listing goes out, half the shortlist already exists." This pattern was consistent across participant roles. Names arrive through meetups, internal referrals, and casual introductions.

Women described a sharp awareness of this reality. One senior engineering lead stated: "They are networking, and we are not, in the sense that I don't consider myself an active networker." Several participants referred to alumni ties from military intelligence units or elite university programs as durable networks offering ongoing access to opportunities. The emphasis was on the everyday rather than the strategic: a coffee call, a shared Slack channel, a Friday lecture series.

Theme 2: In-Group Dynamics and Gatekeeping

Advocacy was not always straightforward, especially where identity dynamics shaped risk calculations. One participant recalled a senior female manager's opening remark: "My very first conversation with her started with, 'I don't want a female manager.'" Another described a pattern where a woman promoted into a leadership role was perceived as adding risk to the sponsor who backed her. The concept of minority gatekeeping surfaced repeatedly: participants described situations where senior women, under reputational pressure, distanced themselves from junior women seeking sponsorship.

These accounts were framed as risk management rather than malice. The cost of public advocacy rises when both sponsor and protege belong to an under-represented group, because failure is read as evidence about the group rather than the individual. These dynamics underline why normalizing sponsorship matters: routines that distribute advocacy and risk reduce the personal cost of backing someone.

Theme 3: Evaluation as Shaped by Advocates

Calibration and promotion meetings emerged as the most critical decision nodes. In these rooms, a manager presents evidence for an employee's promotion. Several participants described how who speaks, what evidence is chosen, and whose narrative is believed determine outcomes.

A VP of R&D explained: "Bias might come from who represents you in those calibration meetings. If your manager is less articulate, or less senior, your case is weaker, regardless of your output." Many participants described a communication gap. One interviewee advised junior women: "Don't say 'we executed.' Say 'I executed.' Women often say 'we,' men say 'I.' That difference is visible in calibration."

The implication is that sponsorship is the advocacy layer in evaluation. Without someone to translate contribution into the language and evidence that the room accepts, performance remains invisible above the immediate team. Several participants noted that evaluation is where visibility and advocacy converge.

Theme 4: Visibility Rituals and Credit Distribution

Participants described how contribution becomes visible through specific organizational rituals. Demo slots, lunch-and-learn sessions, co-presenting at conferences, bylines on published patent filings or blog posts, and authorship on internal reports all serve as visibility surfaces.

A DEI program leader described internal sessions where senior female engineers coached others on writing about their accomplishments for internal review systems. These sessions reframed self-promotion as documentation. One engineering manager summarized: "First, document your successes. Then, if you don't advocate for yourself, no one else will."

Authorship and credit practices differed markedly across teams. In some teams, demo presenters were assigned by a rota; in others, the most experienced or most assertive person defaulted into the slot. Several participants observed that teams with structured credit routines had fewer disputes about recognition and broader engagement in stretch work.

Theme 5: Sponsorship as a Distinct Mechanism

Throughout the interviews, participants distinguished sharply between advice and advocacy. Mentors tell you what they would do. Sponsors name you in the room, broker an introduction, share risk when a task could fail, and attach their reputation to your advancement.

A head-hunter described a scenario: "I got a reference call and the recommender said, 'Give her anything and she will nail it.' That is a sponsor talking." Several participants noted that mentoring was more available than sponsorship, and that the gap between the two shaped advancement trajectories. Women who described having a sponsor, whether assigned or emergent, consistently reported faster access to stretch assignments, quicker promotion timelines and greater confidence in upward movement. Those who described only mentoring, or no advocacy mechanism at all, described advancement as "on me" and career strategy as something learned by observation rather than design.

DISCUSSION

Sponsorship Already Lives Inside Everyday Work

The findings confirm the paper's central claim: sponsorship is already embedded in the ordinary routines of high-tech organizations. It surfaces in reference calls, meetups, calibration sessions, stretch assignments, demo slots, bylines and quiet introductions. Participants did not describe sponsorship as a formal program or a rare act of generosity. They described it as the everyday movement of names, evidence and advocacy through decision points that shape who advances. A product lead's account of hearing about a role through a small professional circle, contacting people within minutes, and entering the hiring conversation through relationships rather than postings illustrates the pattern. The infrastructure is already there. The question is whether organizations choose to make it visible and discussable, or leave it to run in the background where access concentrates around those who are already close to power.

This reading aligns with classic work on weak ties and brokerage (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2005). Opportunity information travels through acquaintances more than close contacts, and people who bridge disconnected groups control how that information enters decision streams. Lin's (1999) social capital framework predicts exactly this pattern: career-relevant resources are embedded in networks, and mobilizing them requires specific social actions, which is what sponsorship provides.

What the present study adds is granularity about where these network dynamics land in practice: the meetup that sources a name, the calibration session where someone speaks for a candidate, the stretch assignment that carries a senior's implicit endorsement. These are the surfaces where sponsorship already lives.

Access Is Social and Unevenly Scaffolded

Access to opportunity is shaped by who gets pulled into guidance, referral, sponsorship and decision-relevant conversations. The interviews show this clearly: women described "they are networking, and we are not," pointing to army ties, weekly football and after-work social events as the spaces where opportunity is actually distributed. Deliberate internal outreach widened the pool in some cases, but the default remained relationship-driven and unevenly scaffolded. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) predict exactly this concentration: homophily channels interaction along existing social lines, and Fernandez et al. (2000) show that referral-based hiring reproduces the composition of the referring network.

The broader survey conducted as part of the same research program offers a supporting signal. Responses to the item "I have had to learn how to lead on my own" (Item 27) scored consistently high, suggesting that development and advancement support is experienced as individually carried rather than institutionally provided. Limited access to mentoring (Item 26) reinforces the same picture: when formal scaffolding is thin, advancement depends more heavily on informal channels, which in turn depend on who already has access to those channels.

Open-ended survey responses echo these patterns. One respondent described being placed into a leadership role without guidance; when a supportive department head later left the organization, promotion backing disappeared, and so did upward aspiration. Another respondent experienced professional development as being entirely "on me," reinforcing the finding that scaffolding is often absent rather than simply weak. These are consistent with the interview evidence: access to sponsorship is real, but it is social, informal and unevenly distributed.

Contribution Does Not Automatically Convert Into a Recognized Signal

Sponsorship matters partly because contribution alone does not travel cleanly through evaluation. The interviews showed that who speaks in calibration, what evidence is surfaced, and whose narrative is believed all shape how work is assessed. One interviewee advised, "Don't say 'we executed.'

Say 'I executed'... Women often say 'we,' men say 'I'," pointing to a communication pattern that dilutes individual credit even when the underlying contribution is strong. Representation at calibration sessions was described as decisive: "Bias might come from who represents you in those calibration meetings." Without an advocate, contribution remains legible only to the immediate team.

This signal-conversion problem is predicted by the evaluation-bias literature. Castilla (2008) showed that performance ratings do not automatically translate into equitable rewards, and Castilla and Benard (2010) demonstrated that meritocratic framing without accountability mechanisms can worsen rather than reduce disparities. Moss-Racusin et al. (2012) found that identical application materials are rated differently depending on the applicant's perceived gender. The present study extends these findings to the calibration room: evaluation is a relational process, and sponsorship is the advocacy that converts contribution into a signal the room accepts.

One open-ended response captures the dynamic concisely. A participant described suggesting a solution that met resistance. The same idea was later accepted without difficulty when a male colleague voiced it. The problem was the conversion of that contribution into a recognized and credited signal. Sponsorship, understood as the act of naming, backing and making contribution legible, operates at exactly this junction. Where decisions are made by people who are predominantly male (Item 6), having an advocate who can translate contribution into a form that the room accepts becomes functionally necessary.

Visibility Is Part of Sponsorship Infrastructure

Sponsorship operates partly through visibility. Demo slots, authorship, bylines, co-presenting and stretch assignments are the rituals through which contribution becomes legible to decision-makers beyond the immediate team. Inside a large tech company, participants described sessions where senior female engineers coached others on writing about their achievements, turning contribution into evidence that promotion committees could use. Others framed the same logic individually: "First, document your successes... if you do not advocate for yourself, no one else will."

This visibility work carries costs that role congruity theory predicts. Eagly and Karau (2002) showed that women face backlash for agentic self-promotion, and Rudman and Glick (2001) demonstrated that self-promoting women are rated as competent but less likable and less hireable. Responses to the item measuring communication self-monitoring when exercising authority (Item 11) indicate that many women calibrate how they present contributions, suggesting a tension between making work visible and managing the social risks of self-promotion. Visibility involves judgment about how much assertion is safe, and those judgments are shaped by the same gendered expectations that the theoretical literature describes.

One survey respondent articulated the advice she had received: make sure people recognize what you have contributed. The framing was supportive, but it placed the burden of visibility on the individual. Sponsorship reframes this burden as an infrastructure problem. When managers rotate demo presenters, confirm bylines before releases and share credit in calibration, the visibility of contribution no longer depends on an individual's willingness to self-promote. The interview data showed that teams adopting these small habits reported a wider spread of recognition and fewer disputes about credit. Ely et al. (2011) predicted this result: designing visibility into organizational routines shifts outcomes more effectively than coaching individuals to self-advocate.

The Case for Normalization

Informal sponsorship tends to favor those already close to power. Homophily concentrates interaction among similar people (McPherson et al., 2001). Cultural matching means that evaluators often prefer candidates whose cues and career markers feel familiar (Rivera, 2012). Informal interaction with male managers yields higher returns for men than for women, widening pay and promotion gaps even when formal rules appear neutral (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023). Left wholly informal, sponsorship rides these same rails.

The interviews provided direct examples. Some women described in-group distancing under pressure: "My very first conversation with her started with, 'I don't want a female manager.'" Minority gatekeeping appeared in contexts where reputational risk was high. Derks et al. (2016) identified this dynamic as the queen bee phenomenon: under identity threat, some senior women distance themselves from junior women to protect their own standing. These dynamics underline the organizational rationale for normalization: routines that distribute advocacy and risk reduce the personal cost of backing someone.

Practical Implications

The practical contribution of this paper is a set of light-touch routines designed to normalize sponsorship without adding bureaucracy. Each routine corresponds to a theoretically grounded friction identified in the literature and confirmed in the qualitative and survey data.

First, sponsor minutes in calibration place advocacy on the record. Rather than leaving the question of who speaks for a candidate to chance, calibration sessions include a brief, timed sponsor pitch in which any manager can advocate for someone outside their direct team using specific evidence and a clear next step. This addresses the evaluation-bias friction documented by Castilla (2008) and Castilla and Benard (2010): transparency and accountability in evaluation reduce disparate outcomes.

Second, referral-equity scripts for reference calls introduce at least one out-of-network name into every sourcing process. This routine targets the homophily-driven concentration of referrals documented by McPherson et al. (2001) and the referral reproduction pattern identified by Fernandez et al. (2000). By requiring a bridging name, the script activates the weak-tie mechanism (Granovetter, 1973) that would otherwise remain dormant in homogeneous networks.

Third, demo rotations and byline checks tie visibility to contribution rather than to seniority or confidence. The evaluation literature shows that visibility is a prerequisite for recognition (Ely et al., 2011), and role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) predicts that individual self-promotion carries gendered costs. Rotating presenter slots and confirming bylines before releases shift the visibility burden from individuals to the team, addressing the backlash risks documented by Rudman and Glick (2001).

Fourth, risk-shielding notes on stretch assignments distribute accountability so that sponsoring a protege carries shared rather than individual reputational cost. Kanter's (1977) tokenism theory predicts that sponsors of minority proteges face heightened scrutiny; documenting shared ownership of stretch outcomes reduces this penalty.

Fifth, meetup-sourcing logs capture names and skills surfaced during industry events, ensuring that the opportunity information traveling through weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2005) is recorded and available to hiring managers beyond the individual who attended the event.

These routines require no new technology, minimal training and no new headcount. They are designed for hybrid-work environments and fit within existing meeting cadences. The goal is to make sponsorship's currents legible: who was named, by whom, on what evidence, and with what outcome.

Quantitative Complement and Boundaries

The broader survey (N = 219 women in Israeli high-tech) does not directly measure sponsorship quality. It does, however, show patterned frictions around mentoring access, recommendation and sponsorship access, visibility, recognition and self-presentation. These patterns appear more consistently in workplace climate and perceived career trajectory than in formal structural markers such as title or promotion count. The survey data offer supportive triangulation for the qualitative findings: the frictions that participants described in interviews are not isolated anecdotes but reflect broader tendencies across the population studied. This does not amount to causal proof that normalizing sponsorship routines improves outcomes. It does confirm that the everyday frictions the paper addresses are widespread and systematically patterned.

CONCLUSIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

Conclusions

Sponsorship already operates through everyday organizational routines: reference calls, meetups, calibration meetings, stretch assignments, demo slots and bylines. The present study maps these surfaces and shows that access, advocacy, evaluation and visibility are the joints where advancement is shaped. When these joints are private and unstructured, access concentrates among those already close to power. When organizations make them visible and lightly structured, opportunity widens while speed and discretion are preserved.

The practical contribution is a set of light-touch routines designed to normalize sponsorship without adding bureaucracy. Sponsor minutes in calibration place advocacy on the record. Referral-equity scripts in reference calls introduce at least one out-of-network name. Demo rotations and byline checks tie visibility to contribution. Risk-shielding notes on stretch assignments distribute accountability so that sponsoring a protege carries shared, rather than individual, reputational cost. Treating sponsorship as organizational infrastructure, rather than leaving it to private judgment, is a tractable step that requires no new technology, minimal training and no new headcount.

The theoretical contribution links established work on weak ties and brokerage (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2005), social capital mobilization (Lin, 1999), homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), cultural matching (Rivera, 2012), evaluation bias (Castilla, 2008; Castilla & Benard, 2010), role congruity and backlash (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001), in-group distancing (Derks et al., 2016) and gendered returns to interaction (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2023) to the specific decision points where careers move. The chain is clear: opportunity information enters consideration through networks, evaluation converts contribution into recognized performance, visibility makes contribution legible beyond the immediate team, and sponsorship is the infrastructure that connects these steps. Evidence from 24 semi-structured interviews with leaders and senior professionals in Israeli high-tech, complemented by item-level patterns from a broader survey (N = 219), confirms that the frictions sponsorship addresses are widespread and systematically patterned.

Future Research

Several avenues remain open. First, longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs could track whether teams adopting the proposed routines show measurable changes in referral diversity, promotion equity and perceived fairness over time. Second, cross-cultural comparison, particularly between network-dense cultures such as Israel and more institution-reliant labor markets, would clarify boundary conditions on which routines transfer. Third, intersectional analysis exploring how sponsorship dynamics vary at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and seniority would deepen the present account. Fourth, future work might examine role differences in sponsorship behavior, comparing the advocacy practices of engineering managers, HR leaders and external recruiters in more controlled designs. Fifth, intervention studies that implement specific normalization routines (sponsor minutes, referral-equity scripts) and measure outcomes over several promotion cycles would provide the causal evidence that the present cross-sectional design cannot supply.

Limitations

The main limitation is the single-country focus. Israeli high-tech is characterized by dense network ties, mandatory military service that shapes professional alumni cohorts, and a relationship-intensive professional culture. Findings may be most transferable to similarly network-dense, high-skill settings. The qualitative design limits statistical generalizability but supports analytic generalization through mechanism mapping. The quantitative complement is cross-sectional and descriptive; no causal claims are advanced. Recall and social-desirability bias are possible in interview data. Finally, the proposed routines are derived from participant accounts and theoretical logic rather than from a controlled intervention study; their effectiveness remains an empirical question for future research.

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