

# Assessing the Internal Worker Upward Mobility Paradox from the Voices of Women of Color

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**Abstract:** Internal upward mobility is frequently framed as a strategic mechanism for leadership continuity and workforce sustainability, yet many organizations fail to capitalize on the talent they have already developed. This qualitative study examines the consequences and missed opportunities that arise when organizations neglect internal employee talent and rely on conventional or externally focused talent management practices. Centering the lived experiences of twelve women of color, African American, Arab American, and Latina American professionals, the study explores how the absence of innovative, internal-facing mobility systems affects professional trajectories, emotional well-being, and organizational commitment. The findings reveal that organizations incur significant costs when internal talent is overlooked, including erosion of trust, disengagement, loss of institutional knowledge, and weakened leadership pipelines. Participants described an internal mobility paradox in which investments in education, skill development, and leadership training were disconnected from promotion and decision-making processes, prompting many to seek advancement externally. Grounded in internal labor market theory, the knowledge-based view of the firm, and signaling theory, the study demonstrates how organizations that fail to actively identify, engage, and elevate internal talent forfeit strategic advantages embedded in employee expertise and commitment. The findings underscore the need for innovative, internal-first talent management systems that surface employee capabilities, strengthen retention, and transform organizational cultures from reactive hiring to sustainable leadership development.

**Keywords:** Internal Upward Mobility, Women of Color, Leadership Development, Employee Development, Knowledge Management, Signaling Theory, Organizational Culture, Employee Engagement, Internal Labor Markets, Talent Management

JEL Codes: J24, J16, M12, M14, D83

## Introduction

Internal upward mobility refers to the deliberate organizational practice of advancing employees into roles of increased responsibility, authority, and compensation based on demonstrated performance, skill acquisition, and potential for broader impact (Seibert et al., 2024; DeLong, 2017). Unlike external mobility, which depends on labor market transitions across firms, internal upward mobility reflects the capacity of organizations to recognize, cultivate, and redeploy talent within their own boundaries. In principle, such mobility functions as both a reward mechanism for high performers and a strategic lever for organizational renewal, signaling a commitment to meritocracy, equity, and sustainable

human capital development (Greer & Kirk, 2022). Yet despite widespread endorsement of these ideals, mounting evidence suggests that many organizations struggle to translate internal talent development into meaningful career advancement opportunities for their workforce (Pappas, 2023).

At the employee level, upward mobility is closely tied to perceptions of value, recognition, and future orientation within the organization. High-performing employees who consistently exceed role expectations, pursue continuous upskilling, and contribute beyond formal job requirements often view internal advancement as a legitimate return on their investment of effort and loyalty (Pappas, 2023). From an organizational perspective, promoting such individuals enables firms to place proven talent into higher-impact positions while preserving institutional knowledge and social capital (Ray, 2024). For example, an employee who begins in an operational role and proactively acquires cross-functional skills may be uniquely positioned to succeed in a supervisory or managerial capacity due to their contextual understanding of workflows and team dynamics. However, when such pathways remain inaccessible or inconsistently applied, employees who “know their worth” may interpret stagnation as a signal to seek advancement elsewhere (Pappas, 2023).

Human resource functions play a critical intermediary role in operationalizing internal upward mobility by partnering with managers to identify promotable talent and align developmental opportunities with organizational needs. Employees consistently report valuing opportunities for growth, particularly when advancement criteria are transparent and developmentally supported (Pappas, 2023). Yet research suggests that many organizations fail to institutionalize these processes, relying instead on ad hoc promotion decisions or external hiring to fill advanced roles. While recognition programs may acknowledge performance symbolically, they often fall short of providing substantive career progression, prompting employees to question whether effort and excellence are meaningfully rewarded (Ray, 2024). In contrast, organizations that visibly promote from within not only reinforce employee motivation but also establish aspirational benchmarks that encourage sustained performance across the workforce (Seibert et al., 2024).

The strategic benefits of internal upward mobility are well documented, particularly in relation to employee retention and leadership development (Pappas, 2023). Providing clear advancement pathways signals that organizations value long-term employee contributions, thereby reducing voluntary turnover and fostering commitment (Greer & Kirk, 2022). Moreover, internal promotions allow organizations to intentionally shape future leaders by combining formal training with experiential learning over time. For instance, an entry-level hire with strong interpersonal competencies and learning agility may evolve into an effective manager after years of relationship-building and progressive skill expansion within the organization (Pappas, 2023). Despite these advantages, organizations frequently undermine their own mobility systems by privileging external recruitment, even as they publicly emphasize inclusion and equity (Greer & Kirk, 2022).

This disconnect carries significant organizational consequences. Limited access to internal upward mobility has been shown to erode employee morale, weaken trust in organizational fairness, and drive attrition, ultimately impairing productivity and financial performance (Seibert et al., 2024; eLearning Industry, 2022). Employees who observe external hires filling senior positions, despite internal candidates possessing relevant skills and experience, may perceive promotion systems as opaque or biased (Green & Kirk, 2022). Such perceptions are particularly damaging in tight labor markets, where skilled professionals possess abundant alternatives and are increasingly unwilling to remain in organizations that fail to reward internal development (Ray, 2024).

A frequently cited contributor to constrained upward mobility is the inadequacy of organizational learning and development (L&D) infrastructures (Ray, 2024). Many

employees report that their organizations neither provide sufficient training opportunities nor allocate adequate time for skill development, instead favoring external hiring over internal capability building (Pappas, 2023). This short-term orientation often reflects performance pressures that prioritize immediate expertise over long-term talent cultivation. Consequently, employees may be encouraged to upskill independently without access to structured pathways that connect learning outcomes to promotion eligibility. Unsurprisingly, such environments increase turnover intentions, with a substantial proportion of employees indicating they would leave in search of employers that actively support professional growth (Pappas, 2023).

Paradoxically, these barriers persist despite unprecedented access to scalable, cost-effective learning technologies. Advances in e-learning platforms, modular training content, and digital credentialing have dramatically reduced the resource burden historically associated with employee development (Pappas, 2023). The persistence of limited internal upward mobility, therefore, cannot be attributed solely to financial or technological constraints but instead points to deeper structural and cultural misalignments between development initiatives and promotion systems (Greer & Kirk, 2022).

Indeed, many organizations position themselves as champions of employee education, offering tuition reimbursement, certification sponsorships, and leadership development programs as part of their human capital strategy (Becker, 1993; Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2022). From a human capital perspective, such investments are intended to enhance organizational capability while strengthening retention and engagement (Ray, 2024). However, a persistent paradox remains: although employees are encouraged to acquire new skills, they often encounter barriers when attempting to apply those competencies internally (Ray, 2024). Employees who complete training programs may find that advancement criteria remain informal, relationship-driven, or disconnected from demonstrated capability (Greer & Kirk, 2022).

As a result, internal upward mobility frequently fails not at the level of skill acquisition but at the point of organizational absorption. Employees unable to deploy newly developed capabilities within their current organizations may pursue advancement externally, sometimes returning later in more senior roles after validating their expertise elsewhere (e-Learning Industry, 2022). This pattern reflects a fundamental misalignment between learning systems and internal labor markets, raising critical questions about how organizations design, signal, and govern internal mobility pathways (Pappas, 2023). Addressing this misalignment is essential for advancing scholarly understanding of internal upward mobility and for informing organizational practices that align employee development with equitable, transparent, and strategically sustainable career progression.

## **Problem Statement**

Internal upward mobility constitutes a critical pillar of organizational sustainability, shaping employee motivation, perceptions of procedural justice, and long-term workforce capability. Organizations that effectively enable internal career progression benefit from higher engagement, stronger psychological contracts, and reduced voluntary turnover. However, despite the prominence of upward mobility in contemporary talent management discourse, growing empirical evidence suggests a widening gap between organizational claims of advancement opportunity and employees' actual experiences of career progression. Recent findings indicate that while a majority of employees (62%) believe everyone has a fair chance of promotion, a substantial minority challenge this assumption, with 30% disputing fairness and 29% asserting that upward mobility does not meaningfully exist within their organizations (eLearning Industry, 2022). This divergence signals a systemic breakdown in how internal labor markets are designed, communicated, and operationalized.

At the organizational level, one of the most persistent structural barriers to internal upward mobility is the misalignment between learning and development (L&D) investments and promotion pathways. More than half of employees (52%) report that their organizations do not offer adequate learning or development programs to support career advancement, a figure that rises to 60% in retail and hospitality sectors, where operational demands frequently displace developmental priorities (eLearning Industry, 2022). In practice, this misalignment creates environments in which employees are expected to demonstrate “promotion readiness” without access to structured mentoring, stretch assignments, or leadership-facing experiences. Compounding this inefficiency, organizations often overlook employees who independently commit to their own development, such as those who pursue advanced degrees or professional certifications beyond job requirements, thereby failing to leverage internally cultivated expertise that could strengthen leadership pipelines and reduce dependency on external hiring.

Beyond developmental constraints, internal mobility systems are further weakened by perceptions of favoritism and bias. A substantial proportion of employees (76%) report observing favoritism in promotion decisions, with 60% indicating that leaders disproportionately promote individuals who share similar viewpoints or relational proximity (eLearning Industry, 2022). Moreover, 30% of employees believe leadership harbors prejudice against women and certain minoritized groups, while 41% perceive a lack of organizational commitment to diversity (eLearning Industry, 2022). These dynamics undermine trust in meritocratic advancement and reinforce the perception that promotion outcomes are shaped less by performance and organizational knowledge than by subjective alignment with dominant power structures. As a result, high-performing employees with deep institutional expertise may remain stagnant while less embedded external hires advance, exacerbating inequities and diminishing workforce morale (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024).

The consequences of constrained upward mobility extend beyond individual dissatisfaction to significant organizational costs and missed strategic opportunities. Nearly one in three employees (30%) report that they would consider leaving their organization due to inadequate tools and resources for career growth (eLearning Industry, 2022). When internally developed employees exit, organizations incur not only replacement and onboarding costs but also the loss of tacit knowledge accumulated through years of navigating internal systems, culture, and stakeholder relationships. External hires, regardless of technical proficiency, often require steep learning curves to acquire this contextual understanding, diverting time and resources that could otherwise be invested in innovation and performance. Additionally, 37% of employees doubt they possess the competencies required for advancement, and 32% report insufficient time during the workweek to engage in learning activities (eLearning Industry, 2022), illustrating how organizations frequently hold employees accountable for growth while failing to provide the infrastructure necessary to retain and absorb that growth.

Collectively, these findings reveal a critical and unresolved organizational problem: while internal upward mobility is rhetorically positioned as an equitable and expected outcome of employment, it is routinely undermined by fragmented development systems, biased promotion practices, and a reliance on external labor markets that disregard internally cultivated talent. The failure to recognize and elevate employees who actively invest in their own professional development represents a profound missed opportunity for knowledge retention, leadership continuity, and organizational learning. The persistence of these barriers underscores the need for systematic scholarly investigation into how internal mobility systems are constructed, experienced, and evaluated, particularly through the lens of knowledge management and organizational equity (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024). Addressing this problem is essential not only for advancing theory on internal labor markets

and career development but also for informing evidence-based practices that enable organizations to fully leverage the talent, knowledge, and commitment already present within their workforce.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore and interpret the lived experiences of ten women of color navigating internal upward mobility within corporate organizations that publicly invest in employee education and professional development. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how women of color perceive, experience, and make meaning of organizational learning and development initiatives, such as education sponsorship, leadership training, and skill-building programs, and the extent to which these initiatives translate into equitable opportunities for internal career advancement. Grounded in the concept of internal upward mobility as the organizational capacity to advance employees into roles of increased responsibility, authority, and compensation (Seibert et al., 2024), this study examines the perceived alignment or misalignment between development investments and promotion outcomes. By centering the voices of women of color, who are disproportionately affected by structural barriers, bias, and exclusionary advancement practices, the study aims to illuminate how organizational systems of learning, promotion, and talent recognition are experienced at the intersection of race, gender, and professional identity. The findings are intended to deepen understanding of the internal mobility paradox, where employees are encouraged to upskill yet encounter limited opportunities to apply those skills internally, and to identify patterns that shape career decision-making, retention, and perceptions of organizational equity.

This study contributes to the literature on internal labor markets, human capital theory, and organizational equity by foregrounding the lived experiences of women of color, an understudied population in research on internal upward mobility. While prior studies have documented structural barriers to advancement, favoritism, and inequities in promotion systems (Seibert et al., 2024; Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024), much of the existing research relies on quantitative or organizational-level analyses that obscure how these dynamics are experienced by individuals. By adopting a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study addresses a critical gap by capturing nuanced narratives that reveal how organizational learning investments, promotion practices, and informal power structures intersect to shape career trajectories. In doing so, the study extends theoretical understanding of why internal upward mobility frequently fails at the point of organizational absorption, despite substantial investments in employee development.

From a practical perspective, this study offers actionable insights for human resource leaders, diversity and inclusion practitioners, and organizational decision-makers seeking to design equitable internal mobility systems. As organizations increasingly position themselves as champions of education sponsorship and professional development, understanding why women of color continue to experience limited advancement is essential for aligning stated values with lived realities. The findings may inform the redesign of promotion criteria, talent identification processes, and learning-to-promotion pipelines to ensure that skill acquisition is meaningfully connected to advancement opportunities. By illuminating how women of color interpret stagnation, recognition, and career risk, this study can help organizations mitigate attrition, preserve institutional knowledge, and strengthen leadership pipelines by addressing the structural and cultural conditions that undermine internal upward mobility.

Finally, this study holds significance for advancing workplace equity and social justice. Women of color occupy a critical yet precarious position in corporate hierarchies, often facing compounded barriers related to race, gender, and access to informal networks.

When organizations fail to translate development investments into equitable advancement, they risk perpetuating systemic inequities while externalizing the benefits of internally cultivated talent. By amplifying the voices of women of color, this study challenges deficit-oriented explanations of career stagnation and instead situates upward mobility as an organizational responsibility. The insights generated may support broader efforts to create transparent, inclusive, and developmentally grounded career pathways that enable women of color not only to acquire skills but to advance, lead, and thrive within the organizations that invest in them.

### **Contexts from the Literature**

One key contributor to this paradox is organizational inertia. Large organizations often rely on rigid role classifications, standardized job requirements, and narrowly defined career ladders. Employees who earn advanced degrees or professional certifications are frequently evaluated based on their current job titles rather than their expanded capabilities (Cappelli, 2015). This phenomenon, commonly described as role entrenchment, constrains internal mobility and prevents organizations from fully capitalizing on their investments in employee development.

Risk aversion among hiring managers further exacerbates this issue. Internal promotions or lateral transfers into unfamiliar roles are often perceived as risky, particularly in highly regulated or performance-driven industries. Research indicates that managers are frequently more comfortable hiring externally because external candidates present clearer résumé-based alignment with job requirements, even when internal candidates possess equal or greater potential (Bidwell, 2011). This dynamic creates a structural disadvantage for internal talent seeking to transition into new functional areas.

Another contributing factor is the disconnect between learning initiatives and workforce planning. Many organizations promote education broadly without clearly linking learning outcomes to internal career pathways. Employees are encouraged to grow professionally but are rarely provided with structured opportunities to apply new skills through job rotations, stretch assignments, or internal talent pipelines (DeLong, 2017). Without intentional integration, education functions as an individual asset rather than a strategic organizational capability.

Faced with limited internal mobility, employees often pursue opportunities elsewhere to apply their newly acquired skills. External labor markets tend to reward credentials more directly by offering higher compensation, expanded responsibilities, and clearer role alignment (Korn Ferry, 2018). In some cases, employees later return to their former organizations in more senior roles, now perceived as more qualified due to external validation rather than internal development alone.

Although this “educate, exit, and return” cycle may benefit individual employees, it imposes substantial costs on organizations. High turnover increases recruitment and onboarding expenses and disrupts continuity and institutional knowledge (Allen et al., 2010). Ironically, organizations may rehire former employees at significantly higher compensation levels than would have been required to retain and promote them internally.

To address this internal mobility paradox, organizations must align education sponsorship with intentional talent mobility strategies. Such efforts include valuing learning outcomes in internal hiring decisions, creating rotational and cross-functional opportunities tied to educational milestones, and encouraging managers to serve as sponsors of talent rather than gatekeepers (Cappelli & Keller, 2014). Transparent career pathways and skills-based workforce planning are essential to ensuring that education investments yield measurable returns for both employees and employers.

## **Knowledge-Based View of the Firm**

The Knowledge-Based View (KBV) of the firm advances the proposition that organizations derive their enduring competitive advantage not from tangible assets alone but from their capacity to create, integrate, and apply knowledge embedded within individuals and social systems (Bibi, 2024). From this perspective, organizations function as dynamic knowledge architectures in which employees act as carriers of expertise, experience, and interpretive understanding. Internal upward mobility occupies a central position within this framework, as leadership roles represent critical nodes through which knowledge is retained, mobilized, and recombined to guide strategic action and organizational learning (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024).

A defining contribution of KBV to the study of internal mobility is its emphasis on the qualitative differences between tacit and explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to codified information such as policies, procedures, and technical documentation, whereas tacit knowledge encompasses experiential insight, contextual judgment, and relational awareness developed through sustained participation in organizational life (Tzabbar et al., 2022). Tacit knowledge is inherently difficult to articulate and cannot be fully transferred through formal training alone. Consequently, internal promotions serve as a key mechanism for preserving this form of knowledge by elevating individuals who have accumulated deep familiarity with organizational culture, informal workflows, and stakeholder relationships (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024).

In practical terms, promoting internally developed employees into leadership roles enables organizations to capitalize on their nuanced understanding of internal systems. For instance, a long-tenured employee who has navigated multiple functional roles may possess an intuitive grasp of interdepartmental dependencies, historical decision rationales, and unspoken norms that shape day-to-day operations. When such an individual assumes a leadership position, this tacit knowledge informs decision-making in ways that enhance coordination, trust, and execution. By contrast, external hires, regardless of technical expertise, often require extended periods to acquire comparable contextual fluency, during which organizations may experience inefficiencies, misalignment, or cultural friction.

When organizations systematically overlook internal candidates for advancement, KBV predicts significant knowledge-related costs. The failure to absorb internally developed talent into leadership positions increases the likelihood of knowledge leakage as employees exit to apply their expertise elsewhere. Moreover, repeated reliance on external recruitment for leadership roles disrupts knowledge continuity, fragmenting institutional memory and weakening learning feedback loops. This dynamic contributes to the internal mobility paradox identified in prior sections, wherein organizations invest in employee development yet fail to retain and elevate the very knowledge they have cultivated. From a KBV perspective, such misalignment represents not merely a human resource inefficiency but a strategic failure to leverage one of the firm's most valuable intangible assets.

Viewed through the Knowledge-Based View, internal upward mobility is thus more than a career management practice; it is a mechanism of organizational knowledge stewardship. Leadership development systems that privilege internal advancement enable firms to retain tacit expertise, reinforce shared meaning, and sustain adaptive capacity over time. Conversely, mobility systems that marginalize internal talent undermine the firm's knowledge base, eroding the foundations of long-term competitive advantage (Bibi, 2024; Tzabbar et al., 2022).

## **Internal Labor Market Theory**

Internal Labor Market Theory conceptualizes organizations as semi-bounded employment systems in which career advancement, compensation trajectories, and role assignments are

governed primarily by internally constructed rules, norms, and progression pathways rather than by continuous exposure to external labor market competition (MacKay et al., 2024). Within this framework of this commentary, employees' careers are shaped less by market mobility and more by organizational architectures that regulate access to opportunity, including promotion criteria, job ladders, and succession planning practices (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024). As such, the theory offers a critical lens for examining how internal upward mobility is designed, signaled, and experienced across organizational contexts.

A central tenet of internal labor market theory is the expectation of structured and predictable progression, whereby employees advance through delineated roles as they accumulate firm-specific knowledge, demonstrate performance, and build organizational tenure. For example, functional career ladders that move employees from entry-level analyst roles to senior analyst and managerial positions institutionalize the notion that advancement is attainable through sustained contribution and development within the firm. When these pathways are transparent and consistently enacted, internal labor markets foster retention by reinforcing employees' belief that their investment in organization-specific skills will be reciprocated through opportunity and advancement. In this way, internal labor markets serve not only as mechanisms of mobility but also as stabilizing forces that preserve institutional knowledge and leadership continuity.

However, the integrity of internal labor markets is compromised when organizations routinely circumvent internal progression pathways by privileging external hiring for advanced roles. Such practices introduce ambiguity into promotion systems, signaling that internal experience and development may be insufficient for advancement. Over time, employees may come to view internal career ladders as aspirational rather than operative, weakening trust in organizational commitments to growth and fairness (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024). This erosion of credibility has implications for the psychological contract, particularly for employees who have invested significant time and effort in developing firm-specific expertise under the assumption that internal mobility would follow. Leadership development efforts are similarly undermined, as high-potential employees may disengage or exit when advancement appears contingent on external validation rather than internal contribution.

Importantly, internal labor market theory also highlights how informal norms and discretionary practices interact with formal structures to shape mobility outcomes. Even when career ladders exist on paper, access to advancement may be mediated by managerial discretion, sponsorship, or subjective assessments of "fit," creating disparities in who progresses and who stagnates. For employees positioned outside dominant networks, such as women of color, these informal dynamics can further restrict mobility, rendering internal labor markets unevenly accessible. In this regard, internal labor market theory underscores that the effectiveness of internal upward mobility systems depends not only on their formal design but also on the consistency, equity, and transparency with which they are enacted (MacKay et al., 2024).

### **Signaling Theory**

Signaling Theory addresses how information is transmitted and interpreted under conditions of asymmetry, where one party possesses knowledge that others cannot directly observe (Li et al., 2025; Connelly et al., 2025). Within organizational contexts, internal upward mobility unfolds in precisely such conditions in which decision-makers often lack full visibility into employees' capabilities and intentions, while employees lack transparent insight into how promotion decisions are actually made. Signals therefore become critical interpretive cues through which both parties infer value, readiness, and organizational priorities.

At the individual level, employees engage in deliberate signaling behaviors to communicate ambition, competence, and leadership potential. These behaviors may include

pursuing advanced education, participating in leadership development programs, seeking stretch assignments, or proactively requesting feedback from supervisors. Such actions are intended to reduce uncertainty about one's promotability by making effort and capability more legible to those in positions of authority. However, the effectiveness of these signals depends on whether the organization recognizes and legitimizes them. When employees repeatedly invest in self-development without corresponding advancement or expanded responsibility, the signaling function of these behaviors erodes, leading individuals to question whether effort is meaningfully rewarded (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024).

Organizations simultaneously act as powerful signal senders through their structural decisions and everyday practices. Promotion outcomes, leadership appointments, and access to high-visibility assignments communicate implicit messages about what, and who, is valued. For example, when organizations routinely fill senior roles through external hiring, they signal that internal development may be insufficient or undervalued, regardless of formal rhetoric emphasizing employee growth. Similarly, when prestigious projects or leadership opportunities are consistently allocated to a narrow subset of employees, organizations signal implicit criteria for leadership legitimacy, often tied to familiarity, cultural alignment, or relational proximity rather than demonstrable capability (Burrell, 2022; Burrell et al., 2024).

These organizational signals exert a cumulative influence on employee expectations and career decision-making. Over time, employees learn to interpret patterns of recognition and exclusion, adjusting their behavior accordingly. High-performing employees who perceive that their developmental signals are ignored may disengage or redirect their ambitions toward external labor markets. Conversely, employees who receive early visibility and sponsorship interpret these signals as validation of their leadership trajectory, reinforcing commitment and continued investment. Importantly, signaling processes are not neutral; they are embedded within power structures that shape whose signals are amplified and whose are discounted. For women of color, for instance, identical signaling behaviors, such as credential attainment or initiative-taking, may be interpreted differently due to implicit bias, rendering their efforts less effective in altering promotability perceptions.

In this way, Signaling Theory offers a critical lens for understanding why internal upward mobility frequently diverges from formal talent development intentions. Organizational actions, whether intentional or inadvertent, generate powerful interpretive cues that shape employee beliefs about opportunity, fairness, and future viability within the firm. By illuminating how signals are sent, received, and unevenly interpreted, signaling theory underscores the importance of aligning developmental investments, visibility mechanisms, and promotion practices to ensure that signals of growth and readiness translate into genuine internal advancement (Li et al., 2025; Connelly et al., 2025).

### **Visibility as a Mechanism of Internal Upward Mobility**

Internal upward mobility, the organizational process through which employees advance into roles of greater responsibility, authority, and compensation within the same firm, depends not only on formal performance metrics and skill acquisition but also on informal social mechanisms that govern access to opportunity. Among these mechanisms, visibility plays a pivotal role in shaping who is perceived as promotable and who remains peripheral within organizational hierarchies. Visibility can be understood as the extent to which an individual is recognized, acknowledged, respected, and valued by influential organizational actors (Buchanan & Settles, 2018). In practice, visibility is often conferred through participation in high-impact initiatives, cross-functional projects, and leadership-facing assignments that allow employees to demonstrate competence in settings where promotion decisions are formed.

High-visibility assignments serve as critical gateways to internal upward mobility because they signal trust, capability, and leadership potential to senior decision-makers. Employees selected to lead strategic projects, such as enterprise-wide process redesigns or high-stakes client engagements, gain opportunities to showcase their expertise, decision-making acumen, and ability to manage complexity. These experiences frequently become informal prerequisites for advancement, as they shape evaluative narratives surrounding “readiness” for leadership roles. However, access to such assignments is rarely distributed evenly; rather, it is often extended to individuals who are already perceived as credible, competent, and culturally aligned with dominant organizational norms (Buchanan & Settles, 2018). As a result, visibility operates not merely as an outcome of performance but as a selective mechanism that reinforces existing hierarchies.

In contrast, invisibility emerges when employees are systematically excluded from opportunities that enable recognition and influence, regardless of their qualifications or performance. Invisibility is characterized by the absence of acknowledgment for one’s knowledge, abilities, and contributions, often resulting in limited access to high-value projects and leadership exposure (Burrell, 2022; Peters, 2024). In organizational contexts, this may manifest when employees are repeatedly assigned routine or supportive tasks while others are entrusted with initiatives that carry strategic importance. In meetings, invisibility may appear through the dismissal or appropriation of ideas, interruptions, or the tendency for decision-makers to seek validation from certain voices while overlooking others. Such patterns constrain employees’ ability to build the reputational capital necessary for internal advancement.

Power dynamics play a central role in determining who becomes visible within organizations. Members of dominant groups, those who hold positional authority, social influence, or cultural legitimacy, often control access to high-visibility opportunities and define the criteria by which leadership potential is recognized (Buchanan & Settles, 2018). These gatekeeping practices can inadvertently reproduce inequities, particularly when promotion pathways rely on informal sponsorship rather than transparent criteria. For example, a manager may consistently select the same employees for stretch assignments based on perceived “fit” or comfort, rather than systematically rotating opportunities among qualified team members. Over time, such practices concentrate visibility and advancement within a narrow subset of employees, reinforcing exclusion for those positioned outside dominant networks.

The consequences of invisibility are especially pronounced for Black women and other women of color, who frequently encounter compounded barriers to recognition and voice within organizational settings. Research indicates that workplace cultures characterized by invisibility deny women access to acknowledgment, leadership opportunities, and platforms to influence decision-making (Burrell, 2022; Peters, 2024). When women are overlooked for high-impact projects or their expertise is routinely questioned, their capacity to demonstrate readiness for advancement is structurally constrained. This dynamic not only undermines individual career trajectories but also distorts organizational talent pipelines by obscuring capable leaders from view.

Taken together, visibility functions as a critical yet underexamined determinant of internal upward mobility. While organizations may emphasize merit-based advancement and equal opportunity, the informal distribution of visibility often determines who is positioned for promotion long before formal evaluations occur. Understanding visibility as both a resource and a gatekeeping mechanism underscores the need for organizations to critically examine how high-impact opportunities are allocated, whose contributions are recognized, and how leadership potential is constructed. Addressing visibility inequities is therefore essential for creating internal mobility systems that are not only developmentally robust but also equitable and inclusive.

## **Methods and Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative, two-phase data collection design to examine how the absence of internal upward mobility is experienced professionally and emotionally by women of color, and to elicit participant-driven recommendations for organizational change. A sequential approach was selected to allow participants time for reflection prior to verbal data collection and to deepen interpretive understanding through follow-up inquiry. This design is consistent with qualitative methodologies that prioritize meaning-making, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant.

### ***Participants and Sampling***

The study sample consisted of twelve women of color currently or formerly employed in corporate organizational settings. Participants included six African American women, three Arab American women, and three Latina American women. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who had direct experience with internal promotion processes, leadership development initiatives, or stalled advancement within their organizations. Inclusion criteria required participants to have a minimum of 10 years of professional experience within a corporate organization and prior exposure to internal learning, development, or advancement systems. This sampling strategy was selected to ensure rich, experience-based data relevant to internal upward mobility and leadership development. All participants had graduate degrees and worked in the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, MD area.

### ***Phase One: Asynchronous Written Data Collection***

The first phase of data collection involved the distribution of a structured qualitative question set via email. Participants received an electronic document containing four open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed written reflections on their professional experiences with internal upward mobility, the emotional impact of limited advancement, perceptions of how their skills and expertise were recognized, and recommendations for improving organizational mobility systems. Participants were encouraged to respond in narrative form and were given two weeks to complete and return the document.

This asynchronous written format served multiple purposes. First, it allowed participants to reflect deeply on their experiences without time pressure, potentially reducing social desirability bias and increasing emotional candor. Second, it provided an initial layer of data that informed the second phase of collection, enabling the researcher to identify salient themes, points of ambiguity, and areas requiring elaboration. Written responses were reviewed prior to scheduling interviews but were not formally coded until completion of both phases to preserve analytic openness.

### ***Phase Two: Semi-Structured Zoom Interviews***

The second phase consisted of individual semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was scheduled after participants had submitted their written responses. The interviews were designed to build upon Phase One data, using participants' written narratives as prompts for deeper exploration rather than as rigid scripts.

During the interviews, the researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify meanings, probe emotional responses, and explore contextual factors influencing participants' experiences. This phase allowed participants to expand upon their reflections, articulate affective dimensions that may not have been fully captured in writing, and engage in dialogic sensemaking regarding organizational culture, visibility, leadership decision-making, and internal hiring practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and professionally transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### ***Rationale for the Two-Phase Approach***

The two-phase data collection strategy was intentionally designed to enhance depth, credibility, and richness of the qualitative data. Written responses provided participants with psychological space to articulate complex or sensitive experiences, while follow-up interviews enabled the researcher to explore nuance, contradiction, and meaning in greater detail. This approach also supported methodological triangulation by allowing comparison between written and spoken narratives, thereby strengthening interpretive rigor.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying organizational details from transcripts and written responses. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing workplace inequities and emotional impact, participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question they found distressing.

### **Question 1: Professional Experience of Mobility Constraints**

Can you describe a time when you believed you were prepared for advancement within your organization but were not promoted or considered for an internal opportunity? How did organizational practices, such as promotion criteria, access to high-visibility projects, or reliance on external hiring, shape that experience?

*Purpose:* This question captures lived professional experiences of stalled mobility, links to internal labor market theory and signaling theory, and surfaces structural barriers without presupposing bias.

### **Question 2: Emotional and Psychological Impact**

How has the lack of internal upward mobility affected your sense of professional value, motivation, and emotional well-being at work? In what ways, if any, did this experience influence your trust in leadership or your decision to remain with or leave the organization?

*Purpose:* This question explicitly elicits emotional and psychological consequences, connecting organizational justice, invisibility, and signaling processes to individual well-being and retention.

### **Question 3: Recognition of Skills, Expertise, and Knowledge**

How effectively do you feel your organization recognizes and utilizes your skills, expertise, and institutional knowledge when making promotion or leadership decisions? Can you share examples of when your capabilities were either acknowledged or overlooked?

*Purpose:* This question draws directly on the Knowledge-Based View and visibility theory, exploring how tacit and explicit knowledge are (or are not) absorbed into leadership pipelines.

### **Question 4: Recommendations for Organizational Change**

Based on your experiences, what changes would you recommend to improve internal upward mobility for women of color, particularly regarding organizational culture, leadership decision-making, and systems for identifying, tracking, and prioritizing internal talent before seeking external candidates?

*Purpose:* This question invites participant-generated solutions, addressing cultural reform, skill-tracking systems, and internal-first hiring practices aligned with equitable internal labor markets.

## Results

Data analysis from the two-phase collection process (asynchronous written responses and follow-up Zoom interviews) revealed four interrelated themes aligned with the four data collection questions. Each theme reflects shared professional and emotional experiences related to internal upward mobility and organizational culture, as articulated by women of color across corporate contexts.

### Data Collection Question 1

Can you describe a time when you believed you were prepared for advancement within your organization but were not promoted or considered for an internal opportunity? How did organizational practices shape that experience?

#### **Theme 1: *Prepared but Unseen*—Perceived Readiness Without Advancement**

##### **Theme Definition**

This theme captures participants' shared experiences of demonstrable readiness for advancement, evidenced by performance, tenure, and skill development, without corresponding recognition or promotion. Participants described organizational practices such as opaque promotion criteria, reliance on external hiring, and discretionary decision-making as central contributors to stalled mobility.

##### **Participant Quote 1**

"I can say with confidence that I was doing the job before the title ever came into question. I had taken on additional responsibilities, trained new hires, and even stepped in for my manager when she was out. I had completed a leadership certificate that the company reimbursed and consistently received strong performance reviews. So when a managerial role opened up and they hired someone externally, it was devastating; not just professionally, but personally. It made me question whether any of my effort actually mattered. I wasn't asking for a favor; I was asking for acknowledgment that my work and growth had positioned me for that next step."

##### **Participant Quote 2**

"What hurt the most was not being told I wasn't ready; it was being told nothing at all. I had no idea what that even meant. I never had access to mentors or career coaches in the company. The position was posted, interviews happened quietly, and suddenly there was a new person in the role. No one spoke to me about why I wasn't considered or what I needed to do differently. I had been with the organization for years, had built relationships, understood the systems, and had already proven myself. Being passed over without explanation made it clear that internal advancement wasn't truly part of the culture."

### Data Collection Question 2

How has the lack of internal upward mobility affected your sense of professional value, motivation, and emotional well-being at work?

#### **Theme 2: *Emotional Toll of Stagnation*—Erosion of Trust, Motivation, and Belonging**

##### **Theme Definition**

This theme reflects the emotional and psychological impact of limited advancement opportunities, including diminished motivation, loss of trust in leadership, and feelings of invisibility. Participants described how prolonged stagnation altered their relationship with work, leadership, and self-perception.

##### **Participant Quote 1**

"After a while, it stops being about the promotion and starts being about how you feel walking into work every day. I used to be excited, motivated, and engaged. But after being

overlooked multiple times, I began to feel emotionally exhausted. It felt like no matter how much I gave, it would never be enough; or worse, it wouldn't even be seen. That's when I stopped trusting leadership. I experienced a bout of deep depression because I had worked so hard to get my undergraduate degree and graduate degree only to be leapfrogged by people with connections with less experience and education. The promotion process just did not seem fair or transparent."

### **Participant Quote 2**

"There's a quiet kind of grief that comes with realizing you're stuck. I started questioning my value, not just to the company but to myself. I wondered if I was being unrealistic for wanting more, even though I had done everything right. It affected my confidence, my mental health, and eventually my decision to leave. I didn't want to keep shrinking myself to fit a system that didn't value me, see me, or appreciate my talents, potential, and ability."

### **Data Collection Question 3**

How effectively do you feel your organization recognizes and utilizes your skills, expertise, and institutional knowledge when making promotion or leadership decisions?

### **Theme 3: *Knowledge Without Leverage*—Skills and Expertise Recognized but Not Activated**

#### **Theme Definition**

This theme describes participants' experiences of being relied upon for expertise, execution, and institutional knowledge without being viewed as leadership candidates. Knowledge was often extracted but not leveraged as a basis for advancement.

### **Participant Quote 1**

"I was the person everyone came to when things went wrong. I knew the systems, the history, and the people. Managers trusted me to fix problems, but when it came time to talk about leadership roles, that trust didn't translate into opportunity. It felt like my knowledge was useful only when it served others, not when it could elevate me. I did not feel valued or respected. I felt used."

### **Participant Quote 2**

"I trained people who ended up managing me. I understood the organization in ways they didn't yet, but none of that counted when promotions were discussed. That's when I realized there was no real system for recognizing internal expertise; just informal decisions that benefited certain people. Jobs were posted and you had to be actively looking on the jobs website to even know that jobs were open. There was no system to track and flag internal employees who could fit the job. It seemed like always looking for someone outside the organization was a waste of talent and organizational resources."

### **Data Collection Question 4**

Based on your experiences, what changes would you recommend to improve internal upward mobility for women of color, particularly regarding organizational culture and systems that prioritize internal talent?

### **Theme 4: *Internal First as Cultural Shift*—Reimagining Mobility Systems**

**Theme Definition:** This theme captures participants' collective vision for organizational transformation, emphasizing actionable recommendations for developing and promoting internal talent.

### **Participant Quote 1**

"Organizations need to stop pretending that internal mobility just happens. There should be systems that track who has what skills, what training they've completed, and which roles they're interested in. Before any job goes external, leaders should review internal

candidates who are already doing the work. There should be a system that tracks employees who complete an additional degree and certificate and rewards employees with the work ethic to gain new knowledge and new skills.”

### **Participant Quote 2**

“What would have changed everything for me is transparency; knowing what it actually takes to move up and having leadership held accountable for developing people internally. I could have benefited from a formal mentor or career coach. The organization could easily create leadership development programs to develop employees from within for leadership roles. If organizations truly want diversity in leadership, they have to build systems that make internal advancement the norm, not the exception.”

### **Practical Recommendations**

1. Establish an internal-first hiring policy requiring documented review of qualified internal candidates before external recruitment begins.
2. Implement centralized, organization-wide systems to track employee skills, certifications, project experience, and career aspirations.
3. Formally link completion of learning and development programs to eligibility for internal promotions and leadership assignments.
4. Require leaders to provide written justification when external hires are selected over qualified internal candidates.
5. Develop and publish transparent promotion criteria that are consistently applied across departments and levels.
6. Create formal sponsorship programs pairing high-potential women of color with senior leaders accountable for advocacy and visibility.
7. Conduct annual audits of promotion, hiring, and retention outcomes disaggregated by race, gender, and tenure.
8. Rotate high-visibility assignments intentionally to broaden access to leadership-signaling opportunities.
9. Incorporate internal mobility outcomes into leadership performance evaluations and incentive structures.
10. Institutionalize recurring career development conversations focused explicitly on internal advancement pathways rather than external exit options.
11. Redefine organizational norms to position internal advancement as a collective responsibility rather than an individual negotiation.
12. Train leaders to recognize and disrupt implicit bias in promotion decisions, visibility allocation, and talent assessments.
13. Create psychologically safe spaces where employees can openly discuss career aspirations, stagnation concerns, and advancement barriers without fear of retaliation.
14. Embed internal mobility and leadership development goals into organizational values and cultural narratives, not solely HR processes.
15. Equip managers with structured coaching tools to support long-term career development rather than short-term performance management alone.
16. Develop leadership development pathways that combine formal training with rotational assignments, mentorship, and decision-making exposure.
17. Recognize and reward leaders who successfully develop and promote internal talent, particularly women of color, as a core leadership competency.
18. Foster employee engagement by ensuring that feedback, performance reviews, and development plans are meaningfully connected to advancement opportunities.

19. Create cross-functional communities of practice that increase visibility, knowledge sharing, and relationship-building across organizational silos.
20. Normalize leadership transparency by requiring leaders to communicate promotion rationales and development expectations clearly and consistently.

## Conclusion

This study set out to examine internal upward mobility as both an organizational system and a lived professional experience, centering the voices of women of color navigating corporate environments that espouse commitments to development, equity, and leadership diversity. Drawing on a two-phase qualitative design and grounded in theories from human resources, knowledge management, and organizational behavior, the findings illuminate a persistent misalignment between organizational rhetoric and practice. While participants demonstrated readiness for advancement through performance, skill acquisition, and institutional knowledge, internal mobility systems frequently failed to recognize, absorb, and elevate that talent.

Across the findings, internal upward mobility emerged not merely as a structural process but as a powerful organizational signal that shapes employee identity, emotional well-being, and career decision-making. Participants' narratives revealed that stalled advancement was experienced as being "prepared but unseen," producing emotional consequences that extended beyond professional frustration to include erosion of trust, disengagement, and diminished sense of belonging. These outcomes underscore that mobility systems function as mechanisms of organizational justice and recognition; when advancement pathways are opaque or inconsistently enacted, they communicate who is valued and who is expendable within the firm.

From a knowledge management perspective, the study highlights how organizations systematically underutilize the tacit and experiential knowledge embedded in internally developed employees. Despite investments in education sponsorship, leadership training, and skill development, participants frequently encountered barriers at the point of organizational absorption. Internal labor market theory and the knowledge-based view of the firm help explain why this disconnect constitutes not only a human resource failure but also a strategic inefficiency, as organizations forfeit institutional memory, leadership continuity, and learning capacity when internal talent is overlooked in favor of external hires.

The findings further reveal that internal upward mobility is deeply shaped by informal mechanisms of visibility, signaling, and social capital. High-impact projects, sponsorship, and relational access to decision-makers consistently influenced promotability, often privileging those aligned with dominant organizational norms. For women of color, these dynamics constrained access to leadership pathways even when formal development opportunities were available. Signaling theory elucidates how organizational actions, such as repeated external hiring or selective allocation of visibility, send powerful messages that shape employee expectations and ultimately drive retention or exit decisions.

Importantly, participants did not frame their experiences solely as individual setbacks but offered clear, actionable recommendations for organizational change. These recommendations emphasized the need for internal-first hiring philosophies, transparent promotion criteria, robust systems for tracking skills and expertise, and cultural shifts that position leadership development and internal advancement as shared organizational responsibilities. Together, these insights point toward a reimagining of internal mobility as an integrated system that aligns learning, visibility, leadership accountability, and organizational culture.

This study contributes to the literature by foregrounding the emotional and experiential dimensions of internal upward mobility and by amplifying the voices of

women of color, a group whose perspectives are often marginalized in research on leadership and career advancement. While the qualitative nature of the study limits generalizability, the depth of participant narratives offers transferable insights for organizations seeking to design equitable, developmentally grounded mobility systems. Future research may extend this work by examining internal mobility across industries, organizational sizes, and intersectional identities, or by exploring the longitudinal effects of internal-first talent strategies.

In conclusion, internal upward mobility is not simply a matter of filling roles; it is a reflection of how organizations value knowledge, recognize potential, and enact equity in practice. Organizations that fail to translate development investments into advancement opportunities risk losing not only talent but also trust, engagement, and strategic capacity. By aligning internal labor markets, knowledge systems, and leadership practices, organizations can move beyond symbolic commitments and create mobility pathways that enable women of color, and the organizations themselves, to thrive.

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