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## Gender equality at board level: how does the recruitment industry fare?

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The proportion of women in top-level roles is very much on the agenda once again, spurred on by various industry reports, latest quotas and workplace trends. Yet the recruitment industry, the very sector which binds markets and industries together, tends to be the most overlooked.

It's why the Women in Recruitment (WIR) initiative – re-launched in April in collaboration with the Association of Professional Staffing Companies (APSCo) – is so relevant. According to industry research, whilst 56% of women make up senior staffing levels in the recruitment industry, just 23% actually sit at board level positions. Deb Pettingill, director at recruitment consultancy ep professional, describes this as 'puzzling', particularly because there is a large female talent pool at senior levels that could progress to board level. So why aren't they? Pettingill cites exclusively male boards being 'a little too comfortable' in their positions as a possible factor, whilst Fiona Hathorn, managing director of social enterprise Women on Boards, sees it as a transparency issue.

Women on Boards, which has recently campaigned for head-hunters to publicly advertise Non-Executive Director (NED) positions, is concerned that board level recruitment is still very much an elitist operation.

"Most top head hunters still prefer to hold recruitment cards very tightly and often perform hidden from view," says Hathorn. As a result, head hunters are recruiting from the same 'C-suite pond' and the same NED candidates are being recruited. To this end, Women on Boards is calling for increased transparency when recruiting for board-level positions. 'Turn off the spotlight and turn on the floodlights', is its mantra.

Stephen Stott, CEO at executive search firm Stott and May believes it is an issue that 'transcends industry', with gender issues only coming about because businesses have been ineffective at hiring women at graduate and junior level.

"The top is influenced by the bottom," he says. "You can only drive equality at the top if it



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exists throughout the whole business.” At the same time, Stott is concerned that companies are focusing on ‘curing the symptoms of gender inequality’, rather than the disease itself.

It’s a point that resonates strongly with Raj Tulsiani, CEO at interim and executive search consultancy, Green Park. According to Tulsiani, it’s the blind CV issue all over again. “What needs to be fixed is us, the companies, not the groups who are being underrepresented. If you look at the conversation around blind CVs, you start to see what is so wrong with the whole concept. You are fixing the problem by taking your name off the CV all together, but the issue of unconscious recruiter bias will come up at a later date in the process. And you have to think, ‘why would I want to work for a company where I have to change my name?’ It’s old world thinking to new world problems.”

Green Park’s Leadership 10,000 report into ethno-cultural diversity within the FTSE 100 was referenced in the House of Commons and is being used by Lord Davies to meet the latest criteria. According to Tulsiani, the report mapped FTSE 100 by race and gender which provided a rich picture of where the diversity issues were, and over time, patterns emerged. The results were worrying.

“It was quite illuminating,” he recalls. “Gender diversity has slowed up dramatically over the past three years and we found that the bigger the firm, the less diversity there is. BME women in particular, are significantly underrepresented at board level.”

For Kate Waters, who is CEO at HR consultancy AustenHR and formerly worked at director level at a recruitment firm that works mainly in the construction industry, it’s very much a cultural issue. “There are less women doing construction full stop, so that is going to have an impact at board level as there are less women to rise up and progress through the ranks,” she explains, adding that the gender split at board level was around 80-20.

Waters describes her experience at board level at the firm as enjoyable whilst being ‘slightly intimidating’ as she was the only woman on the board. At the time, she unconsciously changed her behaviour in order to fit in. “I thought I had to be a woman in a man’s world,” she says. “I copied a lot of the behaviour. I became more masculine, my banter was different, all the things you’d associate with a male-dominated culture.” But it wasn’t until she set up her own HR consultancy that she realised women don’t have to be women in a man’s world at all.

Incidentally, Waters’ company is now made up predominantly of women, which, she insists, was not a conscious decision. “We are not adverse to recruiting men, it’s just worked out like that,” she says. “I actually think men and women balance each other very well, yet a male or female-dominated culture is still dependent on the market. So at board level in many large recruitment firms, you have to be a very high biller to be taken seriously, so maybe less women go for that type of culture.”

For Lynis Bassett, CEO of education recruitment firm Class People, her firm has a similar problem. With a female-dominated management team, Bassett wants to attract more males into top positions, but, as she explains, her male employees don’t seem keen to progress. She recalls one male employee who recently handed in his notice, telling her he just wanted an ‘easy life’: “I hear this from most of the males in my workforce,” she says. “The education sector is predominantly female, so that may be putting a lot of males off.”

Yet for Tulsiani, the view that some sectors are better suited to either male or female is a ‘weak excuse’: “The idea that one gender is better suited to a particular market than another is not only insulting, but it’s just not valid,” he insists. “A lot of leading practitioners in the manufacturing and construction industries are female, for example. We need to allow candidates themselves to decide whether an organisation or sector is right for them.”

And when it comes to the recruitment sector, Nikki Graham, associate director at Sellick Partnership often hears it being referred to as a male-dominated industry. “It always surprises me,” she says. “Especially because the vast majority of our senior management team are female.”

Even so, Sellick subscribes to the belief that flexible working is the key to encourage women to progress in their careers. Julia Kermode, CEO of the Freelancer & Contractor Services Association (FCSA) agrees: “We need more flexible working practices to allow women to take on the demands of senior roles which are often very time-consuming. We need better maternity policies, more annualised hours and for working from home to be an accepted part of the office culture.”

Waters adds: “It’s perfectly possible to run a successful company built around flexible working and work-life balance. My staff all work independently and all our systems are

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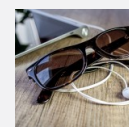
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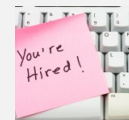
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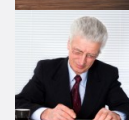
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