

women's drivers

Roundtable panel



What are the factors putting the brakes on women getting ahead, particularly in the predominantly female world of HR? Karen Dempsey met leadership and development experts from several major organisations to discuss the opportunities and threats facing women in high-ranking positions.

Given the compelling business case for diversity, why is it still going to take 40 years for women to reach the same levels of seniority as men?

RUTH MUNDY Women don't necessarily aspire to be at the top of the organisation. It's about creating a culture where women feel they have an equal chance, but it's their choice whether to take it or not.

AILSA DONOVAN It's the difference between having the ability to exercise the choice and actually exercising it.

SALLY BONNEYWELL Various things are helping, in terms of flexible working and use of technology, so working from home is much easier now. That benefits women in terms of making choices about childcare

and balancing work and personal life.

CHRIS PARRY So what about the legislation in Norway that has given organisations two years to get at least 40% of their boards female or risk being closed down?

MORGAN CHAMBERS My concern is we've only got 11% of women at senior management levels, so where are we going to go for board members? You could put women on the board, but if they are not already in senior management, what sort of experience could they bring? I think it's a huge risk.

MUNDY Women want to get on the board on their own merits. They don't want to feel they have been selected just because they are female.

Do women who have 'made it' have a responsibility to other women? Or is there a tendency for them to pull the ladder up once they've got there?

SUSAN BOR I don't think it's about not being prepared to support other women. I am not sure that UK businesses are ready to accept a different kind of leadership. We may have female leaders, but they are female leaders apeing male leaders.

BONNEYWELL When a woman tries to operate in a masculine way – for example, someone who says: "I've done it the hard way, so fight your own battles" – men pick up on this as not being authentic or trustworthy. When a woman is herself, and doesn't try to be a man, she engenders far more trust and credibility.

TERRI PETTIFER-EAGLES All truly great leaders know what their values are, they know where they want to go, and they do it on their own terms. Perhaps men are happier to do that than women.

PARRY I've known senior men to send a woman to coaching because she was "too aggressive". Another woman was sent to coaching because she didn't say enough. It's as if the bandwidth for women is very narrow. If we stray either side of it, we are either too feisty or too feminine.



CHAIR: CHRIS PARRY, executive chairman, Centre for High Performance Development



SALLY BONNEYWELL, director, learning, development and talent management, GlaxoSmithKline



SUSAN BOR, head of resourcing and development, Royal Bank of Scotland



MORGAN CHAMBERS, group head of leadership development, National Grid



AILSA DONOVAN, learning and career development director, Rentokil Initial



BIRTHE MESTER, senior clients director, Centre for High Performance Development



RUTH MUNDY, HR director, Mouchel Parkman



TERRI PETTIFER-EAGLES, HR manager, Davis Langdon

What do you make of recent research saying that businesses need to give more consideration to the pressure women are under to balance work and home?

BONNEYWELL I think much of the pressure comes from the fact that women have high expectations of themselves. Then there's the whole guilt thing about: "I have to do everything perfectly."

BOR We have introduced flexible working arrangements, partly on the back of legislation, and partly on the recognition that, if we don't, we are not going to be able to attract the people we need. But you need a senior person to drive this.

PETTIFER-EAGLES People who have been in an organisation forever may feel uncomfortable with that. But there's a lot of bottom-up pressure – from the recruitment marketplace and from the employee base – as well as that top-down pressure.

BIRTHE MESTER I have seen resentment from people with no children when suddenly people with children had all the flexibility. I've seen less of that in the last three years because of equal opportunity in terms of flexible working. Quite a few of my male clients now have a day at home as well.

Women, stereotypically, aren't as good as men at networking. Is this holding women back?

BONNEYWELL Networking sounds formal, but really it's building relationships outside the formal decision processes. Men do it – whether it's on the golf course or elsewhere – but women need to be encouraged to do it. They don't need to joke or backslap; they just need to be themselves. We find that once women can network informally, they progress.

CHAMBERS It's also a confidence thing. Men just take it for granted.

PARRY I see men coming in and out of people's offices – not just the senior people – and they say: "I just wanted to ask you this, or I have been talking to so and so." That informal approach gets you into the loop. The women were busy working at their desks, through their lunch breaks as well. As a woman you have to be politically smart. You won't be spotted and promoted if you don't come forward.

BOR I avoided going to our executive mess until I moved to my group role. The mess is the best way for me to access informal networks, which are the powerhouse in the organisation.

DONOVAN We have now closed ours, thankfully. You would go to lunch and nobody knew what to talk to you about, because the women had never gone to lunch there. They were all desperate to have their normal conversation, and it was just hilarious.

HR as a profession attracts lots of women, yet many HR directors are men. What barriers prevent women from getting to the top?

PETTIFER-EAGLES I think the barriers are personal, cultural and historic.

CHAMBERS You look at senior gatherings, and you wonder why it is suddenly tipped upside down. We don't know why. Perhaps there is a sticky floor syndrome [where women have the skills, experience and talent to succeed, but lack the confidence to put themselves forward for promotion].

MUNDY We don't do ourselves any favours. We sell HR as the soft, people side of things, and we need to get better at selling it as a hard commercial driver of the business.

So what favours can HR do itself to be taken more seriously?

CHAMBERS What is always missing from HR is business acumen and financial knowledge. We still need to build on those areas.

DONOVAN What's made a huge difference to our organisation is having a new HR director who reported to the chief executive in previous roles, and who reports to our CEO. That has created a fundamental difference in terms of the perception of HR. **MUNDY** Newly qualified HR people often think everything should be done by the book. But good HR is being able to translate what you know. You have to put it in a way that makes good business sense, and that doesn't sound like you are the 'HR thought police'.

BONNEYWELL Black & Decker focused on selling drills until someone said: "No-one cares about the drill. It's the hole." It's the same with HR. We have a tendency to over-engineer. But it's the "what does it actually do for me?" that people are interested in.

PARRY It's getting the confidence to say that, behind the scenes, HR has substantial expertise, just as much as the finance function does, but the rest of the world doesn't want to see that in detail. They want the result of that applied to them. If you can achieve that, you really add value. ■

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Chris Parry, executive chair, Centre for High Performance Development