

Inspirational Women in Business



A selection of career insights

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FOREWORD by Denise Wilson



I am delighted to present this selection of biographies of women already serving, or ready to serve on the boards of Britain's biggest companies.

Also to highlight a number of inspiring business women at different stages in their careers, their views on leadership and advice to aspiring others.

They all make an interesting and candid read in their own right, but together show how many different experiences and career paths can lead to success.

In preparing for the publication of the Davies Review in 2011, consultation findings indicated that the lack of career women role models acted as a barrier to women's progression and the low number of visible women role models, served to reinforce stereotypes, compounding the difficulties for women in reaching the top table.

At the same time, comments from executive search firms and their Chairmen clients, showed concern over the number of women capable and ready to serve on FTSE 350 boards. Against this backdrop, it has been wonderful to see over 300 women appointed to FTSE 350 boards since the publication of the Davies Review just four years ago. And we know there are many more talented women waiting in the wings.

The executive search firms, working in partnership with their clients are to be congratulated for exploring new and untapped talent pools, hitherto ignored. Today's board search extends deeper into the corporate talent pipeline than ever before and wider to include entrepreneurs and senior women serving in government, charitable bodies and the academic sectors. In addition, senior women have been working hard to make themselves more visible, strengthening their network and more clearly set out their career aspirations and goals.

In 2014, around one in three appointments in the FTSE 100 are now going to women, with women making up nearly 23% of all FTSE 100 directorships. We still have a way to go to reach gender parity, but this is a major achievement in a much longer journey.

For my own part, I would encourage all aspiring women to have great confidence in themselves, be prepared to stand up for what they believe in and always bring their own authentic leadership style to the workplace.

I would like to thank Libby Drury at the Centre for Group Processes, University of Kent, Canterbury who researched and produced these insights.

I do hope you enjoy reading the career stories of just a few of the UK's inspiring, talented women.

Denise

CEO – Davies Review

CHRISTINE HODGSON – Executive Chairman Capgemini UK plc



Christine is the Executive Chairman of Capgemini. She is a non-executive director at Standard Chartered plc and Ladbrokes plc. She is a board member at HRH Prince of Wales Charity, Business in the Community and MacIntyre Care.

Educational background

I am a qualified chartered accountant and have a BSc (Hons) in accounting and financial management from Loughborough University. My course included a sandwich year in business which I spent at Coopers and Lybrand.

Career Path

I continued with Coopers as an auditor until I qualified. I loved the organisation but hated being an auditor, so I quickly transferred to corporate finance. I enjoyed following the market, corporate recovery and contested takeovers. I moved up quickly to just below partner level, then a client offered me a post. I was apprehensive about leaving, so I took a secondment for 6 months. I never went back. It was a small plc, and I was on the board by the age of 30. I loved my time there but it was also very intense. We had an extremely serious fire which was followed by undiluted stress caused by fighting banks and insurers, and cash flow problems. I learned a lot from that experience. After a few years I applied for a role at Capgemini. I was offered the post but turned it down as it appeared boring. Then I received a call from the head hunter to go back in and meet the CEO. I was sceptical, but I went and found him very inspirational. The CEO explained they were a meritocracy and he thought I was a good fit. I joined the company and I was quickly promoted to Finance Director. I have been here for 17 years now and progressed from UK Finance Director to the Global Outsourcing Finance Director. I then moved out of finance and became CEO of North West Europe Technology Services. Eventually I was invited to take up my current position in the UK, which I jumped at, as by that point I had a young son.

Role of a Non-Executive Director (NED)

In addition to my executive role, I am a NED at two organisations. The role of the NED is to challenge and support the executive team. I sit on the main boards and some committees including audit, remuneration and social responsibility. I spend time at weekends or in the evenings reviewing paperwork and board meetings are scheduled far in advance, which makes the time manageable. I have a very full portfolio and undeniably it is hard work. It can be pressurised and you have to give up some personal time. It might not be for all women, which I think is absolutely understandable. However, combining executive and non-executive roles is inspiring and complimentary. There is lots of scope for cross-fertilisation and I come back from meetings refreshed and full of new ideas.

What is your experience of being a woman in corporate governance?

I have never hit a glass ceiling or felt gender has been a barrier. There are many strong women in my organisation and I have never felt as if I were there as a token. In Northern Europe I was the first female manager and I had to make some challenging decisions when I joined. In fact, I was the first woman in 40 years of the business to join the Group's Executive Committee. I never felt overwhelmed or overshadowed; I was always allowed a voice.

What is your advice related to maternity leave and return?

I didn't have my baby until I was 42, but for me this worked out well. I had been with the Company for 10 years and I was trusted and had built up a lot of goodwill. There was no doubt that I would get the job done, whether I left at 5:30 or not. Of course having children younger means you have energy and youth on your side, but as an older mother you have more infrastructure and means for childcare.

I think it's vital that organisations focus on managing new mothers' return to work and offer help and flexibility. But this is a two way contract; women should try to avoid being rigid and focus on being reliable. Also, think about your colleagues; consider the impact you have on them and support them when they need it. It might be your male colleagues are up all night doing the feeds! My advice is when you are at work; work. When you are with your child; be with your child, don't be emailing or conference calling. I think this is a way to preserve some sanity.

Values

Honesty and integrity are important to me. I have a clear moral code; look in the mirror test. If I can do that and be comfortable whenever I make a decision or with what I have agreed then I will go ahead. If I can't, then I don't.

Mentoring women

I chair a women's network aimed at attracting and retaining female talent. I want women to achieve what they want to achieve, whether that's a board role or working part time and balancing work with other responsibilities or interests. I think encouraging women involves recognising both those that are happy with a certain equilibrium and identifying those who want more, gently coaching them and raising ambitions. I think role modelling is a difficult term. I don't profess to have a perfect situation; it just works well for me and my family. But if I can give women hope that they can aspire higher, then that's great.

Advice for aspiring women

I'd say aim high, work hard and be resilient. Keep asking for more; you will get it. Don't wait for someone to tap you on the shoulder, put your hand up, take more risks, give it your all and learn by your experiences. Work hard, do your job well, deliver results and be confident at what you are good at. It's important to be yourself, and important that as women, we are not like men. Resilience is so important; don't be too sensitive. There will be times when you take knocks, just pick yourself up, dust yourself down and keep looking forward. Don't dwell on things.

DEIRDRE MAHLAN – Executive Director Diageo plc



Deirdre is Chief Financial Officer at Diageo plc, where she sits on the Board of Directors and the executive committee. She is also a Non-executive Director at Experian plc.

Educational background and professional qualifications

I started out studying computer science, but soon realised that the way my brain worked did not lend itself to programming. I swapped to accountancy, passed my undergraduate degree, and joined Price Waterhouse. Whilst there, I obtained an MBA from Columbia University. Although I am a certified public accountant, people come to finance director roles from a various backgrounds. I do very little accounting nowadays, but find it helpful to have that base. I actually consider myself a business leader first and functional leader (e.g. a finance leader) second.

Career path

At Price Waterhouse, I worked mainly on consumer goods clients for about nine years, through to Senior Manager. I didn't have a strong view of what I wanted to do, I progressed by eliminating what I didn't like and reinforcing experiences that gave me the most energy. Subsequently, I was at Seagram for nine years, and during that period I had three children. I was Vice President of Finance in the wine and spirits division before coming to Diageo in 2001. In 2007 I was invited to come to the UK as Head of Tax and Treasury, after which I was promoted to deputy CFO and joined the executive committee. In 2010 I became Chief Financial Officer.

What were the turning points of your career?

There have been three seminal moments in my career. When I returned from graduate school to Price Waterhouse the focus shifted to making partner, which involved a greater focus on creating new business for the firm. I found I enjoyed my work less and decided to go into industry and develop my career as a finance professional outside of practice.

The second moment was when I was working as assistant controller at Seagram. I attended a presentation from the CFO who was talking about quality. He mentioned an important report he'd received that included an obvious error. I was horrified, as I knew it was a document for which I was responsible. Later, I approached him and confessed the report he was referring to was mine. I told him I thought it was totally unacceptable, I didn't have an excuse and that I didn't intend that to be the quality of my work. He thanked me and invited me to a meeting where we discussed my views of the function and reporting processes. Shortly thereafter I was promoted. I guess he liked my ideas, and my willingness to face my fears and be accountable.

The third moment was my first presentation as Finance Director at Diageo in a meeting evaluating a failing product. Although almost everyone in the meeting was more senior than myself, I remained composed and made a clear recommendation to take the most expensive option in withdrawing the product. I explained why the most costly option, although painful in the short term, would support our longer term strategy. I have a willingness to be direct, an ability to be diplomatic and cut through complexity to see a way forward. That meeting was mentioned on various occasions when I was subsequently promoted. So again, I think this was an example of confidence and courage.

Advice for aspiring women

Get as many experiences as you can. Don't worry about your job title or salary. More experiences make you a more interesting candidate.

Influencing people without authority is crucial. You need enough tools to say I'm going to influence you with rational thought, but if you don't respond to that, I've got to understand what is driving you emotionally. Avoid mentioning your boss when you are trying to get something done, as it reduces your impact and credibility.

The ability to connect the dots is where wider experience is key. For example, there are always different things happening in the business; financial results, an economic backdrop and a customer relationship, etc. So, senior finance professionals need to do more than just assess the financial implications.

What makes a good leader?

A good leader can inspire and motivate people when the organization is performing poorly and when it's doing well. You need to have strong people in your team that are grounded in the values, ethics and strategy of the business and know when to intervene. I think the biggest danger when people are promoted to manage others is that they can't let go of the work they used to do. If they fail, you can be there to catch them. Failures can happen when managers are either micromanaging or not sufficiently aware of issues to know when to intervene.

Work/life balance

I once attended a seminar where the keynote speaker was Andrea Jung, then the CEO of Avon for several years. An attendee asked her how she manages work/life balance and she said "I don't get to all of the meetings and I don't get to all of the school activities but I get to all of the important meetings and to all of the important school activities". I think that says it all, women have to operate in a way they feel they can manage all of the important things in their life. I wouldn't call it work/life balance, I just call it life balance.

Advancing women in corporate life

I know it's a generalisation, but in my experience men, more often than women, define success in life via their work or career progression. So, my hypothesis is that when women feel constricted at work, they are more willing to quit, they vote with their feet. They need to have sufficient freedom to do the things that are important to them. It's not just about flexi-time, it's about feeling comfortable at work and feeling valued and valuable to the business. The challenge for business is to create an environment where women want to stay. Make sure they have opportunities where they don't feel constrained or uninspired by the business model or the role models they see.

Also, don't assume women will put themselves forward. Where you see potential, encourage them and give them support. I am not criticising either side. I also think we have to get women to be more articulate about what is making them uncomfortable, why are they thinking that they cannot be successful? For women, my advice is talk to someone who you trust in the business, explain what is happening to you. If you are thinking of leaving, why not ask for what you want? You might get it, you might not. You can still leave.

What advice would you give your younger self?

I would have learned a foreign language. Although I don't think it has held me back, who knows where I might have been if I was bilingual or multi lingual? Mainly, get as many experiences as you can. The world is full of opportunities, so get out there and live a full life, that's my advice.

DAWN BROOKS – Group Services Director at Oxford Instruments plc



Dawn heads up the service sector at Oxford Instruments plc, a leading provider of high technology tools and systems. She sits on the Management Board and is the organisation's advocate for Diversity and Inclusion.

Educational background and professional qualifications

I have a degree in biochemistry and an MSc in clinical biochemistry. I also have a marketing diploma, for which I won the award for best student of the year.

Career path

At university my careers advice was to teach or do a PhD, but I wanted to use my scientific background in a non-academic field. My first role was with a hospital working in the Biochemistry department during which time I completed my MSc. After 6 years, I took a sales role with a scientific instrument distributor called V A Howe where I was the only female in the sales team. I really enjoyed the selling role and became interested in marketing and product management so I also studied for a marketing diploma. After completing my marketing qualification I was promoted to my first product management role and eventually became overall Sales and Marketing Manager. I travelled the world visiting our customers and suppliers and learned a lot about being a female, often the only female, in scientific capital equipment sales and how to be successful within a variety of different cultures. Nine years later I joined Miele as a General Manager to widen my business-to-business commercial experience, then I took on a dedicated marketing role as Head of Industrial Marketing at Avery Weightronix. In 2006, I joined Oxford Instruments as a Sales and Marketing Director for one of the business units. In 2011 I became Group Services Director and later joined the Management Board.

Working in STEM

There are many highly qualified scientists and engineers here at Oxford Instruments. Most of the environments I've worked have been within capital equipment manufacturing servicing academic and industrial customers. These tend to be majority male environments, certainly at the management level, which meant that I was usually the only woman in the room. Overall, I've not found this to be a problem but on reflection, I have been aware that I was different from the group in terms of my outlook, use of language and approach to teamwork. Early on, I found this difference inhibiting and tried to fit in, but my colleagues appreciated the difference I brought. I soon realised that my approach added extra value to the company and that I should not be afraid to be myself. I think women can have a really satisfying, rewarding career in science and technology. I've recently worked with Oxford University to encourage young women into the field. Science isn't always about wearing a white coat and being stuck in a laboratory. You can do some fantastic things in this arena. The key is to encourage girls to take science subjects at A Level and go on to study for a degree. This provides wider options later on.

Do you have any advice for developing strategic skills?

Think about what you want to achieve, what the end looks like. In strategic marketing there is no right or wrong answer. It's about your experience and best judgement of the situation, having considered all the facts and advice you can find. You make an assessment and devise a way forward, that's your strategic plan. Personally, I like to look at the facts and figures, what is the data telling me? What are the stats? I assess the marketplace, find opportunities, set targets and produce a plan.

What makes a good leader?

Someone who is engaging, enthusiastic and can articulate where they want to go. They outline a clear vision with objectives and a practical plan to get there. Also, they accept they might get it wrong and they listen to people. They have the ability to bring people with them, to get the best from them and build a team that works cooperates.

Values

Be yourself. Do what the job entails, but within your own values. Don't try to be somebody you are not. Sometimes you have to change a little. You have to be adaptable, but not so you lose your core self.

Work and family

I decided I was going to work full time and have a live in nanny. I had short maternity leaves but my job was extremely flexible. The company was flexible because I had a good track record and I'd often worked at home before, so they were used to that. I went back part time and I built it up. I found returning after my second son harder. I remember it was tough. Even though I had the live in nanny I still wanted to get home to look after the children.

Your perspective changes as you age. What seemed really urgent at age 25 is less so when you are 35. Work has to compete with home life, your children or wider family members. I think you shouldn't be embarrassed to say you have to leave early to collect the kids. Just say it, because there will be fathers in the room as well as mothers. I've heard men say that. Does anyone judge them? I don't think so. I think as women, we think we are being judged. My advice would be talk to your line manager about managing work and family. Actively manage your work, if you can't do everything that is being asked, just say. Don't be afraid to tell people.

Women in business

I think as women we are good at picking up on things, messages that are coming through when the words are not being said. You might have an instinctive reaction to something, but I've learnt to go back to the data and to find evidence to support your initial reaction. I think women can deliver messages constructively, in a way that is going to get the right behaviour. I find you can say most things as long as you start the sentence with, I feel this or I believe that, it removes the threat.

Advice for aspiring women

It's important to be articulate and confident in what you're trying to achieve. Confidence and experience allows you to be balanced, not overreact nor be overemotional. If you're open and honest with people, generally they'll support you. If you're reluctant to say things and internalise issues, that can lead you to decide to leave an organisation, which might be a shame for both them and you. I would say just talk to people, because they might be able to help you if they know what you want or need. Also, I'd say believe in yourself. If you think you are due for a promotion, go for it. Seek out people at home or in the organisation to give you support and advice.

SALLY COHEN - Vice-President External Innovation Venadar



In addition to her position at Venadar, Sally is the founder of Sally Cohen Atkins Strategic Marketing. She is also involved in two charities; she is Vice-Chair/Trustee at Unique and a member Pilotlight.

Educational background

I have an MBA from Stanford. Prior to Stanford I worked for two years at Citibank, first in a management training programme and then in a new sales training team. Whilst at Citibank I gained experience across different departments and I loved marketing – so I knew I wanted to work for a consumer products company.

Recent awards and recognition

I was named in Cranfield's 2013 100 Women to Watch and a project I did with two partners for City & Guilds won a Marketing Society Top Prize in 2011.

Career Path

I'm a consumer product marketer and most of my career has been in FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) companies. I started at General Mills, which was one of the big training grounds at the time. After that I was at Kraft, and then Coca Cola for 10 years where I had some very senior, prominent jobs. The great thing about Coke is you have opportunities to move across different functions. So I switched into sales and managed large accounts, which was hard work but rewarding and a great experience. Then I went to the global group doing strategy for brand Coca Cola. I've had other international roles at Vodafone and Allied Domecq. I've worked across lots of industries; food, spirits, beverages, telecommunications and cosmetics. I came to London 15 years ago with Coke, and later became managing director at Elizabeth Arden. I spent time as a NED for Marks and Spencer's Bank, which was great experience and I learnt a lot. I've also done charity board work for years, so I understand the expectations of a board member. Five years ago I began consulting and much of my time is spent working with a large US organisation Venadar, who bring together big companies and entrepreneurs to work on innovation. I also help UK organisations with their strategies related to US clients.

Mentoring and networking

In one of my roles I noticed that although I was getting better results than my male colleagues they would get promoted and I'd get passed over every time. At the time I didn't realise how important it was to have someone putting your name forward and taking care of you. Eventually I moved and worked for a fabulous woman, one of the smartest people I've ever worked for and she started getting me exposure and would mention my name in meetings. This type of thing is deeper than networking.

I was always helpful to people. Often in large companies it's difficult to find cooperative people, so if others know you are helpful, they will reciprocate. Doing good work is important, but it's not enough to get you recognised. You have to be a self-promoter, because other people are doing that and it works. And you have to be seen. I've mentored people, particularly those who have done good work for me, the type of person you could give any task to and they would get it done. I'll support them forever, help them figure out their career transitions, put their names forward to recruiters and write them references.

What makes a good leader?

Having a vision, being able to articulate it and reach the goal. The quality of the vision is also important, it has to pull in a lot of different facts, opinions and beliefs and have real emotion behind it. It's not enough to just be dogmatic and say, this is my vision and this is the way we are going. Of course there are the bullies, and when they are really brilliant leaders they get away with it. But the people I like are the really smart ones that are confident in their intellectual abilities, can articulate well and don't need to bully. It's also important to be a good listener and a synthesiser, take in a lot of different viewpoints and pull them together. Also, be prepared to change your mind if needed. I think it's good to say, "I have new data, and therefore I am going to change my mind" instead of ignoring new data and just pushing on.

Values

I am incredibly honest and ethical. It's really hard sometimes in business, especially marketing products. There is also a lot of 'not honesty' that goes on. I don't mean people are consciously lying but they are not quite telling the truth. Sometimes people invent an answer just to have a response, it's far better to say 'I pass for the moment, but let me get back to you on that'.

Advice for the younger you

Be flexible and know when to give in. Find mentors, people to take care of you. Make sure you work for good bosses and good companies. When you meet good people, grasp the opportunity because it can pass quickly.

Advice for aspiring NEDs

Ask people to take you to board meetings, get exposure to really great people. There's a fantastic training programme that Spencer Stuart organise for 2-3 days once a year. It's a directors' conference where they organise fake board meetings. Well-respected business people role-play and attendees take turns in playing the role of a NED. It's fantastic experience and you get the opportunity to observe and interact with people that have run lots of big boards. Also, Pilotlight is a great way to gain board experience. They are a capacity building charity that offers strategic planning support to charities. They connect and manage collaborations between groups of different business individuals and charities needing strategic advice. It's usually a one-year project: you meet once a month and ultimately create a strategic plan to help the charity move forward. In my experience it often leads to becoming a trustee of a charity and gives you great exposure to other business people, so it's great for networking but you have the bonus of a common interest.

Advice for new NEDs

To do the NED role right is a big time commitment, in preparation and attendance. Also, it takes you a while to know enough about the business to be of value. So don't imagine you will be adding value in your first board meeting. The first year of being a NED is really hard. Colleagues will cut you slack whilst you come up to speed, but this takes time and patience. Make sure you understand any guidelines relating to your involvement with the wider company and how much research is appropriate for you to carry out. Figure out upfront what your unique input to the board is. How will you contribute? Next make sure items relating to your area are on the agenda. You won't ever have control of the agenda, but try to ensure it involves topics upon which you can contribute.

KARIN COOK – Chief Operating Officer, Commercial Banking Lloyds Banking Group



Karin has been Chief Operating Officer at Lloyds Commercial Banking since 2013. She previously chaired the International Swaps and Derivatives Association's Equity Derivatives Implementation Committee and held senior roles at HSBC and Morgan Stanley.

Educational background

Karin has a degree in French and German from Cambridge University and Post Graduate Diploma in Hotel and Catering Management.

Career aspirations in the early years

I wanted to use my languages and pursue a career in hotel and catering. I moved to Paris and took a job as a bi-lingual secretary in Goldman Sachs, whilst looking at graduate roles in hotel and catering. However, I enjoyed the role at GS so much that I ended up staying there.

Career path

Goldman Sachs was a meritocracy and I moved up quickly when they realised I was capable. I was organised, able to multi-task and learn quickly. After five years I moved to Morgan Stanley in London to broaden my experience in a new product area. Again, I was promoted within the organisation and I learnt a lot about leadership. After Morgan Stanley I moved to HSBC, which was a global role. I was based in London but travelled extensively and had teams in many different countries.

Have there been any turning points in your career?

Yes, four years ago I moved away from my specialist area in derivatives. A colleague, with whom I had worked closely, recommended me for a chief operating officer role in Private Banking. I had been head of a global operations team and this was a very different customer base and product set. In the global operations role I had overseen a number of large projects creating global teams and centralising IT. I think my transferable skills of leadership, change and unifying diverse teams were noticed, which led to the wider leadership role. I was then able to use that post as a building block to my current role at Lloyds, which is a much broader functional role.

Leadership

I think it's key to understand people are motivated by different things and that you need to adapt your style to different contexts. Working internationally, my experience was that what motivates a team of local people in Paris is very different to New York, for example. There are cultural features you need to understand as you manage in different places and that's transferable to jobs which are less international; the same applies to different organisations and teams.

Advice for aspiring women

I think one possible pitfall for women is under-estimating the need to promote themselves. You have to make sure your brand is visible and that people are aware of you – because your male colleagues may be doing that without you recognising it. As I become more senior, and there are fewer women at my level, I have become more aware of what it takes to succeed. I think as a gender we suffer from modesty in a comparative sense by not seeking, not banging on the door, for the next job because we want to be more than capable of fulfilling a role. Whereas, in a stereotypical way, a male colleague might think he is only 80% there, but he'll still give it a go. So I would encourage women to also give it a go, because you may be just as good, if not better.

Values

When I am giving advice or mentoring, I try to be completely honest. For me it's about integrity, being human and transparent and remaining true to yourself. I find that approach works well, whether in a one-to-one or a group, because people can ask me anything and I am happy to talk about anything.

Combining work and family

You need to organise your life outside of work to the same level you do at work. I think you need good support networks. If you choose a very demanding role, having a hierarchy of support outside work is really important. If one layer fails you have backup.

Do you have to make sacrifices as a senior woman?

It's important to recognise you have to compromise. I don't think you can be a domestic goddess and have a senior job. Women put a lot of pressure on themselves, particularly in this current phase of society where everybody is trying to be perfect mothers. There are a lot of expectations on women, but you need to be comfortable with the choices you have made.

Of course there are sacrifices as clearly you can't give 100% to both roles. I'm quite a positive person; I try to see the best in every situation. I've had a great working life; my children are very self-assured and are growing up to be fantastic people. I may not have hand-sewn their costumes for World Book Day, but they have learnt a lot about responsibility by having working parents. This has helped them to become independent and confident young adults. So, you do have to make some sacrifices to balance work and family, but you don't have to see them as such, you can see them as positives.

What advice would you give your younger self?

I'd say have a plan. I would want myself to reflect more on my career as it goes along. I am doing that now, but previously I tended to wait to be asked to do the next job. This hasn't held me back in my progression, but if I were doing it again, I'd plan a little better.

What are your aspirations?

I want to continue my executive development, with a potential for non-executive board roles in the future. I am about to start with an external mentor, arranged through an organisation that facilitates mentoring relationships for senior women who want to develop further.

AMEE CHANDE – Managing Director, NutriCentre Tesco



Amee is Managing Director (MD) of NutriCentre, a health and wellness subsidiary of Tesco. She was previously MD of Staples UK, and has also held senior roles at Walmart. Amee's career has spanned many continents including posts in Toronto, Boston, San Francisco, Hong Kong, London and Zimbabwe. Today, Amee sits on the Board of the London Chapter of the Young Presidents Organization and on Board Committees of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts.

Educational background and professional qualifications

I majored in psychology and organisational development and when I graduated, I was awarded the University Gold Medal for top all-round achievement. While discussing my future at the prize dinner, the University President suggested I consider continuing my studies at LSE. I took his advice and moved to London, to obtain a master's degree in organisational behaviour. Some years later, I also completed an MBA at Harvard University.

Career Path

I have always been driven and ambitious. But whilst growing up, I didn't have a broad understanding of the breadth of career opportunities that existed. My parents were immigrants and weren't well networked in the corporate scene, and there weren't many large companies in the city where I grew up. The advice therefore, to attend LSE, served me well as it exposed me to wider opportunities. At LSE I was recruited by McKinsey & Company to become a management consultant and it was my McKinsey colleagues who inspired me to do an MBA at Harvard. I believe much of my professional development has been inspired by my mentors, and the worlds they exposed me to.

Achievements and recognition

At both Walmart, and at Staples I was the youngest member of the senior leadership team and at Staples, also the most senior female executive with operating responsibilities. Whilst at Staples I was also named by the Boston Business Journal as one of the 'Top 40 under 40'. The recognition I am most proud of however is the recommendations that people who have worked for me share with others on Linked In. It is great to know the impact I am having on others.

Networking and mentoring advice

Almost every role I've had has been through a contact who has made a recommendation for me, or given me a heads up. I have worked hard to develop and nurture my professional relationships. For instance, when I was at McKinsey, I reached out to Partners, connected with them and made an effort to stay connected even after I left the Firm. I don't think all of my peers did that. I had very senior mentors, I looked up to them and worked hard to build a relationship. Today, they still look out for me. To me, securing mentors is grounded partly on doing good work, but also reaching out and having the confidence to say, "I'm worth investing in".

One other thought regarding networking. In my opinion, women are good networkers but they tend to keep in touch with other women. I think as women, we need to be conscious that 60-80% of the business community is men, so if we don't make enough of an effort to connect with the guys, we are cutting down the reach of our network.

Work/life balance

I think balancing time between work, community and family is a marathon. I don't think you can do all three at the same time. For me, my community involvement and career aspirations have been really important and I have maybe spent less time on my personal life. What I tend to do however is in between years of intense work, I have taken extended sabbaticals and travel or volunteer.

Last year for instance I enrolled in a full-time graphic design course. The time helps me recalibrate and remember what makes me happy.

When I'm working, my approach to work/life balance is scheduling activities outside of work. For instance, when I commit to meeting a friend for a workout, I'm motivated to leave on time. I also work hard to be organised. I believe there is no reason why my personal life shouldn't have as much discipline and organisation as my work life.

Careers advice

To others I would say, "Understanding what career path to follow starts with defining what success means for you. For example, is success only reaching the position of CEO or would you be happier in a senior functional role?" There is no easy answer and I rarely meet a person that knows. For me, I try not to think too far ahead, and rather ask myself at all times, "does my current role make me happy? Am I doing it to the best of my abilities?" and if so, then I believe the rest will follow naturally.

Women in corporate life

This is a generalisation, but I think women second guess their own abilities and they make choices that take themselves out of the race. For example, "I won't put myself forward because I can only work four days a week". I say, "Just ask!" There is nothing to lose. In my experience, if women can articulate their strengths and define what they need, companies will go out of their way to be accommodating.

I believe what differentiates women at the top from other women is self-confidence. Successful women can say "This is who I am. This is what I'm good at". They also have clarity about what they need to make a position work for them (e.g. flexitime or travel restrictions).

Maternity advice

My perspective is don't worry about taking time out. You will be gone and back before anybody knows it and if you are really good at what you do, you will be amazed at the adjustments companies will make to keep you. I'd also say however, whilst away, try to stay connected. The world and especially technology is moving so fast. It's important to keep in touch and up to date.

What values underpin your approach to work?

I'm the type of person, that brings all of myself to work. I am the same person inside and outside of work. I am approachable and I think that's really important. I try to make a point of getting to know the people I work with, thinking about what makes them tick, and thinking about the personal touches. I also believe that you have to have a life outside of work. My philosophy is to deliver your work to a high level, and save enough energy to live your life to the fullest.

**VIVIAN HUNT – Director, McKinsey & Company and Managing Partner,
McKinsey & Company, UK and Ireland**



In addition to her roles at McKinsey, Vivian is Vice Chair of the charity Action on Addiction; a trustee of the Henry Smith Charitable Trust; and a reader for the Queen's Anniversary Prizes for Higher and Further Education. She chairs the Powerlist committee, having been named the most influential black woman in Britain in 2007. Vivian also recently joined two working committees for the Tate. The Financial Times also recently named her one of the 'European Women to Watch.'

Educational background

I have an undergraduate degree in sociology and government from Harvard College and an MBA from Harvard Business School. I also have an honorary doctorate of law from Warwick University.

Career Path

I was always quite entrepreneurial, and at university I ran the student employment agency, which I was able to expand significantly by the time I'd graduated.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I joined the Peace Corps in Senegal, West Africa, as I wanted to learn a language and live and work in a new culture. I worked as a midwife and primary care worker for 2½ years. This experience provided me with my abiding passion to work in healthcare at scale and to make a material difference to people's lives.

I returned to Harvard Business School to study for my MBA, and then joined McKinsey & Company in the Boston office because it had a vibrant mix of healthcare clients and interesting colleagues. I have stayed with McKinsey ever since. There have been four turning points in my career since then. First, a job opportunity for my husband led me to transfer to London. Second, I began to serve clients globally and orchestrate larger projects, which gave me a lot of confidence. Six years ago I was appointed to run McKinsey's Pharmaceutical and Medical Products practice for Europe, Middle East and Africa. More recently, I was asked to lead our office in the UK, one of our largest offices and a flagship for the Firm – a real honour. I was also elected to our global board of directors. For all of these roles I was either invited or nominated by my peers, which is a gesture of trust and a real responsibility.

Do you have any advice related to mentoring?

I have mentors and role models myself - some male, some female, some clients - and have acted as a mentor to both men and women. I see mentoring as having three elements: coaching, mentoring and sponsoring. A coach offers guidance at a particular time with a particular skill. A mentor takes a broader interest in you beyond just the task, thinking more holistically about your development. A good mentor has the ability to identify the downside of things as well as the upside when things are right or wrong. And, a sponsor is someone who can actively create opportunities for and with you.

My advice for working with mentors is: (1) understand the type of relationship you are after and aspire for it to grow; (2) have a plan of what you'd like to accomplish, whether developing new skills, attaining professional goals or acquiring key lessons particular to your mentor; (3) do your research and know exactly what you would like to learn from your mentor; and, finally, (4) think about what you in turn might contribute to your mentor's agenda. Doing this well will provide a positive introduction and start you both off on a sure footing.

Leadership

Excellent leaders are those who are open to new ideas and innovation, and who are willing to be flexible. They are team-based and look to collaborate with team members toward a common purpose. They inspire trust. These leaders put together confident teams and are not afraid to let someone else lead from the front to build new skills and capabilities on the team.

That said, it's important to avoid giving team members jobs they can't do. Stretch people, but if you over-stretch them don't be surprised if they fail. Remember your title indicates responsibility and a role you've been asked to play. It doesn't mean you are better than others.

Values

I try above all to treat people the way I would want to be treated. It's a simple rule, tried and tested. That is my rudder.

Female work styles

I think there are certain skills sets women bring to the workplace that set us apart. They add to the diversity of leadership styles. For example, women tend to use empathy and engagement to great effect and have a more collaborative approach to decision-making. Men often have many objective goals, but there are also holistic goals that leaders need to achieve. Our recently published DiversityMatters research, looking at the impact of all aspects of diversity on company performance, found businesses with the most gender diverse leadership were 15% more likely to report financial returns above their national industry median. Women today have the opportunity to use whatever style they want, in whatever combination they want. Women should experiment to find an effective and natural style that works for them.

Advice for aspiring women

Find people who want your success - it could be a colleague from work or from your personal life. Above all, you need somebody prepared to support you all the way, because jobs come and go, friendships come and go, and success comes and goes. You need someone to encourage you when things are difficult and help to manage the responsibility of success.

Work-family balance

Finding the right partner clearly matters. I have already mentioned that you need someone prepared to support you all the way. I have a terrific husband, young family and a truly dedicated team at the office.

Things don't happen by accident: you need a plan. Plan how you spend your work and family time, for example with children, and then do the best you can. If you meet your goal, fine. If it doesn't work out, apologise up front and move on. In addition, have excellent executive support – someone who really helps you plan and prioritise your time.

What advice would you have for the younger you?

I would tell the younger me to take risks earlier, and to seek out non-executive directorships that complement and run alongside your professional life. I wish I had expanded my internal and external networks earlier. In reality, it does make you more effective in your role and a more balanced person, and there is so much more to gain.

ELISABET BRICHS – Head of Internal Audit at Commerzbank UK



Elisabet is the Head of Internal Audit in Commerzbank UK. She is the Head of the Corporates and Markets Internal Audit UK department and she also represents Group Audit in any matter in the UK both internally and externally.

Educational background

I have a degree in business administration and an MBA from ESADE, Barcelona. Whilst studying I spent time in the US and Germany where I obtained a Masters in International Management from CEMS (Community of European Management Schools). I attended the postgraduate Advanced Studies (ASP) at the Kiel Institute of World Economics in Germany. I am also a CFA® Charterholder.

Career Path

After university I didn't have a very specific idea of the career path I wanted. I majored in Finance at the ESADE and in Spain that determines where one heads after university. Hence I started my professional career at Coopers & Lybrand in audit in Barcelona. As I still pondered with the idea of going into academia I took the opportunity when offered a scholarship for the ASP. During the programme I published a couple of papers on banking and banking regulation. Having decided to go back into business, a role in audit at a bank seemed a natural next step, which is when I joined Dresdner Bank in Frankfurt. It was a varied role that gave me exposure to many different areas of the bank. The job involved a lot of international travel and provided me with a very steep learning curve. After my husband was posted to London, I told my boss I would like to transfer within the bank but would otherwise look externally. He insisted I didn't look elsewhere and gave me a promotion in London, as team manager. At the time, I found it difficult to ask for the transfer, but my husband encouraged me. While in London Allianz took over Dresdner before selling it to Commerzbank in 2009. During that time I moved internally covering different roles within Group Audit with local and global management responsibilities leading to my current role.

What qualities and skills helped secure your current post?

It is a combination of sound technical and strong interpersonal skills. As auditors you not only need to understand the subject matter but also be able to interact with and manage people. As a manager you often get involved when things don't run smoothly so managing people in difficult circumstances in a constructive manner is crucial to make the most of the job- and for the bank. You often need to remain hard but deliver your point with a certain flexibility and softness. Male colleagues have commented to me that they notice this comes easier to women.

What makes a good leader?

For me good leadership is about inspiring your team, leading by example and being transparent and fair. Be clear about what you expect and make sure to let them know if they do well. However it also means to be clear when things are not working so well.

One error to avoid is thinking that all people are motivated by the same things. It is important to understand that people are different and you cannot use the same tools with everyone. And you should always treat people with respect.

Mentoring

I've never had a formal mentor but I have had good bosses, who have helped me in my career. I have acted as mentor myself. I think being mentored is a fantastic opportunity, but remember it is down to you to set the agenda and be clear about what you want from the relationship.

What are your values?

Be yourself, be authentic and take pride in what you do.

Maternity leave

I have three young children. I took six months maternity leave with each of my first two children, and eight months with the third. I found the first return to work difficult as I had mixed feelings. Am I doing the right thing? Am I a bad mum? It was easier with the second and third child. I had established I wanted to continue working and I had experienced with my first son that it was possible to cope with work and family. When you return to work you need to adjust. Things have changed and you need to catch up. This takes just a couple of months, and you are up to speed again. I think the more difficult challenge is controlling others' perceptions of you rather than making up for missed time. Sometimes there are pre-judgments of what women with children can or want to achieve at work. I think what needs to change is how managers regard and support the careers of working mothers.

Flexi-work and working from home

When I had my first child I wanted to continue working full-time but was looking for more flexibility. At that time, nobody had worked from home in the London team before so I wasn't too hopeful when I initially raised the topic but my then boss readily agreed, and I started working two days at home and three in the office. Being flexible which days I worked from home was important for making it work. When necessary I would change the days I work from home to attend face-to-face meetings. When I work from home I spend all day in my office, while the children are with the nanny and know not to disturb me. I think trust plays an important role. My boss knew me well and could trust me to do a good job. Some of my colleagues based in other locations don't even realise I am at home. However, it is more difficult if your role is client facing. For me being able to work partly from home makes a big difference as it allows me to continue a meaningful career while accommodating my children's needs as a mother.

Sacrifices

I think it is about choices, not sacrifices. When you open a particular door, you are not opening another. Everyone has to make their choices. You have to think in the short, medium and the long term. For new mums it's a difficult moment, and no one can make that decision for you.

What advice would you have given the younger you?

To reflect more about what I want, and be more outspoken about it. My focus has always been to do a good job, while this is important, it is also important to focus on your own objectives.

KAY HARMAN – Executive Director Change Management Willis Limited (Insurance)



Kay is a Business Leader Programme Director at Willis Group Holdings plc, a leading global risk advisor, insurance and reinsurance broker.

Educational background

I have 'A' levels and a diploma in insurance. I have been with Willis for 23 years, although I didn't aspire to work in insurance. I had a misconception of the business through the contact I had with insurance via the High Street and call centres. Working at a commercial level, dealing with large companies, means the career opportunities are more varied than you'd imagine.

Career path

My path has been incredibly varied. I joined as a back-up technician, worked up to managing teams and then managing managers. My roles have included leading change projects and as an Operational Director of business units. I've moved around from the local office to the London office and travelled internationally. In my current role as Business Leader Programme Director, I am delivering an IT and business change programme for Willis UK Entities and 1200 associates.

Values

Be true to yourself and understand the value of everyone. Everyone is an individual and brings value. Always be open and honest and don't be judgemental. I try to always under promise and over deliver. If there's something that is genuinely outside your control; shout loud and early.

Maternity leave

I was very ambitious and career orientated. After maternity leave, there was a perception my priorities had changed and that I wouldn't perform certain roles. At that time my responsibilities included travelling to India three times a year, which I resumed when my son was 5 months old. So, I sat down with my manager and explained nothing had changed, after which things were fine. I think he just didn't want to ask too much of me. It's important to have open conversations with your line manager about career aspirations. Have them before you go on maternity leave and when you come back. New mothers often change their minds, and it's a lot to expect a woman to know what she will want after having a baby. So, keep an open line of communication and have regular conversations.

Leadership and management

I think the biggest mistake leaders make is assuming that everybody's motivation is the same as theirs. Understanding what motivates people to come to work every day is essential in getting the best from your team. Again, have regular and open communication with your team, understand their motivations may change and don't make assumptions. Again, be honest, even if that means providing feedback that's difficult to give or hear. If it is negative allow yourself plenty of time. The individual will need time to process it and may react emotionally. Have examples to support your statement but don't get caught up in an emotional discussion or take their reaction personally. Book in a meeting a few days later when they have had time to assimilate the information. Role play and practice are good ways to develop these skills, but don't take anyone extra in the meeting for moral support, it will accelerate the emotional response.

Mentoring

I have a few people who I mentor for either general career progression or specific skills development. Research your mentor, understand their strengths, understand what you could learn from them and effectively write out your shopping list.

Work-family balance

I think I'm a fairly typical full-time working mum. Sometimes I feel guilty when I'm at home because I think I should be at work, and sometimes I feel guilty at work because I think I should be at home. When I get it right, it means giving my hundred per cent attention to whatever I am doing at the time, either my work, or enjoying my time at home. I don't get that right all of the time!

Flexi work

When I first returned after maternity leave I worked a shorter week. I was managing 250 people in the UK and India and it was difficult to operate at that level in just four days. I'd spend time lining up what needed to happen on my day off, then on my return, all morning dealing with the consequences. The benefit of a day at home with my son was great, but I'm not sure it outweighed the additional stress. It wasn't a part time job, or one that could be handled by somebody else for one day a week. Whilst I think some jobs can't work as part time, there are other jobs which absolutely can.

Everybody is entitled to a meeting about flexible working. Go into the meeting with a clear idea of how the job will work, this will help you be realistic about what the role looks like. Understand you might have to compromise and have a plan B.

What advice would you give the younger you?

Have more confidence. That's easy to say but hard to do. It comes back to having a sense of self. I think confidence comes from understanding your value, focusing on that and selling it. Your manager is incredibly important here, to help you grow the relevant skill set and apply existing skills. Get yourself a mentor early on; I didn't do it but I would absolutely recommend it. Also outside of the workplace, spend time working out what your values and skills are, and what makes you unique.

PHILLIPPA HURRELL – Head of Learning and Development (Central) at Morrisons plc



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Phillippa is the Head of Learning and Development (Central) within the HR Department at Morrisons' head office.

Educational background

I have a degree in accountancy and finance from Manchester Business School. I am dyslexic, so for me, schooling has been challenging. However, learning to overcome this difficulty has made me resilient. I learnt that if I put in enough effort I'd get what where I wanted to be. At school I won a Young Enterprise Award. I set up a greetings card business which was great for business acumen and selling experience. I got my first job at 14 and often worked 2 jobs in the summer holidays. I saved all my wages and so by the age of 17 I was able to buy my first property. This taught me a lot. Before university I did an internship with KPMG, which gave me great confidence in the workplace. I would recommend getting involved in different experiences, taking on different roles, and always look for new opportunities.

Career path

After KPMG I realised I didn't want to be an accountant. I was good with numbers, so decided to join the Aviva graduate scheme. My first job was in the Chief Operating Officer's team. I was surrounded by directors; I learned lots about business and stakeholder management, you can learn a great deal by observing successful people. I did well and came off the scheme early, to become an operational manager. I performed well in that position and I was invited to move into HR. I moved around in my early career, the variety and opportunities this presented me has been incredibly beneficial. It's important to take the most from everything. It is since then I have had a variety of roles relating to learning and development, leadership and change. I moved from Aviva to Telefonica O2, and finally to Morrisons. Most of these transitions have been via professional recommendations. However, I did take decisive action at one organisation. A career opportunity opened up internally but candidates were only being sought externally. I felt I had the necessary skills, so I contacted the director to ask if I could apply. He changed the criteria; I applied, and got the job! I think it's important to take responsibility for your career, and not allow your confidence to be undermined.

Do you have any advice for strategy development?

When I came to my current position I spent a month researching the organisation and the retail sector to develop my strategy. I surveyed 500 staff about their development, which helped me understand current skill gaps. I also shadowed colleagues to understand where the organisation was headed and what was important to the organisation.

Advice for aspiring women

I think it's important to have a strong vision and clarity of your goal. What do you love doing, do you want to get into a different kind of organisation, or get a different salary package? The next point is what makes you different and what value do you bring? I am not the type of person that needs to tick

all 10 boxes before applying for a job. I think passion and a willingness to learn are more important. Also, don't down play what you should be earning, I always negotiate my salary package. Lastly, don't underestimate your competencies. Especially, don't allow others to dictate your belief in yourself.

Networks

I believe it's not what you know, it's not who you know, but who knows you and what they know about you. It's important to build networks both internally and externally. Networks are key for innovation; if you only network within your department, you are narrowing your field of innovation. Figure out who you need in your network; you will need both allies and friends.

Mentoring

I am a mentor and have had many mentors through my career and something that concerns me is that people suggest they would like a mentor and do not follow up. It's important to take ownership to get the support you need. Mentors can be for a lifetime, a term time or a project. Make sure to book regular time with your mentor and drive the relationship, people are there to support you but you have to go out and get it.

What are your thoughts on returning to work after maternity leave?

I came back part time after five months and slowly increased to full time. The first six months of full time was difficult. Being a new mum and working turned my world upside down. I also found the attitude of some colleagues difficult to deal with. I understand that the intention may often be to support and protect returning mothers, but encouraging them to 'take their foot off the gas' can make you feel less competent. It can also make you feel guilty about being career focused at that time. These messages are very subtly conveyed. I think we should not treat working mothers differently. Yes, treat them differently in terms of the policies to support them, but allow them to bring real value to the organisation.

I also think it's important to give part-time workers serious work and for the workers to take their work seriously. I don't see why working part-time should be a barrier to career progression. For example, I am working on a number of projects at any given time. Also, I am not contactable five days a week as I'm often in meetings or at workshops. If I were working part time I would just be working on fewer projects.

Leadership

Self-confidence and resilience are important. Resilience can be learnt. Firstly understand that happiness is not the absence of problems, but the ability to deal with them. Have the assumption that things will not always go well. Learning to bounce back from problems will lead to success. My experience has shown that people look for 3 things, their managers to care; treat everybody like individuals, and set stretching goals. So get to know your team, ask them what they want and need from you, and where they want to go. Also, have a clear vision of where your department is heading and make sure it's completely in line with the business strategy.

Future career

I'd like to have a board position one day, whether that is here or in another large organisation. I'd like to get to the top of my career not for the salary, but to make a difference to people and feel genuinely challenged. I have another 37 years of my career and it's exciting to think where it's going. Ultimately, I think to be taken seriously in business you need to understand the business, get the commercials and be absolutely focused on delivering your element of the strategy.

PENNY MILLER – Partner Simmons & Simmons LLP



Penny is a lawyer and partner within the Financial Services Regulation practice at global law firm Simmons & Simmons.

Educational background and professional qualifications

I attended a grammar school in London and at age 14 my headmistress took me to a magistrates' court. From then on I aspired to be a lawyer. I studied law at Birmingham University and I did various placements during the summer breaks. After graduating I was offered a training contract by one of the placements: Simmons & Simmons. I continued to become a lawyer and am still there 20 years on.

Career path

The usual career path to partner is fairly linear going through a hierarchy of trainee, associate, and then partner within around 10 years. My journey has been slightly different. I qualified in an international group because I wanted to travel. I became pregnant at 27 but it was difficult to combine travel with family, particularly due to a lack of technology at that time. Law is a very male dominated environment and I had very few role models; I had to find my own path. I negotiated taking a less client facing, part-time role as a professional support lawyer. So I came off the main career track for a number of years whilst I had my three children. As my children grew, I increased my hours to five days a week and when the credit crisis happened and more senior professionals were needed in the market, I moved back into a client facing role and was promoted to partner. I wouldn't say this is an ideal path, but it was my path.

What skills helped you gain your current post?

Empathy and being able to build relationships. I think these skills work both externally and internally. In terms of winning business from clients, part of being a lawyer is being a trusted advisor. If clients see you care about their business and you respond to them when they need you, they don't care if you are at the school gates for an hour in the afternoon. It's also helpful in building a team. I care about my team very much and I rely on them. In turn, they know I will always support them. I'm interested in their lives and I want them to manage their time well. I think mine is quite a different approach to many partners in law firms, but I think it has enabled me to progress quickly.

What values underpin your approach to work?

I take on a lot of pro bono work. Also, gender balance and corporate responsibility are really important to me. I believe we need to operate for social good, do things to be part of, and enhance, the community for those less fortunate. I believe the legal profession is very driven in this respect and many lawyers will give their time to activities that support access to justice and/or equality.

Do you have any advice for working in male dominated environments?

It is really important to find a mentor to bounce ideas off and use that person to invite to meetings if you are uncomfortable. I have found it is important to have both female and male mentors. Male mentors are incredibly valuable because they give you the perspective of men and a great opportunity to learn different skills from networking and mixing in the ranks.

Work/life balance

My husband has also adapted his career path and we also rely on our family, so we have never had formal childcare. We share the responsibilities for our children and the home and have adapted our career paths as a team. We make decisions as a family, so when I made partner my children were as happy as me, but they knew the implications are that I will have to work more hours.

What makes a good leader?

Being able to make good decisions and include the team in those decisions. There is no point being brilliant if you are too far ahead of everyone else - you need to bring them along with you, especially if you have difficult decisions to take that will impact them. Similarly, it's important to be good to your people. After the credit crisis, I saw that firms with more board diversity were more flexible, enabling teams to stay together. Other firms who maybe wanted to keep their profits and made significant redundancies, lost their teams and are now scrambling around to get people. Being honest is also key. Honest with people about difficult decisions that have to be taken, explaining why they have to be taken, showing that you care and taking an interest in feedback. I think that by using more flat hierarchies, where all the team can have genuine input, we could reduce stress all round. Often decisions go up to the most senior person, are made based on their view, and then they go down again. It's incredibly stressful for the decision maker, and those who implement the decisions.

Advice for aspiring women

I have three pieces of advice. First, define your own success. Not necessarily in terms of titles or salary, but what success means to you. For example, when my children were younger success for me was combining an interesting and rewarding job with family. Now, it's about making a difference, for my clients, my teams and the business. Next, I'd say be yourself. Originally I found it very difficult in such a male and public school dominated environment, because I was different. But now I realise I am listened to because I am different. The point of diversity is to have different people's views, and whilst it can be hard to speak up when you're junior and may lack role models, you should not feel you are not good enough. Lastly, have balance. Lawyers work very long hours, but it's important to keep social arrangements with clients and friends. I believe I have more clients and a better team around me because I have developed those relationships and built trust. It is also important for your own mental wellbeing.

SANJU PAL – Management Consultant Accenture



Sanju is a Manager at Accenture. She is also the Founder and a Trustee of the UK charity RISE and an Ambassador for Teach First.

Educational Background

I have a 1st class honours degree in Maths from Southampton University. I also earned a scholarship and gained a Master's in Operational Research and Finance from Southampton. I considered following an accountancy path as I loved maths, but was attracted to the Teach First programme because I had enjoyed my experience of teaching during my degree and it looked like an incredible opportunity to develop skills whilst giving back. The programme was designed to get more university students into teaching and it targets schools containing pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It's a two year programme and involves training and teaching in a challenging school. During this time you are supported by large organisations and have the opportunity for an internship. I did mine at Accenture, which led to a permanent post after the programme. Giving back to society early in my career has been a big motivation for me.

Career Path

After two years teaching I joined Accenture as an Analyst. Within the firm there are five levels; Analyst, Consultant, Manager, Senior Manager and Managing Director. After four years with Accenture I made Manager level. I sit within Financial Services and my current role is within an HR function and strategic implementation. I learnt many valuable transferable skills through Teach First that have helped me progress quickly at Accenture. Building trust with children, communicating with a class and managing a challenging school day have translated into business skills such as stakeholder management, presenting and time management skills.

In addition to my career at Accenture I am the founder of a charity called RISE. During Teach First I started a project called the Enterprise Challenge which is where RISE all started. Its aim was to promote social enterprise by connecting London students with students in rural West Bengal to enable them to develop an understanding of village life in India as I had done growing up. The success of the Enterprise Challenge gave me the idea to scale up the project and start RISE as a small charity. RISE is now in its 5th year and in that time hundreds of UK students have participated, opening their horizons and enabling them to be active global citizens by learning about students in rural India.

Awards and recognition

I won the 2008 Teach First Learmonth School Project Award for the Enterprise Challenge project. In 2013 I won the Asian Women of Achievement Young Achiever Award in recognition of my work at both Accenture and RISE. In 2009 I won an award from UnLtd which enabled me to start RISE.

Have you had any turning points in your career?

After an intense training course in Chicago within a few months of starting at Accenture I felt exhausted and demoralised wondering if I could juggle both my career and the charity. Then I had a few coaching sessions based on 'what are your values'. Reflecting upon my values made me realise I wanted to work in a business environment but very importantly that I wanted to make a change in education via my charity work. From that point I've not looked back, even when I have tough days. I can see this issue sometimes with more junior members of staff who perhaps are unclear of what they stand for and therefore what role they should take. Sometimes what you stand for doesn't always happen in your day job, but can be complemented by something outside. Accenture have been wonderful supporting my work with RISE. I have tried to earn credibility and prove I am able to juggle both, but I've sought advice from senior members of the firm who are sponsors and supporters – seeking counsel from them has been crucial for self-development.

Work-life balance

Flexibility has been key for me. I spend at least a small amount of time each day on RISE but I am 100 % focused on the charity during my holidays – I guess that's a decision I've made, I don't really have holidays anymore. Initially RISE was run by about 20 volunteers in their spare time with me heavily supporting to lead them. Accenture is a place where it's possible to work flexibly as long as you fulfil your role and that is something that makes this firm the great place it is. I work hard to manage my days and commitments so that I reach the milestones in delivery.

Aspirations for the future?

In relation to Accenture, my next aspiration is to become a senior manager within the next few years, then managing director. My challenge is to combine my career at Accenture with the development of RISE. As the charity grows and we take on full time people I intend to remain as a board member - this is the model I aspire to where I continue to help drive the charity even though not in full time capacity. But it's rare, there are not many charities or organisations where the founder is not at the helm.

Do you have any advice for aspiring women?

Be open minded, trust and have fun! Initially, I was set on working in the public sector at Accenture and not in financial services, but a Senior Manager helped me understand that it was important to not be quite so rigid in your thinking early on in your career. So I started in financial services three and half years ago and I've had some great experiences with various UK banks in this time. Secondly, find people in your organisation that you trust. Trust them in different ways, such as their values, their great work, or their credibility with clients. Also, trust them when they come to you with an opportunity and consider taking it! Lastly, be yourself, and find things that make you want to go to the office in the mornings. These can be extra-curricular things you get involved in with the organisation like how can you help build the business? How can this express something you have an interest in? So on days when your daily role is difficult, your other interests might motivate you. This also helps increase a sense of belonging with your organisation.

What values underpin your work?

Integrity, contribution, empowerment, accomplishment and resilience. These underpin my work at Accenture and RISE, and generally me as a human being.

What advice would you offer the younger you?

Make the most of opportunities that come your way and go looking for ones that haven't. Be as proactive as possible. When you are approached with an opportunity think further, what other outcomes could this bring? What more could I get from this? Take time to understand what your values are, stay true to them and this will help you make big decisions. Also try not to be disappointed in defeat, stand back and learn from things, remember there is always another positive outcome just around the corner.

