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30% by 2018: Gender diversity progress report



Achieving gender diversity through flexible working



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Flexible working is one of the most effective tools at our disposal to increase the participation of women in the workforce. Why? Put simply it enables women to return to work quicker after a career break and remain in the workforce for longer. That said, why is the term still accompanied by hesitation and the odd eye roll?

Let's start with what flexible working is not. It's not less work, it's not less output, it's not less hours and it's not scores of empty desks. These negative associations have clouded our judgement on a practice which, aside from promoting gender diversity, also leads to a more productive, innovative and profitable workforce (McKinsey 2017, Bain 2016, Credit Suisse 2017, BCG 2018, HBR 2014).

Success lies in the definition, and the key is keeping it broad. There is rarely a one-size-fits-all solution. Businesses are successful when they have a flexible approach and teams are able to find a solution that works for their needs.

Flexibility might mean a shorter working week for some, but for others it could be the ability to work from home occasionally, leave work an hour early, or start a few hours later on a Monday so they can spend their weekend away or play tennis before work. It essentially requires a mind-set shift from 'hours worked' to 'output' and the acknowledgment that engaged employees are more motivated, ambitious and productive during the hours dedicated to work.

Studies have shown that workers are typically only productive for up to three hours of an eight hour traditional working day so it is easy to see why letting employees have more control over how they approach their workload doesn't equate to less work, just more productive hours.

Flexible working is too often spoken about as an employee benefit when in fact the positive impact to businesses and society is just as compelling. It is estimated that women returning to the workforce could add \$398 billion to the Australian GDP; our carbon footprint would fall with less people driving to work (currently 69% of Australians use their cars to commute); and the improved health and wellbeing of our workforce would relieve pressure on our medical services as mental health is the number one reason Australians visit their GP.

A change in outlook needs to happen quickly. Take the media and marketing industry which employs 61 per cent females, yet only 30 per cent of senior positions are held by women. Adding to that is the fact just 20 per cent of CEOs are women, merely 16 per cent of board members are women and there are no female chairs. Starting from a higher than average base (of 61 per cent female representation) these stats are shocking and highlight the issue that something clearly happens along their career path that causes women to stall, or opt out.

By no means is this the only sector that needs attention but it is an important industry to tackle, not least when you consider the influencing role advertising and media play on establishing unconscious bias and gender stereotyping. You have to wonder whether more women in senior roles contributing more diversity of opinion and perspective, not to mention direct insight into the female psyche, might lead to better balanced ad campaigns. It is ironic that an industry which commentates on the issues of gender diversity, and gives a voice to the movement for greater equality, is one of the worst offenders.

Examining the reasons behind the demand for flexible work sheds light on why women are moving away from the media industry. A significant portion of them are mothers and primary carers. Other motivations include launching businesses, caring for elderly relatives, juggling school children's activities, pursuing a passion or interest, relocating, or a recent life event that has led to a re-evaluation of priorities and lifestyle (like an illness or family event).

Up to 15 per cent of those women actively seeking flexible roles are at executive level; women who should be filling our boardroom pipeline. They want to continue to contribute. If we fail to offer them this opportunity, with no exaggeration, we are looking at forfeiting thousands of years of experience from the industry. This is significant as not only do we lose these women from senior management roles and future boardroom positions, but we are also depriving our younger female generation of inspiring role models.

Businesses often talk about the struggles of a talent gap but this isn't accurate, the talent exists and wants to work. Employers are just failing to attract up to 25 per cent of the workforce by only offering full time, non-flexible positions.

Furthermore, the assumption that only mothers require flexibility is short-sighted, and not only threatens losing other women from the workforce to their competing priorities, but also helps to reinforce the assumption that mothers are solely responsible for childcare. This is an important cultural shift that is required. We need to normalise flexible working to encourage more women to apply for senior roles and feel comfortable having the discussion in interviews knowing there is a widely embraced flexible culture. Unfortunately there is still a long way to go, especially when you consider only 1.4 per cent of companies in Australia have set a target for men's engagement in flexible working practices.

There is no doubt that women leaving the workforce for a period of time is a key reason as to why fewer women reach senior positions and don't make it to our boardrooms. When you consider that this is also a contributing factor as to why women retire with half the superannuation of men, it begs the question why flexible working isn't more common place.

One of the challenges is often establishing a receptive culture to flexible working. Only 25 per cent of organisations that offer flexible working provide manager training. This is significant and reflects the lack of acknowledgement of the role flexible working can play in improving financial performance, lowering operational costs and driving employee engagement.

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The success of a flexible scheme lies in the hands of teams and their managers. Being equipped with the tools to competently manage a workforce that might be remote, and not rewarded by the hours spent in the office, is crucial.

Equally important is the corresponding investment required in technology to facilitate a flexible workforce. When looking at progress reports this is an important consideration as a flexible scheme on its own isn't necessarily conducive to a stronger female workforce if the infrastructure and culture haven't first been established.

The bottom line is women mostly require flexibility for a relatively short period of their professional lives. However, this time can often fall in crucial career-building years. By not supporting them through this phase, we are forcing them to opt out, or stall, in their careers making their journeys to senior management, and ultimately the boardroom, longer and harder.

Wyse Women launched in 2016 offering products and services to increase the participation of women in the workplace. Focussed on the media, marketing & communications industry, the organisation connects experienced women with flexible work opportunities and provides support and advisory services to progressive businesses looking to build a flexible, diverse and inclusive culture.

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