

Gender diversity:

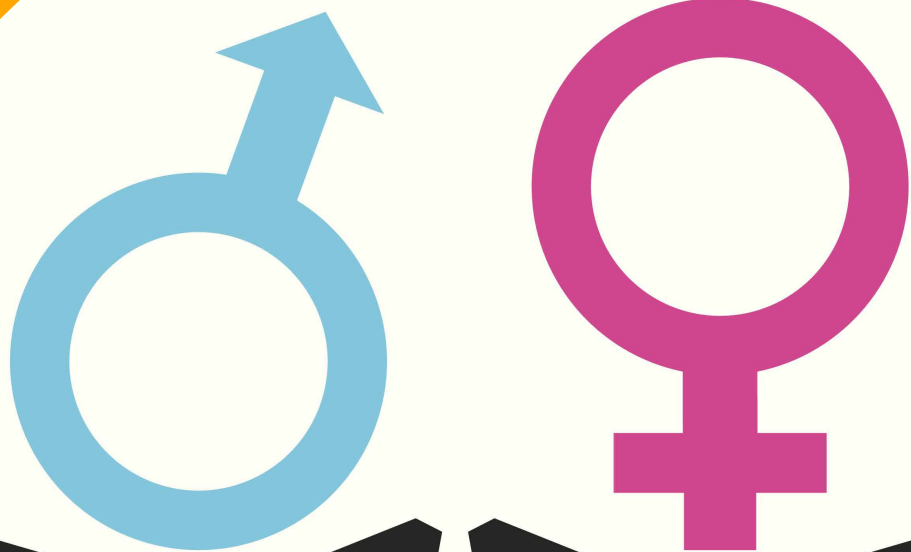
Can the financial
world do more? ...

A hot topic in the financial sector - and almost every other sector for that matter - there is plenty of research pointing to the progress being made with gender diversity. But is it enough?

The corporate world has modernised greatly in recent years, embracing technological innovations and the need for new hybrid roles to address today's digital challenges.

But while global corporations have shown themselves to be open-minded about the need for change around the majority of issues, progress has been slow around one of the last taboos in business - gender diversity.

Nearly two-thirds of companies have women board members, up from 56 per cent in 2009, but only a fifth have boards consisting of at least 20 per cent women.¹ Considering that women make up roughly half of the world's population, it is clear there is still a long way to go before parity is achieved.



¹Corporate Boards Make Steady But Slow Progress Towards Gender Equality, Thomson Reuters, <<http://thomsonreuters.com/press-releases/102014/corporate-boards-make-steady-but-slow-progress-towards-gender-equality>>

Gender diversity: An accountancy overview ●●●

So how does the financial world shape up when it comes to gender diversity? At the most recent count, 18 per cent of Big Four partners were female. While only 19 per cent of leadership positions in public accounting firms as a whole are currently held by women, the increase in percentage shows that the percentage of female partners is higher in non-Big Four.² Finally, less than a fifth of financial experts sitting on boards in 2013 were women.

This demonstrates how senior positions at the top firms are still mainly the preserve of men, despite a series of initiatives designed to make it easier for women to climb the career ladder.

But talent and hard work is being rewarded. For example, Olivia Kirtley was elected as the first female president of the International Federation of Accountants last year, while Leslie Seidman became

the first woman chair of the Financial Accounting Standards Board in 2010, and then there is Helen Brand, who has been the CEO of ACCA for over six years.

These individual cases show what is possible, but how can action be taken to create more supportive environments for women to succeed?



² Given that of the top 52 global Networks and Alliances, the Big Four constitutes 66 per cent, then the 19 per cent of female partners in all public accounting firms equates to approximately 22 per cent in all non Big Four firms in this group

Time for action? ...

It has been predicted by the World Economic Forum that global gender equality will not be achieved in the workplace until 2095, so there is an urgent need for action. The benefits of a gender diverse team are obvious, as the highest performing firms - those growing at more than 20 per cent on an annualised basis over the past three years - are actively trying to encourage female development.³

So what steps can financial firms take to improve female representation in leadership positions?

- **Make the leadership path obvious -**

Female professionals have to know there are genuine opportunities for promotion. By making the career path clear, they will become much more engaged with the process and identify positions that match their ambitions.

- **Rail against unconscious bias -**

Getting more men to talk about gender can make a huge difference, as it forces the C-suite to think about their own perceptions. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg is a huge advocate of this method, as she thinks it is the only way to negate the partialities humans naturally exhibit.

- **A top down approach -**

CEOs have to show they're serious about gender parity, or else the issue will just become something that HR departments fail to prioritise. The commercial and business benefits of gender diversity are obvious, but decision makers shouldn't be afraid to reveal their personal views on why there needs to be more women at the top table.

- **Mentoring -**

Despite the fact successful women routinely cite the importance of mentoring during their development, less than two-thirds (63 per cent) have had a formal mentor.⁴ This shows a clear disconnect in workplace policies, as plenty of firms are failing to put the right structures in place to help women access the support they need.

- **A culture change -**

Offering a good work-life balance is extremely important for working mothers, especially if they are going to reach the top. Research has shown that informal flexibility can be a very positive tool, as it lets employees find the right balance between their personal and professional lives.⁵ Remember, a happy workforce equates to a productive workforce.

This demonstrates how there are plenty of measures open to organisations taking the issue of gender diversity seriously. However, the fact remains that women also have a role to play, as they need to adopt a proactive approach to their career development and not be afraid to put themselves forward for promotions.

³ Why wait 80 more years to reach gender parity?, EY, <<http://www.prnnewsire.com/news-releases/why-wait-80-more-years-to-reach-gender-parity-300021481.html>>

⁴ Women as Mentors, DDI, <<http://www.ddiworld.com/thought-leadership/research/trend-research/women-as-mentors-does-she-or-doesnt-she#.VM-CrmisWSp>>

⁵ Why wait 80 more years to reach gender parity?, EY, <<http://www.prnnewsire.com/news-releases/why-wait-80-more-years-to-reach-gender-parity-300021481.html>>

How are Praxity member firms faring? ●●●

Praxity members globally are shining lights on gender diversity, as they understand the benefits of fostering happy and productive teams. So let's take a look at some success stories:

Moss Adams

The firm features on the 2014 Best Public Accounting Firms for Women list by the MOVE Project - in order to qualify for the ranking, you need to have at least 40 employees, with women comprising about 38 per cent of top leaders. Women now occupy 24 per cent of partnerships at Moss Adams, putting it ahead of many accountancy firms in both the US and globally. The firm's approach for advancing women is underpinned by context - female professionals receive in-depth feedback on what they need to do to climb the ladder. They have also set up networking partnerships designed to help women grow their client bases.

Plante Moran

Another to feature on the MOVE Project list, the firm is known throughout the US for its work-life programmes. As well as building out its network of champions for women in each office, Plante Moran also tracks the progress of women as they seek to get leadership positions - last spring it published its first-ever report that tracks its 'women in leadership' initiative. This underlines the firm's commitment to taking a strategic approach to helping women break through the glass ceiling.

Mazars

Members of the Women's Forum since 2007, Mazars is committed to promoting diversity. Not only does the firm ensure equal opportunities for employment, but the same potential for developing a career is offered to all members of staff. Diversity is one of Mazars' key values and through dialogue it hopes to improve women's access to positions of responsibility in the company. The forum also provides a platform for debating women's roles in the workplace and society as a whole.

“ You have to move past those invisible boundaries and take chances. Don't let preconceived notions prevent you from trying ”

- Aronson partner Lexy Kessler



Aronson

Aronson has no problem giving top positions to women, as shown by the career progress of Nicole Mitchell and Lexy Kessler. Nicole was named a GWSCPA Emerging Leader in 2013, while Lexy is the partner-in-charge of Aronson's Government Contract Services Group, and she credits her success at the firm to eschewing the roles society assigns to both men and women. "You have to move past those invisible boundaries and take chances. Don't let preconceived notions prevent you from trying," she stated.⁶ Ms Kessler also thinks women shouldn't be afraid to make important, strategic relationships.

Dixon Hughes Goodman

The first Dixon Hughes Goodman Doctoral Scholarship was awarded to Joye Caston last year through the PhD Project. The two-year scholarship is worth \$20,000 (£13,200) and she will now pursue a doctorate in accounting at Jackson State University. The initiative is designed to recruit minority professionals from business into doctoral programmes in all business disciplines. Since its creation, the PhD Project has increased the number of minority business professors from 294 to 1,253. Dixon Hughes' financial support is an example of its desire to promote a diverse workplace.

Across all of the 102 countries and 625 offices where Praxity firms operate, gender diversity is one of the key metrics considered by local, regional and national management. Praxity firms in general can be seen, as noted above, to be keen to adapt and modify working conditions and culture to maximise the probability of all advancement of staff and partners to be on a true merit basis, and not constrained by gender, or by any other social or historical discriminatory factor.

⁶ Women in Business Q&A, the Huffington Post, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-dunn/women-in-business-qa-alex_b_6382604.html>

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