

What women want

It's official. Gender diversity in the workforce is good for productivity, but where are our senior women leaders? What do women need or want to get to the top? asks Carolyn Boyd

THERE ARE so few women in the upper levels of Australia's top 200 companies – either as chief executives or chairwomen – that should just one happen to leave, you could count them all on two hands. But things are looking up. After years of trying, women are finally seeing some action to redress the gender imbalance.

Last year a suite of development programs was launched by business groups including the Business Council of Australia (in conjunction with AHRI), the Australian Institute of Company Directors and Women on Boards.

The Australian Stock Exchange also instituted mandatory gender reporting guidelines that require ASX-listed companies with 100 or more employees to disclose gender policies and employment figures, or explain why reporting has not been adopted.

Compared with New Zealand, the UK, Canada, the US and South Africa, Australia has the lowest percentages of women in top business roles. There are just six female CEOs and five female chairs in the top 200 Australian companies.

"The statistics were pretty appalling so what's been great about the last year is ... bodies that have ignored the issue for the last 25 years have finally taken action," says Nareen Young, chief executive of Diversity Council Australia. "They did have a bit of a rocket in the form of community pressure but certainly I think the one that is having the most effect ... is the requirement by the Australian Stock Exchange ... this has created a lot of movement in terms of identifying C-Suite women, identifying future leaders, and people are going to have to delve right down into their organisations to see who's there." In 2010, 27 per cent of all new ASX200 board appointments were women, compared with just 5 per cent in 2009. The surge took the percentage of women directors from 8.3 per cent to 10.6 per cent, edging closer to a long-term target of 20 per cent.

Katie Lahey, the outgoing, former chief executive of the Business Council of Australia (BCA), says one of the greatest challenges is getting women into senior company roles. "The pipeline of women into boards is important but to me that's easier to fill," says Lahey, who points out every company has just one CEO but there are eight to 10 board roles.

Lahey believes it could be three to five years before a noticeable volume of women reach the executive ranks. "It's a long haul," she says. "If there was just one hurdle, we could remove that and move on and open the floodgates."

Sometimes it's a lack of child care, sometimes it's women feeling the environment isn't supportive of them coming back after having a family. For some women it's the fact that they look up in the organisation and see no women role models and think 'what chance have I got?'

"Sometimes it's the women themselves," says Lahey. "They lack confidence, they don't want to press their case. We see that time and time again." Many women haven't been exposed to operational roles – considered vital for landing the top jobs. "Women in most senior positions in companies are often in the service side of the business [rather than the money-making side]," says Lahey. "They're in HR, they're the legal counsel, they're in marketing. They're not running the manufacturing plant. Often they've been streamed early on into roles that won't always lead them up to the top of the tree."

On the domestic front

Child care and maternity leave remain challenges for many women. "It's the great unsolved dilemma of the female labour market in Australia," says Young. It's not simply about finding a place for the child to be cared for – hard enough in itself. There is also a complex web of community, family and personal expectations around motherhood and what is the right thing for the child. For parents of school-age children, there is the challenge of how to balance full-time jobs with care of their offspring during the lengthy holiday periods, and how to give the children access to extra-curricular activities or simply quiet downtime if they spend every afternoon in after-school care while their parents work.

Young says families need to do what is best for them. "It's not for anyone to judge any of us about the choices we make," she says. "About our childcare choices, or our family work choices over the lifecycle."

Paid maternity leave is just part of the issue but the Diversity Council's Young says it's "incredibly symbolic because it says that 'we value your contribution at work as an employee, as a participating member of the labour market while you're on enforced leave to have a baby'".

At Woolworths, HR director Kim Schmidt says women need the most support when they come back from having a baby, often seeking to slowly build the amount of days they work. There has also been demand for flexibility in full-time work hours, with parents wanting to dash out when there's something important on such as their child's sports carnival.

Women often opt out of the workforce when they have their second child, says Young, but flexibility in starting hours or days of work can help. "Getting two children to a child care centre by a certain time and then getting to work by a certain time is really an unfair ask on families," she says. "If you're only doing that three days it's not so much of an ask and you understand that that's for a limited time period. It might be the case that when your kids go to school that you do four days or you do something else entirely in terms of flexibility, work shorter days for example."

Lisa Eccleston, group general manager human resources at Amcor Australasia & Packaging Distribution, knows first hand how important it is for women to share the domestic load at home. Her husband has a senior role with mining giant Rio Tinto, and the couple are parents to two girls, aged 11 and nine.

The couple knows they are lucky in that they can afford to outsource cleaning, gardening, ironing and some childcare, but the general chores of cooking, washing, tidying and shopping are done on a needs basis, fitted in around long working days and family time. "We don't really have a list of who's going to do what," Eccleston says. "It's just eyes wide open to all of the things that need to be done everyday."

Entrenched Bias

There are women languishing in the pockets of organisations who haven't found opportunities to move up, says Britt Jacobsen, manager at Optimiss Consulting, a company that helps business increase the number of women in their ranks. The problem could be hidden bias. Employees at the same level might get the same money, but unknowingly companies might be more likely to hand the juicy roles to men.

Sometimes it is much more overt. Young says a small group of society had businesses running scared about promoting more women. "There was always going to be a very small rump, if you like, of the community who said it was all about mad, hairy-legged feminists and there was a bit of fear of that particular element," she says.

Companies who are struggling to promote more women often need to shine a light onto their operations. "We need to look at being open and transparent about things like pay equity and recruitment practices and really, really target any of those underlying biases that are happening," says Jacobsen. "It's really tricky, it does involve chipping away at a number of different areas."

Pay audits can uncover inequalities. "It's an immediate figure that senior management and boards can look at to say, 'we do have a problem,'" says Jacobsen.

At Woolworths, two pay audits have been conducted, and there are more planned. "By actually having the data and presenting the data, it becomes much more part of that decision-making process. People become much more aware," says Schmidt.

Quota - Not a dirty word

There's a lot of talk about quotas at the moment, Jacobsen says. "A lot of companies are really afraid that ... it's going to take women back, that it's going to take companies backwards, but the truth is that it's one of the few things that's actually bringing results," she says.

At Amcor, there are no targets set – yet. But every recruitment panel has a woman on it, and a diversity council headed by the CEO is being established. "We're putting in some of those more lead-based indicators to start with, and

the diversity council will then talk about whether we need to set quotas and targets and what that might look like, and get buy-in and ownership from the business,” says Eccleston.

Woolworths has a target number of women filling 33 per cent of executive ranks by 2015.

The Future looks bright

There is much hope in the air that women are finally going to move to equal footing. “I’ve been around the traps for 30 or 40 years and for the first time ... I feel optimistic,” says Lahey. “We’re seeing change. We’re starting to see a real focus on why we haven’t got women sitting around board tables and why we haven’t got women in our CEO lists.”

Nareen Young has been working exclusively in the diversity field since 1998. “I can honestly say, I’ve never seen anything like it before,” she says.

Talent train:

Chief Executive Women

Chief Executive Women has created a Talent Development Program (TDP) to address the issue of self-confidence by emerging women leaders. With the support of more than 20 of Australia’s largest corporations, CEW has run its program for five years and each year close to 100 of Australia’s emerging women leaders take part.

Business Council of Australia: Going for the suite spot

Increasing the number of executive women is the firm focus of the Business Council of Australia’s C-Suite program, which was launched last year in conjunction with AHRI. The pilot program has paired 11 women with the potential of reaching a C-Suite role within three to four years with a chief executive mentor from another ASX 200 company. CEOs taking part include Commonwealth Bank head Ralph Norris, and Woolworths boss Michael Luscombe.

Katie Lahey says much of what is gleaned from a mentoring relationship can’t be learnt in a textbook – mentees get to see how CEOs prioritise and what keeps them awake at night. “I’d give my right arm for that,” she says.

Participants are encouraged to go to their mentoring meetings with a specific issue to discuss. “It’s not just a cup of coffee and a networking session, it’s got to be much, much more than that,” says Lahey.

The year-long pilot program is nearing its end. If successful, it is expected to run again. “We’re just starting on something that’s going to be very valuable,” Lahey comments.

A matter of confidence:

Women on Boards

Women on Boards has four programs – the Nextgen program, and three mentoring programs – Director Ready Now, Boards on My Horizon and Career Development.

The Nextgen program will run for the first time this year, working with 36 women, 10 of whom will be from investment bank sponsor UBS. The program will help women gain the confidence and skills to deal with boards. “Women just don’t get the same level of cut-through when they’re presenting to boards and senior managers as men do,” explains Claire Braund, executive director of Women on Boards.

It could be their voice, presentation style, or the fact that there is sometimes an easier collegiality established between male presenters and an all-male board.

Raji Ambikairajah has been selected to take part in Nextgen. The electrical engineer from Sydney is completing a PhD on smart grids, or electricity networks that utilise digital technology. She is also the voluntary Sydney chapter leader of a charity called Room to Read, which promotes education in developing countries.

Ambikairajah hopes the skills she gains from the Nextgen program will help in her charity work, and her career. “Engineering is still very much a male-dominated industry and the program addresses the issue of managing gender,” she says.

Ready to step up:

Australian Institute of Company Directors

Kim Schmidt, HR director of Woolworths, says it can often be difficult to expose employees mired in the day-to-day of their jobs to the skills they need to step up to a senior level. “It’s really hard to give people that kind of development,” she says.

That’s why Woolworths is taking part in the Australian Institute of Company Directors’ nine-month Board Ready program, which was launched in February. It exposes senior managers to boardroom behaviours and practices, and will build a pipeline of board-ready executives. Up to six executives per company from Westpac, Insurance Australia Group, Woolworths and PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC) will take part this year, and will each be mentored by a Fellow of Company Directors, who advise participants on their boardroom performance.

At Woolworths, 55 per cent of employees are women and they make up 27 per cent of the executive ranks. It’s not good enough, admits Schmidt, but it’s a vast jump from seven years ago when women held 16 per cent of executive roles at Woolworths.

One of AICD’s mentors is Kathleen Conlon, non-executive director of CSR, DLA Phillips Fox and REA Group. “I think mentoring can give women a different perspective on how they should push their own careers,” Conlon

says. “They don’t necessarily understand the power structure in business [which] is very much around line management and [profit and loss] responsibility. And so you see women going into a career and they say ‘well I want to be well rounded’ so I’m going to do some marketing and I’m going to do some of this, and I’m going to do some of that and that will make me a better manager.”

What they don’t get in any of these functional roles, says Conlon, is experience in the power structure of the organisation.

“And so they’re not aggressively targeting the power pathway, which is the line management pathway.

“I think the issue is it may seem like a promotion but CEOs only ever come from line managers, I don’t think any marketing director has ever been made a CEO except in some very specific marketing companies.

“And so there is this issue about power and one of the things I tell women is, ‘You never do anything that is not a power position if you want to be in line management. If you don’t want to be in line management that’s fine, but you need to make the decision early and manage your career much more aggressively.’”

The AICD program is designed to give executives a better understanding of the role of the board, and prepare to deal with the board through their executive career and beyond.

“Really this is a very specific set of skills that we’re mentoring for,” says Conlon. “A lot of times both women and men might not get the opportunity to move into the CEO role of an ASX-listed company because they haven’t had the [experience of dealing with the] board.”

Conlon believes the gender imbalance at board level will improve in coming years, but worries that will leave an even bigger gap in the executive space. “You’ve basically shifted your pipeline from executives to boards and I think that’s an issue.”

While she doesn’t have a magic bullet to fix the problem, Conlon says sponsorship of talented women would help. “If you look at how people get ahead in business, the successful executives were generally sponsored by somebody in the organisation who helped them drive their career,” she notes. “So I think it’s really important that when people think about putting mentoring programs in place, that the senior people they’re using to mentor actually understand that their job is to sponsor, to actually help the person find the job, get them into the job, not to sit back and give them advice.”

1943: Advice to employers of women

Pick young married women. They’re less likely to be flirtatious, and they need the work or they wouldn’t be doing it.

Obtain a physician to give each woman you hire a special physical examination, one covering female conditions. This will reveal whether the employee-to-be has any female weaknesses that would make her mentally or physically unfit for the job.

Be tactful when issuing instructions or making criticisms. Women can't shrug off harsh words the way men do.

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Gender summit this month

Together with UN Women Australia AHRI is holding a Gender Equity in the Workplace summit on 4 March in Sydney. The program includes presentations from Westpac CEO Gail Kelly and Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick. hrmonthly will be reporting on this special event. Watch this space.

Young professional navigates her way

AT 29, Katharine Goulstone is very focused on where her career is going. She has her sights firmly set on becoming a chief operating officer of a business in 10 years. "For me, career achievement is a personal objective as well as a financial objective given that Australian property is not getting any cheaper," Goulstone says.

Growing up in Newcastle, NSW, Goulstone went straight to work after high school supporting a number of Australian banking CEOs and boards as an executive assistant. It wasn't until she moved to London at 21 that Goulstone really considered that she was supporting the very people she aspired to be and began planning her own journey to CEO level roles. At 23, Goulstone was managing the trading desk of a US hedge fund while studying financial economics at Berkbeck College in London.

Now back in Australia and married with a one-year-old daughter, Goulstone has just returned to work running a specialist defence and aerospace recruitment company. But the question of how to juggle career and family was on her radar well before she married. She wanted to earn enough that she could choose to have a family in her 20s and return to work if she wished. "I had to get my salary to a level so that it was actually sustainable to go back to work [after having a baby]," she says. "Looking at our finance plan over 10 years and over 20 years of where we want to be, I was too frightened to take too long out of the workforce now. I felt like it was going to be too hard to get back on the ladder."

Goulstone has recently completed an executive Master of Business Administration through the Australian Graduate School of Management and says part of her career driver is being a role model to her daughter. "When I fell pregnant in the first term of my MBA, the obvious question was, 'well do I continue?'" Goulstone explains. "I fast forwarded 20 years and considered the inevitable conversation with [my daughter] about why she

shouldn't drop out of university, what ammunition am I going to bring to that discussion if I've dropped out myself?

I was very aware very early on that I'd become a role model and it was important for me that I was a hands on mum, a successful person who had a career, and someone that I hoped that my daughter would be inspired by."

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