

Variety is the spice of life

By Sophie Pettit on Sep 21, 2012 in HR Features

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Diversity in the workplace brings about dynamism: the sharing of more ideas, perspectives and experience. This was a key topic of discussion at this year's *Woman Extraordinaire Forum 2012*, a two-day event in which more than 40 female speakers came together to tackle the issues facing women in the workplace and share their experiences in leadership, innovation and embracing positive social change.

When it comes to gender diversity, research suggests that having women on the Board of Directors has a direct positive impact on a company's performance and profitability. So with females making up 53% of the Hong Kong workforce, it would appear the prospect for a diverse and lucrative workplace is high. However, the latest Hang Seng Index (HSI) shows that in 2012, a mere 9% of directors in the region's top 48 companies are female. So what can women really bring to the Board table and where are companies going wrong when it comes to getting them on the C-Suite? These were the questions put to a panel of six of Hong Kong's female senior executives.

Why do we need women at the top?

As China Chairman of one of the top international law firms, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, and one of two women on a board of 15, panellist Teresa Ko is a leader in helping Chinese and global companies become listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. Ko stated that companies can enjoy a 40% increase in profitability when they have women on the Board of Directors. She believes that as well as bringing a more diverse perspective to the boardroom, women tend to raise more issues, generating a more vigorous debate, which in turn brings about more opportunity for positive change within an organisation. Not only that, but women can provide more connectivity to female employers, all contributing to enhancing the overall image of the company.

Fellow panellist Ka Shi Lau, Managing Director and CEO, Bank Consortium Trust Financial Ltd (BCT) offered the view that women are able to bring passion to the Board and a drive and determination to succeed—perhaps due to that age-old stereotype of women needing to prove themselves among their male peers. However, the panel came to an agreement that there is a perceived problem with the supply, demand and visibility of women in the workplace. So with all these assets to offer, why aren't women leading?

Supply

Statistics appear to show that there is certainly no lack of potential when it comes to the availability of skills and determination among women, particularly in Hong Kong's Gen Y. The panel pointed out that while over 60% of graduate intake in the region's universities is female, almost a third of MBA classes comprise women and as it currently stands, only 10.3% of directorships within the Stock Exchange's 1,500 listed companies

are female. So perhaps it is only a matter of time until these women climb the ranks into the C-Suite?

Demand

On the flip side, it was commonly suggested that when it comes to demand, chairmen and directors are not looking widely enough at the pool of female talent available, but rather turning to what the panel referred to as the 'old boys network'. In order for diversity to be achieved at Board level, panellists agreed that the HR department and those in charge of recruitment need to look further afield because the talent pool is simply not being seen and that this is a message, which should be firmly imbedded in the organisation, from top to bottom.

Visibility

However, achieving diversity is not all down to HR and the Board of Directors. The panel suggested that women are not making themselves visible enough and are holding back from opportunities to enter the C-Suite, either due to a lack of confidence in themselves to take on such a role, or the fear that they will fail to achieve the 'work/life balance' when it comes to having children and developing their career. Perhaps this partly accounts for the fact that of the 400 million new entrepreneurial ventures last year, 160 million were initiated by women.

Getting women on Board

This year's *Woman Extraordinaire Forum 2012* highlighted that while many of Hong Kong's organisations still have a long way to go in achieving gender diversity, several initiatives are currently tackling the issue from varying angles.

The Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Ltd (HKEx), for example, has recently proposed a change to its Corporate Governance Code, requiring all companies listed on its Exchange to have a policy on Board diversity and to report on this in their corporate governance and interim reports. Shalini Mahtani, Founder and Board Director of Community Business, wholeheartedly supports this move, in line with changes being made in other countries, and is pleased that Hong Kong is responding to calls for companies to 'take diversity more seriously'.

Meanwhile, the Women's Foundation is launching its *Mentoring Program for Women Leaders* for the fourth year running, with the support of leading corporations and associations in Hong Kong. More than 350 professional women have benefitted from the Program, designed to address the under representation of women in senior management roles and accelerate female leadership and empower women to advance in their careers.

Su-Mei, CEO, The Women's Foundation offers advice for companies who want to take diversity seriously, "Diversity has to be embraced from both the top-down and the bottom-up. To ensure talent is driving the business, leadership development initiatives like mentoring programmes should target specific populations that are under-represented in leadership positions in the company. Returnship programmes, supportive parental leave policies and flexible working options are all critical to retaining employees who

have childcare and elderly care responsibilities. At the Board level, it is important to ensure that a diverse slate of candidates are recruited and considered to the fullest extent possible without compromising business performance.”

The Program is free-of-charge to participants and the application deadline is **30 September 2012**. Application forms can be accessed and submitted to The Women’s Foundation website: <http://www.thewomensfoundationhk.org/>