

The Gender Agenda

Women at PwC: A global business issue*



PwC's Gender Agenda blog, an initiative of the global Gender Advisory Council, was launched in October 2007. Updated regularly, it provides a discussion platform for the global issues and debates which relate to women in business.

http://pwc.blogs.com/gender_agenda

*connectedthinking

PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS 

“The single most important thing to progressing in my own role was ...”

3 April 2008

One of the very first PwC people to whom I spoke when I first started in my role with the Gender Advisory Council was Dale Meikle, who has written today's blog posting. Currently on secondment to our European partnership, she joined PwC US in 1999 and worked in the Washington National Tax practice until 2005, before moving to Luxembourg, Paris and finally (for now) Belgium.

Based in Brussels, she works as a Human Capital Manager for the region and co-ordinates the PwC Eurofirms Women in PwC Network. Dale has assisted on several GAC projects, most notably working on the “Leaking Pipeline” interviews, conducted in both English and French, undertaken with senior women in PwC France.



“I know something of how our perceptions can influence reality; when I came from the U.S. to Europe on secondment two years ago, I immediately surmised that in order to gain credibility I was going to have to change (it can get awkward quite fast if you don't learn the two versus three cheek-kissing conventions in France versus Holland). I was going to have to hone my patience and cooperation skills.

I was also going to have to make a decent effort at learning at least one of their languages. And those were just the small things. Europe, with its inherent cultural diversity, was a paradox – a progressive region, yet also one deeply rooted in tradition. And so my secondment began with a dawning awareness of the particular way our perceptions and mindset directly impact our experiences.

In my new role as manager of the Eurofirms Women in PwC Network, my education in this sphere would soon be furthered. I was no expert in diversity when I began this role, but I knew a few things. My economist friend had explained to me that without the cost-free domestic labor women contribute to society, the global economy would implode (interesting, I thought; hadn't my own mother once threatened to “go on strike?”) And to my pregnant friend who worried about how she would rejoin the workforce after starting a family, I promptly replied, Move to Sweden! Immediately! Two years, many articles, conversations, annual reports and meetings later, I know quite a lot more.

The most fascinating and personally relevant insight I gained was when I assisted the Gender Advisory Council (GAC) in interviewing PwC's female leaders. Speaking to these women brought veracity to the statistics and academic papers I'd been reading. Each story I heard was very different. Some of these women had experienced high degrees of autonomy, while others had acquired trusted mentors who'd “held their hand” in navigating the nuanced path to leadership. Some had worked on a myriad of clients all over the world, whilst others had been at the same office and client practically their entire career. Having children had had a significant impact on work for some, while for others it had not. Some had experienced perceived sexism, while others saw their gender as wholly neutral to their career progression. Interestingly, some of these women would have changed just about everything they had done, while others insisted they'd have had it no other way. On the surface, these stories sounded contradictory; there was no “solution” – no consistent formula for success that could be neatly packaged and shared with other women.

It was only with some time and perspective on the interviews that I was able to connect the dots. I was sure that none of these women had achieved a leadership position by accident – and the one common element that had allowed them to get there was their own perception of themselves and their environment; to paraphrase Emily Dickinson, they dwelled in their possibilities, not their limitations. That was the defining factor individually and the unifying factor when looking at their stories as a whole.

Simply put, they had found a way to become leaders armed with the belief that it could be done. These women were driven in a way that transcended their environment (however detrimental or supportive that atmosphere had been at the time) though they may have used many different tools to get to the same place.

“The single most important thing to progressing in my own role was ...”

3 April 2008 (Continued)

Personally, this revelation was quite significant and empowering for me. Much as I understood those two years ago that I'd have to change my expectations and behavior to adapt to European business and social mores, I now realized that the single most important thing to progressing in my own role was changing my own behavior, perceptions and willingness. Success was not something vague and intangible; I was obligated to know my own mind and then seek out and take advantage of possibilities. The realization became palpable to me that while the support structures and culture at PwC are necessary to the success of women, it is the willingness and beliefs of each individual that will truly have impact and bring lasting change.

It's a fact that the environment today at PwC is very different than it was when these women were taking their first steps toward leadership. There is the inception of the GAC and there are territory leaders who are removing obstacles to women's advancement, one by one; there is the sweeping shift in the mindset of our young women just beginning their careers. In fact, I wonder if this new generation is so different from those that came before, that gender won't even cross their minds; that because they don't see a glass ceiling, that it actually won't exist for them.

I wonder if decades down the line diversity will be so embedded in the way we work that we will have rendered formal programs and communications on the subject superfluous. What I know is that these young women will be in an environment that is willing to support and enable them significantly more than the women I interviewed. I believe we should share their success stories very early on in our young women's careers to demonstrate that above all else, it is they who will decide their future; that armed with their own ambition and inspiration – and in the milieu of our dynamic organization – they indeed have the opportunity to get wherever they want to go, as far and as fast as they can. And so do I, and so do any of us.”

Blanka's story: Czechs in the City

11 April 2008

I'm currently in New York, at the end of a whirlwind 10 days of travelling between London, Toronto and the Big Apple. I have so much to report back on, having attended two book launches for "Why Women Mean Business", gone to the Catalyst Awards Conference at which Nissan and ING were recognised for their innovation and progress, given out over one hundred copies of the "Leaking Pipeline" report and, last but not least, met some of the most interesting and smart people out there, one of who even shares my somewhat rare allergy to aubergines (or "eggplant", as she calls it). What were the chances?

More on all of that next week. Ahead of that account, here's the final blog entry to win a copy of "Why Women Mean Business". It comes from Blanka Dubroková, currently based in PwC's Prague office. Here's her story of what she learned from her secondment to New York. Thank you, Blanka.

(I have to just add in at this point that WWMB is currently unavailable in the USA, as it's sold out! We had the last 100 copies at the NYC launch and it's now being re-printed – so, for those of you who have one of the first copies, you have a first edition!).



"In 1996, I joined Coopers & Lybrand in Prague in the Czech Republic, as an audit assistant and spent the next nine years auditing telecommunication, technology and utility clients. In 2005 - 2007, I joined PwC USA and worked in the Global Assurance Methodology Group in New York. I made my first contacts with a women's network here. Now back in the Czech Republic, I am currently working in a joint role as an assurance senior manager serving clients and a team leader of the Central and Eastern Europe audit methodology team.

I enjoy working with people from different territories; here I truly appreciate the global nature of the Firm. Helping the Firm to be a better place to work at, thus ultimately providing a better service to our clients is my main aspiration.

Believe in Yourself

Magnificent skyscrapers, century-old subway stations, and yellow cabs everywhere. It was July 2005 and the biggest adventure of my life - a two-year secondment with PwC New York – had just started.

I really didn't know what to expect when I found myself at JFK airport, after successfully passing through strict looking immigration officers. To some of my friends and colleagues, moving as a single woman to the USA, and specifically to New York, seemed risky. But I had tried not to think about the possible negative sides of my decision and focused instead on all the good things which could happen. I spent the first part of my life in the communist Czechoslovakia and another part living in the young democracy of the Czech Republic. This somewhat diverse experience, together with my three large suitcases and a determination to pass the coming life test as best as possible, were the main equipment I took with me to the US.

The City absorbed me immediately. It was hot and humid, even at midnight. I couldn't figure out how to unlock the door of my temporary apartment. Exhausted from a long flight, jetlagged, and thirsty, I almost started crying. Why the hell is the lock not working in the way it is supposed to work? A wise Czech proverb says: "Different place, different habits". Accepting that things are working differently, and that it still can make a lot of sense to others -- as a doorman I ended up calling explained to me, smiling and demonstrating how to unlock the door-- was the first big learning lesson. I kept reminding myself of this always when things, actions, or conclusions of other people seemed illogical to me. And I continue till now.

After a week of acclimatization, it was time to start working. Here it was. The PwC office at the intersection of Madison Avenue and 42nd Street, the busiest street in Manhattan. Looking at the 35-story building, all glass and steel, I still couldn't believe this was the place I would be going to work for the next two years. It appeared cold and anonymous. Looking around me at millions of cars, people, and crazy bicycle riders, I was wondering how to find my place in this jungle, not knowing anyone. And no one knowing me.

Blanka's story: Czechs in the City

11 April 2008 (Continued)

Luckily, my fears didn't come true. My new colleagues in the office did a fantastic job of helping me adjust, both to my job, as well as to life in the City. Buying a TV set, arranging for an internet connection at home, applying for my social security number, everything was suddenly much easier with their advice. My coach, a Partner in our group, took two hours out of her busy schedule to meet with me to introduce herself and to learn more about me and my background. Even though my job turned out to be quite challenging, at the same time it was the most fascinating experience. Having many new things to learn, working with new people, travelling to Europe and other places in the US: this was all demanding, but also very inspiring.

After several months, I was asked to take on new responsibilities, including leading various teams, presenting at group meetings, or being a coach to several members of our group. To my surprise, I also received some positive feedback for bringing different perspectives and contributing something unique into our projects. All I was actually doing was applying experience from my home office and trying to add value to my work and to our team. My background and experience from a different part of the world suddenly appeared as an asset. I realized that everyone can make a difference, and that even I can make a difference.

Outside work, I found myself in various situations I had never possibly imagined. I became a tai-chi instructor and led classes in a tai-chi studio in Manhattan. As a volunteer, I taught a series of "Our Community" lessons to a class of second grade students at the elementary school in my neighborhood. I also ended up putting together a business plan for a charity organization, probably as a result of being the only member with some finance and management background. It felt very encouraging to be able to contribute something to life in The Big Apple.

Looking back at the two years spent in the US, I feel endlessly grateful for having such a wonderful life opportunity. If I could name just one of the things I value most, I would say gaining confidence. Confidence in myself, my skills and abilities. I found out that I am as good as others in this big world and that I can bring valuable things to the table.

I want to encourage every woman to: "Believe in yourself". Whatever you decide to do, you can really do it, no matter how difficult or impossible it may look. Put aside your fears and enjoy your journey."

Teaming with Men for Success

9 May 2008

Last month, I attended the Catalyst awards in New York and, as I wrote here at the time, participated in a fascinating workshop on gender equity and male involvement.

Many of you have now seen the handouts from this session and I hope have found them to be as interesting and thought provoking as did I. One person whose interest was also piqued by this approach and topic was award winning Australian business woman Maureen Frank, creator of the “My Mentor: Challenging Women to Step Up” programme currently in use in PwC Australia (which is due to be profiled in the Global Initiatives section of www.pwc.com/women any day now) and best selling author of the book “You Go Girlfriend”. Maureen will also be running a half day workshop on mentoring at the Working Mother conference in South Africa later this year, at which PwC South Africa and the Gender Advisory Council are Gold level sponsors.

I have completely forgiven Maureen for dedicating my copy of her book to “Chloe” and, to prove it, asked her to write us a guest piece for the Gender Agenda blog. Here are her views on teaming with men for success in gender diversity.



When women won't support each other – ask a man!

Men are key to our success. As an advocate for women in the workforce – I never thought I would write that.

Recently I attended the Catalyst Conference in the US – Catalyst being the global leader in research on working women. Here I had an ‘ah – ha’ moment around the significance of male involvement in the gender equity challenge.

Whilst hearing global experts on ‘teaming with men for success’ and ‘white men as advocates for gender diversity’, one point crystallised for me – my own corporate success was assisted by the support of some amazing men. Yes, there were women too – in two categories: supporters who were not closely connected to my business; and, sadly, what the Americans term ‘bully broads’ (translation - bitch). The people who knew my business, who pushed, challenged and believed in the way I operated, were men.

These men were treasures, champions, mentors. They are people to whom I owe a large debt and many are still great mates. There are others like them in corporate Australia and doubtless elsewhere in the world – you just have to turn over a few rocks to find them.

In gender work with major organisations our inclusiveness strategies tend to focus on women. Whilst this is critical, I now also see the need to understand the essence of men like my champions. How do we increase the numbers and their consciousness of gender diversity?

At Catalyst I saw men from around the globe who ‘get it’ and are outspoken about it. A sneak peak at the latest research with these men was shared, identifying four main barriers to commitment to gender equity:

Firstly, the fear of blame or mistakes, that they “won’t get it right” leads to “doing nothing at all”. I’ve frequently heard colleagues claim ‘I don’t know what to say – can you speak to her?’, or in a case when the woman in question would benefit from some direct feedback: ‘oh I couldn’t do that, what if I upset her...’

The challenge for us is to make it safe, to invite men into the fold and to forgive mistakes made with our best interests at heart. We have to swallow our pride, knowing that we can’t do it without them. Not popular feminism I know, but words that do need to be spoken.

Secondly, the approval of other men seems to be a significant barrier that I had never really understood before. Certainly, peer pressure exists, but what do men really say on the subject when we’re not there? How do we find out? How do we change this? Clearly men need strong role models on the subject to help shape these moments from within.

Teaming with Men for Success

9 May 2008 (Continued)

I believe that most men want to do the right thing, but we haven't shared how 'gender discrimination' can be subtle and unintentional. We need them to understand not just the corporate and societal costs and benefits, but the individual impacts for them too. For those that "get it", we have to provide support in 'spreading the word' and influencing their male colleagues and peers.

Thirdly, the personal cost to men in not engaging is usually not spelled out. Money talks – the cost of employee turnover, the gender differences in why people join, stay and leave organisations – these are the arguments that help men to 'get it'. The impacts on their business unit, their bonus payout and their individual performance can be made clear. Sadly in many organisations, this case for gender diversity is unclear or unpublicised. A compelling financial business rationale is hard to resist for any businessman who understands the FACTS.

I remember one CEO with whom I worked. Despite being a strong supporter of women he would not publicly endorse support for the initiatives: "What will my men think of me? They'll think I'm being unfair." We got there eventually when I argued "imagine that I am your daughter sitting in front of you in 20 years time!" We called the initiative a code name: 'Project Lauren'.

'Lauren' was his daughter.

Finally, apathy abounds. Overcoming it requires understanding of the personal interest for each man, which may be different: perhaps deeply private, financial, or a broader sense of justice.

A self labelled 'white heterosexual man', who is now a gender diversity 'champion', told us his story. Let's call him Mr X. His CEO shared the business case with him, personally challenging him to "get involved, to take a risk". He confesses to being stunned; the data was what hit him. He declared 'even if you are oblivious to whether you treat people fairly – you really cannot deny the compelling business case.' Shocked that he hadn't seen this before, he became determined to learn more and to share the newfound knowledge with other men.

Mr X became aware of the subtlety of the challenge: what it really meant to be aware and inclusive. He changed the way he listened to people in his company, asking real questions of people, and was overwhelmed with the thanks he received for these simple acts.

Mr X now proposes these practical ways to involve men:

- Ask them to engage in the solutions! Obvious but often overlooked;
- Ask them in a way that doesn't scare them - sharing the numbers with them and encouraging them to ask questions.
- And he found a positive response when men believe it's not just "secret women's business"!

Another expert at the Catalyst workshop raised the concept of privilege and its invisibility to those with it. He shared that white men don't see themselves as part of a group but as individuals, unaware of their gender. Understanding the privilege their status affords them helps with their journey: never having had to face the subtle exclusion, the internal dilemmas about children, the constant battle to retain your femininity and be a good business person, and so on.

The rules of masculinity dictate that men need to teach other men about this. Yes, we can play a role, we can include, we can share, we can educate – but we also need to support and empower men to want to teach men...

In the news: pit bulls and snails

15 September 2008

Hello again. I returned from my recent holiday (only narrowly missing the collapse and subsequent impact on holidaymakers caused by the demise of the XL Group) to a raft of emails in response to my "Travel Tao" post. Many thanks to you all for these great suggestions, and keep them coming in; I will collate them and post another "Tao" article in a few weeks' time.

While I was away, as the whole world now knows, and as pondered upon here and in the UK Observer of 13 July, John McCain selected Sarah Palin, the self dubbed "pit bull in lipstick", as his running mate in the forthcoming American Presidential elections.

"Gender, Back on Stage" screamed the New York Times headline in the international edition, as acres of newsprint were then devoted to discussing Sarah Palin's family life, glasses, lipstick choices, bear hunting past, time as a beauty queen and other issues germane to the debate around who is the best person to be the deputy to the future President. Conservative political strategist Vin Weber commented last week - that he had "... never heard such a divergence of views as that on Sarah Palin".

For all that I agree with the oft-repeated comment made by Palin about the "eighteen million cracks in the glass ceiling", I also concur with Gail Collins, who challenged the excessively optimistic view that Palin will inherit all of Hillary Clinton's supporters with her observation that:

"... the idea that women are going to race off to vote for any candidate with the same internal plumbing is both offensive and historically wrong."

When I've discussed this with friends and colleagues, many of whom are American and hence can either vote or, if expats of long standing who can't vote, still take a keen interest, they have mirrored this perspective, with one diehard, proud, getting-the-vote-out campaigning Democrat even conceding that, whether you love her or hate her, Palin has completely changed the dynamics of the campaign and brought some amazing energy to the Republicans.

It seems as if American's liberals don't know what has hit them. Can you be a liberal and not support the female candidate? Is this the equivalent to not supporting Obama and thus being regarded as a racist?

Is the selection of Palin a smart move and one which will tip Middle America; is she a candidate who can indeed mop up the votes of women of all colours and politics?

Well, we'll know after 4th November and one thing is clear: after that date, the White House will have either a black man or a white woman in one of the two top jobs for the first time in American history.

Meanwhile, back in the UK, the Equal Opportunities Commission published their 2008 report entitled "Sex and Power", which examines and surveys the number of women in positions of power and influence. The depressing news, that there are now fewer women in these roles than there were when the EOC first commenced their survey in 2003 made headlines around the world, and this comment from CEO Nicola Brewer was repeated everywhere:

"We always speak of a glass ceiling. These figures reveal that in some cases it appears to be made of reinforced concrete. We need radical change to support those who are doing great work and help those who want to work better and release talent.

"The Commission's report argues that today's findings are not just a women's issue but are a powerful symptom of a wider failure. The report asks in what other ways are old-fashioned, inflexible ways of working preventing Britain from tapping into talent."

In the news: pit bulls and snails

15 September 2008 (Continued)

The EOC have given permission to other websites to share their snail image banner, so here it is:



They've used the snail motif throughout the report as an emblem of the verrrrrrrry slow pace of change which is currently predicted by these numbers, for example:

- A snail could crawl the entire length of the Great Wall of China in 212 years, just slightly longer than the 200 years it will take for women to be equally represented in the British Parliament.
- A snail could crawl nine times round the M25 in the 55 years that it will take women to achieve equality in the judiciary and –
- It could also crawl from Land's End to John O'Groats and halfway back again in the 73 years it will take for equal numbers of women to reach the top of the FTSE 100 companies.

Non UK dwellers should note that the M25 referenced above is a 117 mile/188 kms motorway which encircles London ... just for context. Disheartening context.

You can download the PDF of the full report from the EOC website link above, and it's an interesting read, but not one which is going to cheer anyone who really cares about gender issues. As I said at the start – depressing.

Finally, because I am determined to end on a more positive note, I can report that we are going great guns with the production of the GAC video, as we move into the final few weeks of filming. We are scheduled to complete the filmed interviews by the end of September, and will then edit the footage into our finished film in early October, prior to releasing it in the middle of that month. I'll write a little more about who and where we've been filming next time.

Sex, Flights and Videotape

30 September 2008

Hello again. Last week's promised update on the progress of our video failed to materialise, as you may perhaps have noticed, due to one very simple reason: I was without a laptop! My computer made a noise, not unlike the sound of a champagne cork popping (only much less fun) last Sunday evening and suddenly I had no technology. It transpired that the hard disk had become corrupt and so my poor PC had to go off to be mended. Whilst all this was going on, I was working in Barcelona and then in Amsterdam, frantically trying to function via my BlackBerry and constantly checking for updates as to the patient's progress. Fortunately, my wonderful colleagues in IT managed to recover absolutely everything and so I was able to collect a fully functioning laptop when I got back to London on Friday.

But, just to end my week if you read the news story about the technical failure of London's air traffic control systems last Thursday, then spare a thought for those of us who were, like me, trapped at Schipol airport for several hours, gazing in despair at a departures board which listed my flight home as:

“Indefinitely Delayed.”

I eventually arrived home FIVE hours later than scheduled, at midnight rather than at 7pm. If you're reading this and you don't travel on business, but have a sneaking suspicion that its “glamorous” – consider this story!

However, the time spent in both Spain and the Netherlands was excellent, and I learned and shared so much. The Barcelona trip was for me to participate in our annual “Women in Europe” two day conference, which brought together men and women from 20 European countries, plus guests from other PwC territories, including GAC members Anita Stemmet and Laurie Endsley from South Africa and Central and Eastern Europe, respectively, and Elham Hassan the leader of PwC in Bahrain. I am particularly fond of both this group and this event, as, back in 2006, it was the first ever PwC function which I attended in my new role as Gender Advisory Council programme office leader.

I'd only been in the job for about three weeks and I caught the train to Brussels to talk about the creation of the Council and what we planned to do. As if standing up and speaking to about 50 complete strangers wasn't daunting enough, I was also forced to “mime” my slides due to a technical fault which meant that, basically, I was there but the slides were not.

It's true what “they” say about difficult things making you stronger ... I survived - and every year since then it has been both easier and more fun to get together with my European colleagues and to learn about the creativity, energy and passion they are applying to advancing the female agenda in their respective countries.

One of my favourite writers, Alison Maitland (co-author of “Why Women Mean Business”) was our guest speaker and shared an excellent presentation which outlined the themes of the book and why more companies should both care and take action on the gender front. And to keep her talk current and linked with breaking news, Alison started by commenting that:

“The business activities of the last few weeks have shown us the kind of havoc that can be wreaked by male dominated organisations.”

Which is certainly true – where are the female faces amongst the failed investment bankers? And is their absence a good thing?

The following day, I travelled to Amsterdam, where “International Women of Excellence” were hosting a one day workshop at TNT headquarters, entitled “Leading for the Future: Women Do Mean Business.” The excellent keynote speaker was Marie-Christine Lombard, CEO of TNT Express, who began by warning us that she may be viewed as radical, because: “the more senior I get, the more radical I become.” She outlined her career, which has taken her through an MBA, a spell in US retailing and time spent in investment banking in both Wall Street and Paris (“there's a new generation coming through – a new generation of men”) before moving into the transport and logistics industry.

Sex, Flights and Videotape

30 September 2008 (Continued)

When asked what women need in order to get to the top, she replied:

- Legitimacy: you have to come up through the pipeline and know your stuff
- Credibility: you have to be really smart and knowledgeable
- You need a network of key people to support you, plus -
- Determination to succeed – and –
- Self confidence and self assurance.

She warned us that “companies need an extraordinary HR strategy to change the current way of working” and concluded by saying that:

“Women in companies are only an outcome of the position of women in society.”

This last sentence particularly resonated with me, as it ties in so completely with the themes that we are exploring with our film. As I've mentioned before, we have been filming all over the world (this week will see our crew in both New York and Brazil, obtaining footage to accompany that already shot in South Africa, India, the UK and Russia) and asking leading business people, politicians, academics and commentators to share their vision of the world in 2050. What needs to change in society for women to achieve their full economic potential? Who is responsible for creating those changes? What interventions really make a difference? And what do we want the future world to be like for our children?

As long ago as 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women made this statement:

“... empowerment of women and equality between women and men are prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all peoples.”

- and it's been interesting to hear our interviewees' views and perspectives. Of course, one of the most fascinating tactical and operational aspects of making our film has been the climate in which we are making it, at a time of unprecedented global economic changes. I have wondered on more than one occasion if it would have been a different (easier?) experience if we had been filming a year ago instead of now

Challenges we have faced have included the resignation (post filming) from her leadership role of one interviewee, the very high profile meltdown of a financial institution associated with another interviewee, and staff redundancies occurring within a major corporation which led to the CEO deciding that now might not be the best of times in which to participate in this film. Oh, and there's also some election or other happening in America in November.

I described the filming process to my colleagues in Barcelona as being something of a moving target and that's certainly been the case, but what a fascinating project. We are on the home stretch with regard to filming and are now working on the edit and considering what to keep and what ends up on the cutting room floor (more new vocabulary for me; other key phrases which I can now bandy about include “establishment shots” and “viewing the rushes”). We hope as part of the editing to create a short trailer which I'll try to stream here once it's completed.

Later this week I fly to Washington DC to have meetings with a couple of external organisations and also to present on gender as a business issue at Genesis Park and I'll then come home via the annual Newsweek “Women in Leadership” event in New York, which was the subject of one of my very first blog entries almost a year ago.

Happy Birthday, Gender Agenda!

Going live: the launch of “Closing the Gender Gap”

29 October 2008

Hello. I am once again in New York (rain swept, grey and cold, with the streets littered with discarded, inverted umbrellas – and weeping British tourists, distressed at the low level of sterling against the dollar) – this time for Working Mother’s annual Work Life Congress. PwC US were once again named as one of the top 10 companies in America for working mothers and Gender Advisory Council member and PwC US Chief Diversity Officer Roy Weathers will be accepting an award at the gala dinner later this week.

Since my last blog entry, the GAC film - “Closing the Gender Gap: Challenges, Opportunities and the Future” has gone live on the website – you can view it via this link or by clicking on the blue button to the right of this article. We’ve distributed the link and copies of the film on DVD to the interviewees, key PwC people and our clients - and the response has been quite amazing; some of the comments I’ve received to date include:

“I am planning to share it with others both internally and externally, but especially my four nieces and my nephew. I want them to know the importance of this message as they enter the workforce.”

“Having had the opportunity to view the film on the Gender Gap, I feel compelled to acknowledge and thank you and your team for the marvellous work done on this film. It was perceptive, crisp and professional but a significant factor was that it spoke the human language instead of business jargon.”

“I just wanted to drop a line and say how impressed I was by the Closing the Gender Gap video. I just watched the full version and thoroughly enjoyed it. It was powerful, diverse, concise, polished, and hard-hitting. The message is clearly conveyed and the number of high profile participants that you interviewed is astounding.”

“The film is excellent. It thoroughly gets the key messages across.”

I am armed with copies of the DVD and the companion guide and will be sharing them with colleagues and clients at the Working Mother event. It’s wonderful to see our hard work made real in the shape of An Actual Product after so long in the cooking. Please do take a look and let me know your views, or how you think the film could be used in order to continue the debate which lies at the heart of the gender agenda.

In other news ... at the time of writing, there is less than a week to go until the US Presidential election takes place. I still suspect that the final result will be closer than the current polls are suggesting. And what of the female angle? Vidya, one of the current Genesis Park participants in Washington DC, kindly shared this article from MSNBC with me on myths surrounding women’s voting patterns and behaviour. It will be interesting to see how the post election analysis pans out as to the accuracy of these myths and predictions.

Of course, I will still be in New York for Halloween this Friday; I’m going to watch the parade and perhaps I will capture a photo of someone in what I understand to be this year’s #1 choice of fancy dress attire: The Sarah Palin outfit. All that’s required is:

- Hair in a bun/beehive/“up do” [“Top tip! Re-cycle last year’s Amy Winehouse wig” – as I heard on the radio this morning]
- Glasses
- Business suit

Optional extras: gun, moose antler, baby. I will report back, and post a photo if I manage to take a suitable one.

Until next time,

Cleo

On culture, Malcolm and books

18 December 2008

Hello again. A while ago, I mentioned that I'd share a bit more about a very interesting event that I attended in central London, in which Malcolm Gladwell talked about some of the themes and premises contained within in his new book, "Outliers". I must caveat all of this by saying that I haven't as yet read the book myself, but hey ... Christmas is coming and perhaps I'll get lucky and receive a copy next week.

"Outliers" is subtitled "the story of success" but, interestingly enough given that he had a book to sell, Malcolm didn't spend his 45 minute slot talking about the (male!) people featured in the book who fulfil a definition of success (Bill Gates et al) but rather focussed on culture (as in, the way that we think and behave based on our nationality, personality and external influences) and how cultural context can affect behaviours, beliefs and outcomes. He told a long and surprisingly witty, given the subject, story about a New York plane crash and how no one thing – a failed engine, a lack of fuel – had actually caused the accident but how it was rather the result of a chain of errors, primarily based around differing communication styles, which had led to a number of individually small and quite insignificant errors all welding together and becoming one disastrous error.

Which in turn led to both a plane crash but also (thankfully) to a change in approach in training pilots and co-pilots to communicate with each other and also with entities such as air traffic control.

The global cultural piece really fascinated me, as it chimes very strongly with what I've witnessed in my travels around the PwC world during 2008. Our women in the UK, the US, India, South Africa and so on have so much in common with respect to their "PwC-ness" - and yet have many different challenges to face outside the workplace in terms of external attitudes to work, as well as practical considerations such as childcare. My time in India last month led me to reflect that perhaps sometimes we focus our awareness a little too much on the perceived practical barriers such as childcare and flexibility and not enough on the cultural issues (attitudes towards work, the need to "please" external customers at all times, opposition from the older generation) which can impact how easy or difficult it can be to create and sustain a career.

I'm currently writing a new piece for the www.pwc.com/women website about some of the women who lead PwC in their respective countries (the profiles of the female partners in Bahrain and Turkey are already up there) and it struck me that the four women who will feature in the article are not necessarily from countries where, in cultural terms, you would "expect" a woman to be the leader. They haven't benefitted from corporate interventions or programmes or initiatives. But they were smart, talented, determined and freely admit that, in a couple of cases, the timing was right for them. In other words, they made their cultural contexts work for them, and overcame the significant hurdles of the expectations of others and the definitions of "the norm" - to succeed.

That to me is the true "story of success".

Back to Malcolm. This article referring to him as a "Geek Pop Star" from New York magazine provides a great overview of his career to date and the new book. And, if you, like me, believe that you can learn a lot about a person from their choice of reading material, then here are:

Malcolm Gladwell's favourite books

- The Blind Side – Michael Lewis
- Should I Be Tested for Cancer?: Maybe Not and Here's Why – HG Welch
- Freakonomics – Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner
- Traffic – Tom Vanderbilt [described as: "a very clever young writer tells us all sorts of things about what driving says about us". My husband read this book a few weeks ago and has been regaling me with nuggets from it ever since ...]
- Nixon Agonistas: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man – Gary Wills
- The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking – Roger Martin

[Source: The Week magazine]

On culture, Malcolm and books

18 December 2008 (Continued)

His own blog is also, unsurprisingly, an interesting read.

More on my personal books of 2008 next time – not quite as erudite as Malcolm's, though.

Until then, seasons' greetings –

Cleo

PS: I've had a lot of blog feedback lately saying that you appreciate the links I provide to global news stories and interesting articles. All PwC people can email me and get themselves added to my mailing list of global items, so please make that a New Year's resolution if you're not already on the list.

And here's an article which I found whilst on-line at New York magazine's site, entitled 'The "Bitch" and the 'Ditz' " which sets out to examine how the participation of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in the US Presidential election race "reinforced the two most pernicious sexist stereotypes and actually set women back."

Women as role models – is it fair?

13 January 2009

The recent British press coverage about French justice minister Rachida Dati “returning to work” a mere five days after she gave birth to her first child via Caesarean section gave me much pause for thought.

For those of you who are outside the UK and who therefore may have missed what felt like, for a few days last week, the almost blanket coverage and hand wringing by the (mostly female) commentators about the fact that she has done this – the back story is that Ms Dati had her baby and was then seen striding into a meeting, looking groomed and happy, brandishing a folder and showing no visible evidence at all that she had just given birth to her first child. My French is nowhere near good enough to know if the French media took the same approach, but here in England, the gist of the message was:

- She's crazy – this is crucial bonding time for she and her baby and that is –
- Way more important than going back to work – and meanwhile –
- Who's taking care of the baby? And –
- What message does this give about childbirth and maternity leave to both –
- Other women and –
- Employers?

On the last point, Barbara Ellen of the Observer commented that:

“One of the most galling aspects of all this is what manna from pinstripe heaven it will be to the Alan Sugars of this parish - confirming an entrenched corporate belief that female maternity leave is an expensive inconvenience, a PC luxury, even a ****-take.”

(I also thought there was a slightly snarky tone to some of the articles regarding how well groomed and put together Ms Dati appeared to be, but that may have just been the old Anglo-French rivalry rearing its head once more.)

Anyway – the reason that I put “returning to work” in inverted commas in my first sentence was because every article that I've read seems to be inferring that Madame is “back at work” for good now, having had her five days off – and most of the indignation has sprung from that assumption. I looked at it from another angle – that yes, she was up and functioning but was effectively just popping into the office for an hour or so. Which is of course completely different from returning to work full time at that stage of your child's life, oui?

There has also been indignation as to the apparent message that she is giving, namely that, childbirth is a mere inconvenience from which it takes a few short days to recover and that anyone who isn't up, about and fully co-ordinated (one commentator took exception to Ms Dati daring to sport “matching earrings”, mon dieu) is betraying the sisterhood and is giving the message to “employers” – by which I guess we mean “male employers” – that taking any more than five days (say: four months, six months, a year ...) is lead swinging of the highest magnitude and that the resultant crimps in your career are both self-inflicted and only to be expected.

Which in turn brings me back to my original ponder – is it fair to Rachida Dati to rebuke her for the decisions that she has made about HER child and HER career, and to therefore expect her to be a role model for other women – therefore berating her when she behaves in a way which is not perceived to be role model worthy but which does suit her own agenda? I've read quite a lot on-line from women indicating that they barely knew their own name and where their shoes lived five days after they'd given birth, let alone were in a fit state to get up, dressed, find their earrings, leave their baby and go to work (for however long a period).

But Ms Dati is clearly happy enough and well enough to do all of this, and is surely also smart enough and sufficiently aware of the impact on her daughter to make the decision to do so. She doesn't appear to have asked to be regarded as a role model, or for her actions to be examined on a global scale, judged and then found wanting.

All of this reminded me that Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, co-author of “Why Women Mean Business” sent me a fabulous picture last year, bearing the image “Stop Fixing the Women!”.

Women as role models – is it fair?

13 January 2009 (Continued)

Avivah's point is that the current gender imbalance is not of women's making, so why therefore do we both look to women to "fix" the problem and, while they're at it, fix themselves? And I think that expecting women in the public eye, in particular, to be role models and for their every word and deed to be played out on a public stage and picked over as fodder for debate, whilst said women are simply living their lives and trying to juggle home and career based commitments, is absolutely unjust.

Yes – let's have female role models. We have some ourselves, here in PwC, and they are all fantastic examples of women who have carved impressive careers for themselves, from whom we can learn. But please can we let women choose if they want to be role models to others? And, unless they stick their hands up and say so, can we leave them alone to do what they feel is best, even if what they are doing isn't what we would have done under the same circumstances?

Mentioning Avivah, her new website, WOMEN-omics, launched earlier this week. Avivah comments that the site is a global portal which:

"... shifts the debate from 'What's the matter with women that they aren't reaching leadership positions?' to 'What's the matter with companies that haven't optimised the other half of the talent pool and marketplace – the female half?'"

Take a look – it's a good resource, with some very interesting articles.

Until next time,

Cleo

PwC Gender Advisory Council contacts

The Gender Advisory Council was created to be an action and results oriented advisory group who work on ways to improve the representation of women at the highest levels of PwC. Members come from PwC firms around the world, including:

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