



BE INSPIRED

How retailers can foster more women leaders

Women make up 60% of retail's workforce yet just 10% of executive boards.

Gemma Goldfingle examines how to redress that imbalance

WOMEN LEADERS have long been in the minority in retail, but surely times are changing? Not according to the chairs governing the UK's largest retailers.

Just 46% of the 50 chairmen surveyed for headhunter Korn Ferry Hay Group's annual chairmen's report said they believe that they have enough female executives within their talent pipelines to ensure diverse leadership over the next five years.

There is no shortage of women working in retail – 60% of the sector's workforce are female. Retail is an industry built around serving a female customer – 85% of all purchases are made or influenced by women.

Yet just 20% of executive teams and 10% of executive boards are made up of women, according to management consultancy Elixirr and Women in Retail, an organisation whose members include retail's most senior female board members and executives.

The number of women hired for the most senior jobs in retail declined last year: of the 45 retail chief executives employed in 2015, 15% were women, compared with 25% in 2014.

Women in Retail and Elixirr interviewed 70 senior executives from the UK's largest retailers, and all agreed that more can be done to ensure gender diversity.

The top tier of management must lead the charge in order to push through real change, says Ann Summers chief executive Jacqueline



"There's nothing retailers can do unless that person at the top believes and recognises the value of women"

Jacqueline Gold, Ann Summers

Gold CBE, an ambassador of Be Inspired, *Retail Week's* campaign to highlight and promote the careers of successful female retail leaders.

"There's nothing retailers can do to solve the problem unless that person at the top really believes and recognises the value of women. It's about the will to change. Any company can achieve it," she says.

The old boys' club

Even in 2016, the perception of an old boys' club still exists. Many of those interviewed by Women in Retail and Elixirr highlighted a lack of senior female role models, particularly those who are accessible and relatable, and more than half said "being different" is a significant challenge in rising to the top.

Be Inspired ambassador and N Brown chief executive Angela Spindler says having prominent female role models in a business helps reinforce gender diversity. "Being a

female CEO helps me demonstrate every day that there is no gender bias here. It's obvious that females are recognised and promoted in our company," she says.

Fellow Be Inspired ambassador Karen Witts, chief financial officer of home improvement group Kingfisher, agrees. "People look for organisations where they feel that they will fit in. So for Kingfisher, that could mean fitting in as a woman."

"Often it's as simple as seeing that women are well represented in the organisation, at all levels. That provides a good indication as to how well women can progress in a particular company," she says.

Kingfisher particularly excels at boardroom level – 44% of its directors are women, including chief executive Véronique Laury.

"What happens at board level and executive level of a company is really important as it demonstrates that everyone, every woman, has the opportunity to progress," says Witts.

Spindler says N Brown ensures that women are considered for all key positions: "I wouldn't consider a candidate list for a job if it didn't include both males and females."

Four out of six executive positions at N Brown are filled by women, as are four out of nine non-executives roles. However, Spindler says she will always hire the best person for the job, regardless of gender.

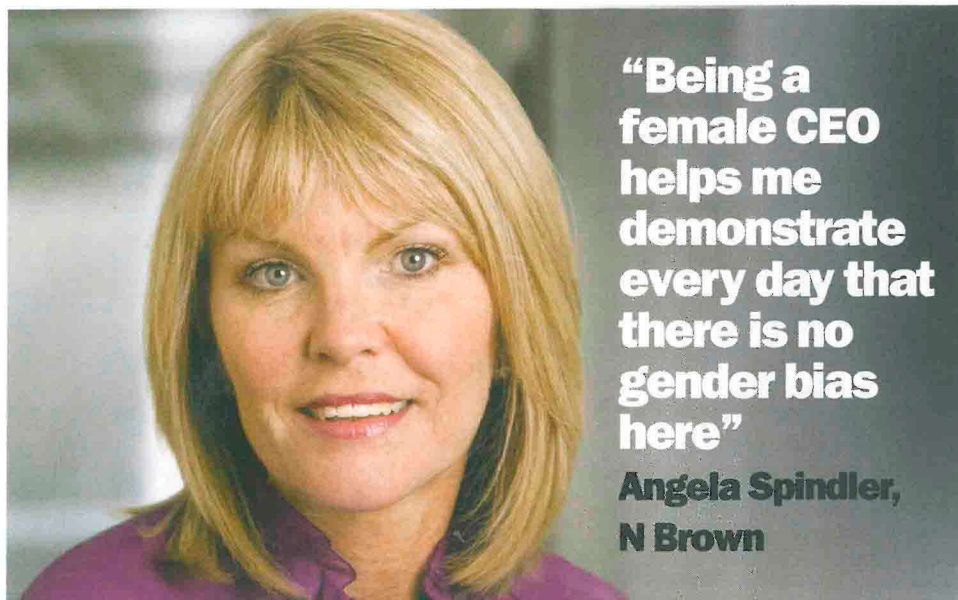
Wickes owner Travis Perkins also ensures female candidates are on the shortlist when



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Katie Bickerstaffe, Dixons Carphone

To find out more on the campaign, visit
Retail-week.com/BeInspired



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**Angela Spindler,
N Brown**

recruiting, a practice that Women in Retail and Elixirr advocate.

Retail has led the way in achieving non-executive gender diversity. Across FTSE 350 retailers, 24% of board representatives are female – compared with 20% in media companies and 18% in oil and gas companies.

The chairmen interviewed by Korn Ferry Hay acknowledged that the 2011 Davies Report, which called for 25% of FTSE 100 non-executives to be female by 2015, has had a positive impact on gender diversity.

Should there be quotas?

Stephen Robertson, chairman of Retail Economics and The Timpson Group, believes there should be a quota system for executives to drive through change more quickly.

However, Katie Bickerstaffe, chief executive of Dixons Carphone's UK and Irish business, and ambassador of Be Inspired, is not a fan.

“I think you should be hired based on performance. I'd hate to think I was hired based on a formal quota,” she says.

Spindler agrees and says the introduction of quotas could create tension in the workplace. “Women could be accused of not getting promotions on merit. It could also be difficult for men to progress in this environment,” she says.

Women in Retail and Elixirr say that although they do not advocate “tokenism”, they recognise “what gets measured gets done” and encourage retailers to set gender balance targets to measure and report on.

They also urge retailers to draw up an industry-wide charter to pledge to achieve gender balance at all levels of the organisation.

This follows a similar initiative by the financial services industry earlier this year. Women tend to lack self-confidence and retailers must try to actively identify and cultivate female talent. “Often I have to tell males that they are not ready but I typically

[have to] convince women they can do it,” says the personnel director of a major grocer.

Katy Gotch, head of group strategy at Home Retail Group, encourages retailers to actively look for female talent. “So often women fail to appreciate and acknowledge their own strengths,” she says.

Mentoring, sponsorship and coaching are useful tools to build confidence in potential leaders. Witts says Kingfisher has created a women's network to provide networking support to female managers from both executive and non-executive leaders.

It is important that retail's female role models play their part, says Gold. “Successful women owe it to themselves, and they owe it to other women, to shout about their success – they must be prepared to put their heads above the parapet,” she adds.

Retailers should also look outside their own organisations to give rising stars access to a wider pool of role models, according to Women in Retail and Elixirr.

Providing role models for female talent

Retail's talent pipeline drops off significantly between middle management and the first layer of senior management, which often coincides with childbearing age.

This is a similar story across most industries. However, retail is characterised by long trading hours and early morning trading meetings, which can prove difficult for working mums.

Bickerstaffe says retailers need to be flexible and accommodate employee commitments such as looking after children or elderly relatives: “People want to succeed but we recognise they've also got other things going on. People perform better if they're working in a way that suits them. We want them to feel comfortable having a conversation about smarter and flexible working.”

Smartphones, instant messaging and video-calling mean employees can be connected to the office without physically being in that 7am trading meeting.

Flexible working is becoming important to all workers, not just women. Studies show that 75% of millennials say work-life balance drives their career choices. Flexible work schedules and work-from-home policies will become increasingly vital for retailers to attract and retain talent across the board.

Fashion retailer White Stuff, for example, has invested in flexible working, including in IT, to give remote access to data at home, rethinking shift patterns and challenging the number of meetings staff have to attend.

➤ **Retail Week's Be Inspired is committed to providing women role models. The campaign will spread the inspirational stories and practical advice of the industry's female luminaries to help embolden and empower the next generation of women leaders. To find out more on the campaign visit Retail-week.com/BeInspired**

An overview in numbers

60% of retail employees are female

85% of all purchases are made or influenced by women

20% of executive teams are women

10% of executive boards are made up of women

15% of retail chief executives employed in 2015 were women

46% of retail chairmen have enough women in the talent pipeline to ensure diverse leadership

72% of senior executives believe their company could do more to ensure gender diversity