



BE INSPIRED

From utilities to finance, businesses are developing talented women. **Susie Measure** looks at how they are doing it

The industries that can teach retail about nurturing female talent

"IF LEHMAN BROTHERS had been Lehman Sisters, it would still be here today." So quips Liz Bingham, who spent four years heading EY's quest to ensure more women made it to the top of the global accountancy firm. The joke made the rounds in the wake of the global financial crash eight years ago, and the punchline was powerful enough to shock many companies into action.

Take banking. Where financial firms were once pariahs for their testosterone-fuelled boardrooms, today some, such as Santander and Lloyds, are leading the field when it comes to helping women peak at work. Heather Jackson – founder of An Inspirational Journey, which tackles the gender imbalance – credits the financial sector with "leading the way".

Firms such as EY have embraced initiatives including Jackson's Pearls Programme, which turns the spotlight on middle managers, picking out those with the potential to rise higher and helping them get there with a series of special seminars, conferences and extra support from peer-to-peer networking in order to build a "talent pipeline", says Jackson.

So far, so obvious, perhaps, and yet the hard facts show that few companies make it a priority to help women rise to the top, especially in retail. Just two of the companies in *The Times* Top 50 Employers for Women



"The anecdote, or urban myth, is that women in their thirties leave companies to have babies and don't come back. But the reality, when we dug into the data, is that wasn't what was happening" Liz Bingham, EY

list, compiled in 2015 with Opportunity Now, which campaigns on gender diversity, are retailers: Marks & Spencer and Asda; three, if you include The Post Office.

And of those, none is run by a woman, nor even boasts more female than male directors. Those retailers keen to promote employees who – after all – represent the sex making 85% of purchasing decisions, according to one recent survey, should look outside their own sector for some tips on retaining and promoting their female staff.

Outside inspiration

Few have tried harder to help change the culture in Britain's companies than Jackson, who has helped to advise companies in 22 different sectors on employee development

during the past five years. She says it is "crucial" for women to have a "general network of support, regardless of sector. That's where many women come unstuck".

She observes: "Even in the 21st century, we women don't use our networks as well as men. That boys' club is about how to play the game. Women will find support comes from different areas, and having internal visibility is very important." She credits the "great mentoring and sponsoring programmes" established by financial firms as making a difference.

Jackson cites engineering and IT as sectors that retain their female staff. "The women [in those firms] are role models. They need to tell others how they got there. It's recognising how they made it that will help others."

She advises anyone eyeballing someone else's success to be bold and ask them about it. "Don't assume you know how that woman has got there – get them to talk to you about it. That's what helps to support women into senior positions," she maintains.

At Shell, Anne Anderson, vice-president of the oil giant's aviation arm, says "strong sponsors" early in her career helped push her in directions she wouldn't necessarily have contemplated. "That helped to stretch me outside of my comfort zone." Strong networks and plenty of ways for employees to connect also support inclusiveness



"You can only have that mental wellbeing when you are in the right environment that respects people and provides a support network"

**Pamela Doherty,
Kelda Water Services**

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



ALAMY

within the global company, she adds.

Pamela Doherty, who started at Yorkshire Water in an administrative role aged 17, is another mentoring advocate. Now 46, she was promoted 10 months ago to managing director of Kelda Water Services, the utility company's commercial arm. She traverses the country in her mentor capacity because she is "very grateful for the support I've had to get to where I am". Mentoring helps to imbue people with the "right mental wellbeing to get to senior level". But that, she points out, requires support: "You can only have that mental wellbeing when you are in the right environment that respects people and provides a support network."

Taking action

The right support network, says EY's Liz Bingham, now a partner in the firm's people advisory services business, starts simply by recognising the women that are there. "The

anecdote, or urban myth, is that women in their thirties leave companies to have babies and don't come back. But the reality, when we dug into the data, is that wasn't what was happening. Women were coming back, but their careers were stalling and they were becoming invisible once they were back. We needed to unpick why."

EY's solution included maternity coaching, not just for mothers at home with babies but crucially for their line managers left behind too. "They needed to know how to give [returning mothers] the confidence that they could pick up where they were when they left," Bingham says. And it worked: "Feedback from mums for the second or third time is that [coming back to work, now that the maternity coaching is in place] has been like night and day [when compared with how it was before the scheme was introduced]. It filled them with so much more belief that they could pick

up their career – and go on overseas travel, for example, rather than have their line managers assume they weren't available."

Maggie Stilwell, EY's managing partner for talent, UK and Ireland, has some tips for companies seeking to emulate what the accountancy group has done in elevating women. "Understand and articulate the business case as to why all forms of diversity would help your business be more successful.

"Once you've done that, it becomes something that is managed alongside all your other business imperatives and becomes part of what you're trying to achieve as a company."

Shell's Anderson says changing the gender balance all boils down to mindset. "To be successful, you have to embrace the conversations and create an environment where it is expected that women will be in leadership roles."

Companies that have enshrined the right to flexible working have also benefited from retaining women, although as Sandie Okoro, general counsel of HSBC Global Asset Management, points out, it is important to offer male employees the same rights. She insists that all employees in her London team work two days a week from home, a move that was even more popular with men than women.

Bupa is reaping the benefit from spreading female talent around its business, according to Sue O'Brien, who sits on the Government's Women in Business pressure group as well as running headhunter Ridgeway Partners. The health and care provider has women in the top two spots: acting chief executive Evelyn Bourke and acting finance director Joy Linton.

"Instead of hiring from outside, which doesn't solve the issue, what Bupa has done is have conversations with women inside its organisation about what they want to do, why and when. That last point, timing, is the most crucial," O'Brien says.

On merit

Where companies do need to recruit women, they could try heeding Sally Bibb's approach. At consultancy Engaging Minds, she focuses on a "strengths-based" method of recruiting, which helps to cut through the unconscious bias that can keep women out of prominent roles, especially if men are doing the hiring.

Outside the UK, countries that have imposed quotas on female corporate representation are leading the way, including Norway, France, Finland, Sweden and Belgium. But Jackson believes relying on quotas is a mistake. "They are very reactive. Anyone can do anything with a gun to their head. What we want is collaboration. This is about replacing average talent with great talent, not replacing great male talent with average female talent."

And to do that, EY's Stilwell adds: "It's very important that we don't just focus on trying to fix women, because women don't need to be fixed. They need to be given an environment in which they can succeed."