

## Media Coverage – Women's Directorship Programme 2014

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# WDP breaks down barriers to the board

By [Sophie Pettit](#) on Jul 12, 2014 in [HR Features](#), HR Magazine, [Summer 2014](#)

As the third instalment of the Women's Directorship Programme (WDP) kicks off after its successful debut year, *HR Magazine* explore the issue of gender diversity in the workplace and explores what exactly it is that inspired the programme.

Despite comprising over 45% of the global workforce, women currently represent less than 10% of board level positions internationally, indicating that when it comes to getting female talent on the C-Suite, organisations are clearly falling short somewhere. So where are companies going wrong and what are the barriers to achieving a gender-balanced board?

While some argue that directors are not looking widely enough at the pool of female talent available, but rather turning to what is often referred to as the 'old boys network', others maintain that women themselves are more accountable for their lack of presence at the top. While it has been suggested that a lack of confidence among women is preventing them from making themselves visible enough to be acknowledged, the idea that women must choose between their career and their family life often emerges as a barrier to the board. Whatever the reason, however, one thing is for sure and that is that action is being taken to tackle this much-discussed issue and achieve gender equilibrium in the boardroom.

### **Moving in the right direction**

One such initiative was born from the collaboration between executive search firm Harvey Nash and The University of Hong Kong, HKU Business School, which joined forces to launch the very first international board preparedness programme in Hong Kong in early 2013. Now entering its third instalment, the WDP was designed exclusively for women to create an answer to the worldwide business community's call to tackle the existing gender imbalance in boardrooms.

Consisting of six modules, taught over two three-day sessions (October 9-11 and November 13-15, 2014) the programme aims to address current and contemporary issues enabling women to be more effective at managing boards, and increasing the supply of board-ready women executives across the industries. Through a series of case studies and thought leadership delivered by guest speakers, the programme offers participants a fresh perspective on how behaviour in the boardroom differs from behaviour in the rest of one's corporate life.

This insight has proven to be particularly poignant for Ann Coughlan, Managing Director, Bupa (Asia) Ltd, who took part in February and March earlier this year. Already a member of the internal Bupa Asia Board since 2008,

Coughlan was keen to develop her own career in terms of increasing her representation on other boards for external companies and gaining insight into other sectors.

She explained, “The WDP offered me a fantastic setting to gain new insights and understand the different dynamics that impact on the outcome of a board’s decision. Throughout the programme I was given the opportunity to interact with industry leaders from different sectors around the globe. This enabled me to gain different perspectives from sectors other than healthcare, which allowed me to think about customer experience through a different lens, whether it be the financial services sector, retail industry or even tourism.”

Coughlan’s perspective has changed to the extent where she now looks for different skills when recruiting new members than she did prior to the programme. She explained, “The WDP encouraged me to take a different approach to the board and look at it from a more strategic and forward-thinking point of view. I consider where we want to be in five year’s time and therefore seek the skills that match this objective, rather than simply replacing the skills we already have.”

Since taking part in the WDP Coughlan confesses that she now sees the value she can bring to it—a barrier, which she suspects often holds women back. She said, “I think women often don’t realise the value of perspective they bring to the board and may question how their role can play into a certain industry. They may question themselves more and therefore be more hesitant to get involved at this level than their male counterparts.” Coughlan, however, believes that this is beginning to change and whereas in the past boards were predominantly male-orientated, women are beginning to step up and be seen, an objective that the WDP is helping to achieve.

### **Support from above**

In addition to the support of initiatives such as the WDP, Coughlan pointed out the importance of gaining encouragement from peers and superiors and exploring conversations that open up opportunities to expand and grow. This is something that is echoed by Julienne Loh, General Manager, MasterCard, Singapore, who was actually put forward by management to enrol on the WDP as part of her professional development. She explained, “I am fortunate enough to work for an organisation that believes that a gender mix on the board is the root of innovative thinking and one that ‘walks the talk’ when it comes to achieving this.”

For Loh, taking part in the programme enabled her to open up her mind to the importance of the board and the crucial role members play over and above their day-to-day jobs. It also allowed her to connect to a network of professionals from whom she could gain in-depth knowledge, which, combined with the support of management at her organisation, allowed her to mentor junior staff and share her learnings with her colleagues.

### **Integration is key**

Loh suggested that while organisations need to support their female employees to allow them to maximise their professional abilities and progress in the career journeys, women themselves need to make an active decision to

step up and seize opportunities to develop and grow. For Loh personally, this has meant integrating her professional life with her family life.

She explained, “It’s not so much about striking a work/life balance, it’s more about achieving work/life integration and women need to make a choice to do this. Maternity leave allows women to have a family and excel in their roles—the support is there, but for women what it boils down to is making a choice and allowing time to develop themselves over and above their existing roles and responsibilities. They need to make the decision to step up and get out of their comfort zone in order to get where they want to be.”

It certainly seems that when it comes to achieving gender equilibrium in the boardroom, things are moving in the right direction as initiatives such as the WDP strive to increase the visibility of women and provide them with encouragement to put themselves forward. As Kirti Lad, Director of the Board Practice, Harvey Nash Executive Search, Asia Pacific concluded, “Through the Women’s Directorship Programme we are committed to unlocking the talent pipeline and empowering female leaders to gain the confidence and skills needed to secure board positions.”

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