

Special Report Work & Careers**Getting women on board**

Alison Maitland APRIL 29, 2009

Whenever she speaks at internal company events, Karen Witts receives feedback from women in the audience pleased to see a senior female executive in a highly visible position. “People look for role models and once they see [there isn't a glass ceiling](#) they feel encouraged to be a bit more ambitious,” she says.

As chief financial officer of BT Retail and managing director of its Enterprises division, Ms Witts (pictured above) has big ambitions herself – she would like to be a chief executive one day. Right now, however, she wants to broaden her knowledge and contribute her expertise more widely by securing a non-executive directorship with a significant-sized company.

The economic crisis, she hopes, may be the catalyst. “The economic situation is creating some churn at board level,” she says. “I see the same names appearing time after time in appointments. I do think companies are going to have to dig a bit deeper pretty soon and think in a fresher way about the diversity of thought and experience they need on their boards.”

Ms Witts is one of 50 women board candidates invited to an unusual event in London next week to meet more than 20 influential chairmen and directors of companies and private equity firms. The event, a concept imported from Norway by the [Professional Boards Forum](#), features a simulated board meeting where candidates have a chance to show strategic thinking, handling of governance issues and financial savvy.

The session promises to be “a fantastic experience”, says Ms Witts, 45. “It's not every day you sit down with tens of chairmen.”

She is in the early stages of her quest for a non-executive directorship and is being patient because “it’s a really important next step”. With a strong financial background and her previous role as managing director of operations at Openreach, BT’s local network business, she says: “I believe it’s quite unusual to have the mix of finance and operational experience that I have.”

The high-level attendance at the event demonstrates the seriousness with which a growing number of chairmen take the need for greater gender balance on boards. [Women still occupy less than 12 per cent of FTSE 100 directorships](#), a far cry from more than 40 per cent on large companies in Norway, the only country to have enforced quotas.

In the UK, women have been offered just 11.6 per cent of non-executive appointments to FTSE 100 boards in the past year, according to figures provided to the Professional Boards Forum by BoardEx, a sponsor of the event. Only 6.6 per cent of non-executive directors across all UK quoted companies are female. But Greg Wood, co-founder of BoardEx, says his database includes 12,000 “highly capable women executives with an immense amount to offer, currently holding executive positions in global organisations but yet to take on their first non-executive role”.

Elin Hurvenes, Norwegian founder of the Professional Boards Forum, and her UK business partner Jane Scott see the slow pace of change as a challenge and an opportunity. “Judging by the level of interest from senior, prominent UK chairmen, we’ve hit a nerve here,” says Ms Hurvenes.

In Norway, she has introduced about 1,000 women to chairmen and directors, directly resulting in at least 150 appointments. “There are not very many natural arenas where these two groups – chairmen and outstanding women candidates – have an opportunity to meet. That’s what triggered the Forum in Norway.”

In the simulated board session, candidates and chairmen will discuss a topical case based on a real business. They will work in groups of seven or eight, moving to different tables for a second round. Ms Hurvenes says this is a good way for the women to shine. “In my experience, women are not very good at self-promotion. But put a task in front of us and we excel.”

Roger Carr, chairman of Centrica and Cadbury and a keynote speaker at the event, believes boards devoid of talented women are missing out. “Having a mixed gender board is invariably better than a single gender board,” he says. “It’s more civilised, a little more courteous. It encourages people to air different opinions from their gender perspectives. If half the people you’re serving are women and you have no women on the board to offer a view, that’s a very distorted picture you risk creating.”

Another leading figure attending the afternoon-long meeting is Sir Philip Hampton, chairman of RBS, the government-controlled bank, and of J Sainsbury, the supermarket group, also a sponsor of the event. Like Mr Carr, Sir Philip is part of the [FTSE 100 Cross-Company Mentoring](#)

Programme, in which chairmen mentor senior women in other companies to help redress the gender imbalance in boardrooms.

Sir Philip agrees the economic crisis could be an opportunity for new faces, although he does not envisage an overnight revolution. “There’s an awful lot of tarnished reputations, particularly in financial services, and they are generally male reputations,” he says.

The candidates invited to Tuesday’s event include senior women from the private sector, professional services, academia, the media and the non-profit world. About a quarter are already non-executive directors. The age range is 36 to 60, and half a dozen are from other countries including France, Norway, Canada and the US.



Drive for gender balance: fifty talented women board candidates are attending an event in London aimed at helping them secure non-executive directorships

“We want to grow the pool as large as we possibly can,” says Ms Scott. “Our challenge is to demonstrate that women with ‘non-traditional’ CVs – who haven’t been on boards or been CEOs before – can be really effective non-executive directors.”

Caroline Goodall (pictured), head of mergers and acquisitions at Herbert Smith, a law firm, is another of those invited. She was the first woman partner to lead the corporate practice of a big City law firm, has broad international experience, has served on the governing body of Newnham College, Cambridge, and is a member of the companies committee of the CBI, the UK employers organisation.

Now in her early fifties, she is planning a second career as a non-executive director on corporate boards and is busy talking to headhunters and contacts, and attending City dinners and conferences. She welcomes “enlightened” male business leaders presenting opportunities for able women.

“It is important that boards function effectively,” she says. “I think some chairmen and nomination committees feel there is less risk of a dysfunctional board if people come from very similar backgrounds, but this mistakes uniformity for unity. You need different

perspectives and people asking questions from different angles. It improves the quality of decision-making.”

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