

with Bernadette Barber



Bernadette Barber works for Chadwick Corporate Consulting

Supply and demand



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would be as beneficial for the corporate world as the individual employees.

The problem of the lack of a supply of experienced and qualified women candidates to take on directorships cannot be solved simply by looking at providing those women with opportunities for boardroom experience once they have reached a suitably senior level. Careers must be nurtured from the start and for the duration in order for that senior level to be reached. All too often careers, which might simply have progressed at a slightly slower pace for a small number of years, end up having been abandoned for too long by the time women feel ready to resume a full-time role. This is not to say that the interesting suggestions made in Lord Davies' report on how women might be offered chances to get first hand experience of life in the boardroom are not relevant, but that in many respects they are the last piece in the nurturing jigsaw.

Lord Davies' report rightly looks at problems of demand as well, highlighting that there has been frustratingly little real change in recruitment practices since Higgs, with recruitment via personal friends or contacts still shockingly commonplace. Genuine and sustained effort is needed by companies on this issue as well as the issue of career development.

Only time will tell as to whether Lord Davies' recommendations will bring about tangible improvements in boardroom equality. However, with Government patience over this issue clearly becoming thin, the unpopular alternative of quotas looks increasingly likely if voluntary efforts fail. That threat does not only come from domestic sources; further legislation is one option being considered as part of the ongoing EU review of corporate governance.

The time for excuses is over. Companies are in a position to influence both supply, by providing real and widespread opportunities for the long-term career development of women, and demand, by being genuinely open to the appointment of women to senior roles. Whether they rise to the challenge voluntarily or wait until the Government's patience finally wears out is up to them.

» About the author

Bernadette Barber is the author of ICSA's Corporate Governance Handbook, published by ICSA Publishing. Order your copy at www.icsa-bookshop.co.uk.

Apparently at the current rate of change it will take 70 years for boardroom gender-balance to be achieved. For working women, the idea that their great granddaughters can expect equality is just not good enough. Nor should it be good enough for corporate Britain, especially when research has demonstrated that companies with more women on their boards are more economically successful.

Lord Davies of Abersoch wants to radically accelerate the pace of change, with women to occupy at least a quarter of all board seats by 2015. In the recent report *Women on Boards*, he has responded to concerns but stopped short of introducing a mandatory quota, such as that which other countries have already adopted, opting instead for a gentler voluntary approach. Of course the call for greater boardroom equality of opportunity is hardly new, which begs the question, why has so little headway been made to date?

Some companies would have you believe the problem is one of supply, that there are not enough women following the type of long-term, high-flying career paths that enable them to rise to the appropriate senior levels to be appointed to the board. There is of course

an element of truth in this argument. While many women do not have children or continue to work full time in motherhood, many others choose family life, giving up previously promising careers in order to spend a few precious years bringing up their children. To put it into perspective though, these are typically just a handful of years out of a working life spanning 40 years or more. What a waste of corporate resource for such breaks to kill off otherwise successful careers.

Truly flexible career options, which value the contributions of parents (whether male or female) and other carers who are at a stage in their life when they are unable to give the 110 per cent commitment so often demanded of employees, are not always readily available to those in senior positions. Perhaps more creative thinking by employers could enable better alternatives for those who need to take their careers at a more relaxed tempo for a few years. However, who would want to pick up the previous pace of their professional lives later on in life? Fundamentally, if employees were able to slow the pace of their career at a certain time in their lives without their skills, experience, specialist knowledge and, most importantly, their confidence having lapsed, it