

# Giving women a fair chance

Call for work in education to encourage more women into technology sector, writes Gareth Naughton

Ireland continues to lag behind our EU partners when it comes to promoting women to senior roles, though we are making progress at middle management.

Just 21 per cent of senior roles in Ireland – at the chief or so-called “C-suite” level – are filled by women, according to figures compiled by Grant Thornton earlier this year.

Worryingly, that represents a drop compared to four years ago, so we are headed in the wrong direction.

## Easy option

Sinead Donovan, partner with Grant Thornton, said that while the reasons for this decline are not clear, it might be a simple case of companies taking the easy option.

“In times of recession where there is a natural cut in workforce and pressure put on management, women have probably fared worse than men for the obvious reasons. As an employer, sometimes the easier choice to promote is a man because there is less risk involved with time off and all the rest,” she said.

There is progress at the mid-management and director level, but the barriers to getting to the top remain steadfastly in place. Donovan puts this down to the issue of flexibility.

“There is no doubt that, once you get into these senior positions, both sides need to be flexible,” she said.

“Quite often, I would see that flexible working is thrown out there as a way to promote women into senior management. Flexible working needs to be on both parts, not just the employer being flexible but the woman herself also needs to be flexible.

“It is a two-way street. I don’t think there can be any argument that someone getting into top senior management can only work three days out of five or work nine to five. They probably have to be available for calls in the evening or out of hours,” she said. This is the area where Ireland is becoming a little “unstuck” she said. “There is not that desire in both camps to have that flexibility to ensure that women get to senior positions,” she said.

“Take the obvious example – if it is that the woman needs to be home at 5pm to pick the kids up and feed them, as long as she can be online again later on or head out for an evening event, then surely the companies and the woman themselves can work around that?” she said.

## Changing trends

The progress being made at mid-management level is encouraging, but it could also be a natural consequence of women starting their families a bit later, said Donovan.

She believes that a cultural shift is needed, with support from government in the form of more flexible, shared parental leave, so that women – who still make up the majority of care-givers in families – are not forced to take lengthy periods off work unless they want to.

“At the moment, the woman gets six months’ maternity leave and only the woman can do that. That is going to impact the woman’s career,” said Donovan.

“I would like to see that there is an ability for that to be shared, which will mean that, if a woman only steps out for two months or whatever, it may be that it is not impacting the career. I am not saying that the child does not need parental support for six months – it does – but that can be shared.”

Some companies around the country are making a concerted effort to change the status quo, introducing programmes and working practices designed to ensure that women are given the same chances at advancement as their male counterparts.

## Enterprise Rent-A-Car

Car rental firm Enterprise Rent-A-Car recently promoted seven women to management roles, bringing the proportion of women at that level to 36 per cent.

In what is traditionally considered a male-dominated industry, the company is making a conscious effort to bring female graduates on board and ensure that they rise-up



Leslee O'Loughlin, group human resources manager at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, which has implemented a female leadership programme  
Picture: Feargal Ward

through the ranks, according to Leslee O'Loughlin, group human resources manager with Enterprise.

“Approximately 18 months ago, we implemented our female leadership programme because we are very committed to gender parity in senior levels within the organisation,” said O'Loughlin.

“They are paired with a senior manager who acts as a mentor for them over an 18-month period. The female manager is asked to identify specific challenges to their own development as well as professional goals and targets that they want to realise from the programme. “Then they work strategically with that senior manager to try to address those challenges and achieve those targets.”

O'Loughlin said two issues were regularly coming up with the women going through the programme – confidence and perception. Both seem to affect women more than men, she said.

“Confidence comes from experience and we are working very hard to help them realise their full potential by



## Flexible working needs to be on both parts

providing the training, support and development that they need,” she said.

“With the perception, a lot of that is getting them to understand that senior managers within the organisation are committed to their overall long-term success.

“So, that perceived notion that they are not good enough for the role or someone doesn’t want them in the role is something that we are continuing to challenge them on and make sure that they understand that we are committed to their success.” The goal is to have parity of gender

across management within two years, and the approach is top-down. Chief executive Pam Nicholson has been named one of Forbes Magazine’s Top 100 most powerful women in business, and the company has implemented flexible working practices and generous maternity leave.

“We have an alternate work arrangement that we make available to folks and we are very focused on promoting that internally. So if there needs to be an adaption in their work schedule to accommodate a family issue or something that they are dealing with in their personal life, they can do that,” said O'Loughlin.

“Our mums are paid for the whole time that they are on maternity leave, and we have a great phase-back benefit that allows women to more easily phase back into the workplace. If you have been gone for six months, it can be a bit of a culture shock when you are back to full-time employment,” she said.

There has been an impact on the bottom line, O'Loughlin believes. “We have seen a steady increase in female



Oonagh O'Driscoll, HR director at Sláinte Healthcare

hires, female population and females in management and over the last two financial years in Ireland we have also had record high years in terms of profit, growth and customer retention. It is a testament to the fact that diversity is good for business,” she said.

## Sláinte Healthcare

At healthcare technology company, Sláinte Healthcare, 57 per cent of the senior management team are female, as is a third of the technology department.

HR director Oonagh O'Driscoll said that the company was relatively young and was benefiting from the fact that it is not battling an embedded culture.

Their ability to attract women is self-perpetuating, too. “It is a very young and innovative company so there are no traditions that need to be shaken in terms of numbers or imbalance.

“The more women there are in a technology department, the more inclined women are to join that department because there is already a better balance and it is an environment that is comfortable.”

“That is a little bit of a catch-22 for companies, but when you are already are on that trajectory, it certainly helps you.

“The fact that we have such a high participation rate at senior management level means that it is a cultural environment where people are going to be rewarded if they are successful for the job, whether male or female,” she said.

As well as generous maternity leave, the company has implemented flexible working

arrangements. “People work hard, but they work when it suits them as well.

“We do have a pretty generous maternity scheme and there is a lot of flexibility around how you work,” said O'Driscoll.

“You may be able to work from home on occasion. It is about just having a work-life balance and it is not really about clock watching, it is about outputs.”

She believes that work is needed in the education sector to encourage more women into technology, with greater access to higher-level maths and science subjects, and even recognition that people with language skills may have an aptitude for coding.

“The private sector has really taken the lead in some of its initiatives, like the coding club for girls,” she said.

“I really think that it does go back to some of the education choices. [We need to be] encouraging more access to that and encouraging parents to have access to it, because we are all shaped by what views our parents have at that young age. There is more that we can do in that space.”

## People Problems Relationship Breakdown

# Waitress claims her job was that of ‘general dogsbody’

Mirela Mentel claimed to have experienced discrimination on both gender and race grounds, and also harassment, when she worked as a bar assistant, waitress and cleaner at a popular pub in Co Offaly between 2008 and 2010.

Mentel told the Equality Tribunal earlier this year that when she worked at Foy’s Bar and Lounge in Edenderry, she was repeatedly threatened with dismissal, and that the owners fostered a culture of harassment and discrimination.

Her job was described as that of “a general dogsbody”, she said. She alleged that she was told she would be fired if she did not work extra hours, but that she was not paid for these hours. She went on to claim that colleagues would hide her cleaning detergents and materials, and tell her to buy more if she wanted to clean the workplace.

She further alleged that her supervisor would order her to carry heavy boxes of



Gerald Flynn

plates from the basement to the top floor, then instruct her to bring them back down to the basement again. She said she had also been directed to push large containers of waste into the middle of the street in Edenderry.

Mentel alleged that, after she washed floors at Foy’s Bar and Lounge, other staff would purposely walk on them and dirty them. She also told the equality hearing that when she asked for pay slips, the joint owner of the pub, PJ Foy, laughed at her and said: “For all the good that would be to you, you may wipe your arse with them.”

The tribunal also heard that

Foy’s Pub operated two different sets of pay records for Mentel. Neither PJ Foy nor his wife, Mags Foy, was in attendance at the hearing, having stated that they had to attend a funeral.

The tribunal invited them to submit details such as a funeral notice or a letter from the undertaker to justify a postponement, but neither was forthcoming.

Instead, the couple was represented by a HR lawyer, who argued that Mentel’s case should not be considered, as she had already brought a successful complaint of constructive dismissal at an earlier Employment Appeals Tribunal hearing and had also won her case at a Rights Commissioner hearing.

It was argued that Mentel was making a claim for “double recovery”, having already succeeded at alternative employment forums via basically the same set of facts.

It was found that she could not be compensated on the basis of having no employment contract, not getting proper rest periods or holidays

and not being paid a premium for Sunday and bank holiday work, as this had been covered by the EAT compensation.

It was further decided by the equality officer, Valerie Murtagh, that there was no gender or racial discrimination at play in this case, on the basis of an argument by the pub’s HR adviser that Irish and other migrant employees had been treated in a similar manner over pay and holidays by the owners of Foy’s Pub.

Murtagh decided, however, that she had power to consider the aspects amounting to harassment on grounds of gender and race, which are beyond the jurisdiction of the EAT.

Murtagh found that, in the absence of any direct evidence from the pub owners, Mentel “was subjected to harassment in the course of her employment, which was related to her gender and race, resulting in a very demeaning and hostile environment for her”.

She added that, when Mentel complained of the absence of pay slips and asked for some clarity over her work-

ing hours, PJ Foy had cut her shifts to eight hours a week.

The former bar assistant and cleaner was awarded €2,500 in addition to her earlier EAT compensation.

When contacted this week in Edenderry, PJ Foy said that any mix-up over pay slips had been resolved. He described as “false” the allegation that he told Mentel, when she sought a pay slip, “you may wipe your arse with them”.

He said he had not read the Equality Tribunal’s determination, but that he understood that it was being appealed. His solicitor, Catherine Day, confirmed that the decision was being appealed to the Labour Court.

Foy explained that he had attended a funeral of an employee’s sister the day before the hearing and that, consequently, neither he nor his wife was able to attend the equality tribunal hearing the next day.

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## Movers & Shakers

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■ Bio-Marine Ingredients Ireland has hired Jason Whooley as chief executive. He joins from Bord Iascaigh Mhára, where he was chief executive for seven years. He was also chief executive of the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organisation for ten years.



■ Legal firm DAC Beachcroft has announced a new partnership agreement. Gary Rice is joining from Beauchamps Solicitors, where he was a partner for 18 months. Prior to that, he was a partner at Kenny Stephenson Chapman Solicitors for seven years.



■ Gary Hopwood is the new general manager of Ricoh Ireland. Hopwood has been regional operations manager with Ricoh UK for the past six years, and was regional services manager with Ricoh UK for the five years prior.



■ Diarmaid Murphy is the new commercial and sponsorship manager for the GAA and Croke Park. He has been commercial manager with the European Rugby Cup (ERC) for the past eight years, and was formerly the ERC’s communications manager for five years.

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