

Women in Business

SHIRLEY ANNE FORTINA



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Contents

Executive Summary	VII
About the Author	XI
Acknowledgements	XIII
Part 1: Theories and Strategies	1
Chapter 1: Statistics and Interesting Observations	3
The glass ceiling	3
The grass ceiling	3
The pay divide	4
Hudson Global Resources and Human Capital Solutions statistics	5
White paper: 'Could the Right Man for the Job be a Woman: How Women Differ from Men as Leaders'	5
White paper: 'Breaking the Cultural Mould: The Key to Women's Career Success'	7
The WA Business News – an interesting observation	8
Chapter 2: The BIG Question	11
Four approaches to dealing with diversity	11
The first approach: Assimilation	12
The second approach: Accommodation	12
The third approach: Differences	12
The fourth approach: Deal with the source not the symptom	12
Small wins strategy	12
Conclusion	13
Chapter 3: Brand 'YOU'	15
Self reflection	16
Transferable skills	17
The SWOT analysis	17
The personal value proposition	18
The 330 pitch template (personal value proposition template)	20
Conclusion	20

Chapter 4: Communication, Assertiveness, Confidence and the Gender Difference	23
Communication	23
Assertiveness	25
Confidence	26
Chapter 5: Women in Business Networks	29
Networking sites and forums	31
LunchBox List	31
sphinx	31
Women’s Network Australia	32
Australian Businesswomen’s Network	32
Babes in Business	32
Business Chicks	32
Online Divas	33
Business Mums Network	33
Small Business Development Corporation Women in Business	33
Chapter 6: The Art of Negotiation and the Game of Politics	35
Negotiation	35
The game of politics	36
Chapter 7: Work/Life Balance – Is This a Myth?	39
The glass analogy	39
The Wheel of Life	40
Chapter 8: The Mentor	43
What is mentoring?	43
So who is a mentor?	43
Understanding your mentoring needs	44
How to choose a mentor	44
Some interesting statistics	44
Success stories	44
Chapter 9: Conclusion – The Way Forward	47
Part 2: Case Studies	49
Case Study 1: Minter Ellison Perth – Diversity in the Workplace Using Innovative Approaches	51
Minter Ellison Perth	51
Flexible working arrangements	51
Workplace survey	54
The Department of Consumer and Employment Protection – Case study	55
Developing values from the bottom-up	55

Focus on people and empower employees	56
Benefits for all	56
Tips from Minter Ellison	56
Case Study 2: Inspirational Women	57
The questionnaire	57
Nine women, 14 questions	58
Case Study 3: PKF Chartered Accountants and Business Advisers, Perth Supporting Diversity in the Workplace	75
PKF Perth	75
Flexible working arrangements	75
Work from home	75
Part-time	75
Targeted professional development and networking for women	76
Graduate recruitment	76
Case Study 4: Women in Business Programmes – Do They Work?	77
A review of current practices in women-only staff development programmes at Australian universities	78
Introduction	78
Women-only staff development programmes in Australian universities	79
Data collection	80
Universities with staff development programmes for women and target groups	80
Characteristics of women-only staff development programmes	81
Philosophical approach	81
Programme design	82
Location of programme	86
Conclusion	87
Case Study 5: Women in Business Survey	91
Survey questions and responses	91
Brand YOU	91
Communication, assertiveness and confidence	97
Negotiation, politics and gender differences	98
Work/life balance	100
The mentor	103
Index	107

Executive Summary

“The future depends on what you do in the present”, Mahatma Gandhi.

DIVERSITY, AND more specifically gender diversity, has direct benefits in a business context. Evidence is mounting to support this statement, and it has been acknowledged by many that women bring a distinct personality and motivational strength to the business environment and to leadership roles. A study by Catalyst reports that large corporations which boast higher numbers of female directors have stronger financial performance on average than those with fewer women on the board¹.

Over the past century, the journey for women to try and reach equality with men in the workplace has not been without a number of obstacles and issues. The ubiquitous glass ceiling is one of the many forms discrimination takes, as well as ongoing lower remuneration levels and low value work. Unfortunately, there are still many instances where discrimination is present, as evidenced in Chapter 1 of this report. However, it is not all doom and gloom with a number of high profile and successful women talking about positive changes and their successes.

A McKinsey Quarterly report, entitled ‘Centred Leadership: How talented women thrive’, states that a new approach to leadership can help women become more self-confident and effective business leaders. It goes on to state that women start their careers in business and other professions

with the same level of intelligence, education and commitment as men, and yet comparatively few reach the top². We all know this to be true, but is this a result of some form of discrimination on its own, or could it be that many women themselves have chosen a different path?

One of the most important skills that women must acquire is perseverance: the ability to remain focused, despite the many obstacles, is critical if we are looking to beat the statistics depicted below. We should expect the journey to be a difficult one, we should expect to have moments of unhappiness and we should have the ability to look inwardly and transform our own views, skills and reactions, while always attempting to be true to ourselves. In other words, we should expect to walk a tightrope, while juggling a number of balls and keeping our balance.



To win in business, Katherine Hammer³ says women must not only be persistent and creative, but must learn to recognise and abandon a losing battle and become adventurers.

Hammer further states that “the statistics for women in business are not heartening, that the path is long and hard, and it will be many more generations before things change. But the difficulty can be tempered by attitude”⁴. Without becoming overly philosophical, Dorothy Parker’s famous quote comes to mind: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference”.

Attitude and choice is the thread that will be weaved throughout this report. While we all acknowledge the numerous issues women have to face (partly dealt with in Chapter 1), I would like to set them aside for the moment and ask ourselves the following questions:

- What are we doing to gain skills to effectively navigate a challenging and ever-changing business environment?
- How can we nurture our career advancement while maintaining an effective work/life balance along the way? and
- What are our businesses doing to support diversity in the workplace, and what are we doing to help the process?

This report concerns women in business in the broadest sense – whether single or married; with or without children (or those that never plan to have children); in the business world because they want to be in it, or in the business world because they feel they are forced to be in it. If you work and you’re a woman – this is for you!

When asked to write this report, I initially balked at the idea as I am no academic,

and I am not used to putting my thoughts in writing. I am more a ‘let’s talk this through’ type of person who is passionate about business, and about women succeeding in business.

This report does not propose to cover the various topics included from ‘cradle to grave’. However, it does pick out the key concepts (which are not new and have been discussed and written about at length by many national and international authors) with a view to bringing together some of the findings, thoughts and views in a format and sequence that I, and I hope you, will find useful.

We will cover a number of topical issues with the intention of providing women with some empowering tools to help them maximise their full potential in the business world and be in a position to answer the questions outlined above. It aims to challenge women to think differently, to inspire them, to stimulate them and, finally, to motivate them to take control.

I would like to highlight Chapter 3, which deals with ‘Brand YOU’: self reflection. This, in essence, is where it all starts. We all need a clear sense of purpose. Success can be difficult unless we are clear about what we want to achieve. There is a need to understand our goals, visions, values, attitude, skills, habits and what makes us different. We need to define this before we can be effective in our communications, assertive in our interactions, and engage effectively in politics and negotiations, while at the same time find the elusive work/life balance. In addition, we need to build on our confidence to give us the power to make a difference in our lives from a professional and personal perspective. In Kirner, J. and Rayner, M.’s book, *The Women’s Power Handbook*⁵, they say that “you need confidence to trust your own judgement, to

take risks, and to negotiate on your own terms. You need confidence to believe that your own experience, ambition and needs do matter.”

The case studies are presented from a number of perspectives, with Minter Ellison’s Perth office (Case Study 1) providing us with some insight into the way that they operate, making it easier for their staff to find a work/life balance and supporting their women lawyers. Inspirational Women (Case Study 2) looks at nine amazing women and provides us with an insight into their thinking through their answers to 14 questions – these are interesting and inspirational. Some look at innovative business approaches to diversity with a focus on systems, policies, processes and support. Finally, the last case study summarises the results of a survey of 230 women conducted in January 2008, tailored to highlight the experiences of individual women in business.

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About the Author



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