



Minute Interview with Denise Wilson October 2011

Matthew Dallisson – Senior Consultant

One Minute Interview' with Denise Wilson, who sits on the Steering Group of the Lord Davies Review of Women on Boards and is an advisor to the Technician Council

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Matthew Dallisson: Is access to leadership roles for women a level playing field?

Denise Wilson: It can't be a level playing field - unless you happen to believe we only have a few hundred women capable of participating in direction, decision making and good governance of the top 350 companies in the UK. Truly meritocratic boards are needed for optimum business performance but the Davies Review showed there is no shortage of talented women. However, there is a problem with women being selected for the top jobs and with retention as they climb the corporate ladder. Women form 51% of the UK population and 46% of the economically active workforce. They outperform males educationally, are estimated to be responsible for nearly 80% of household purchasing decisions and hold half the UK's wealth. Yet women make up only 14% of FTSE 100 boards and almost half of the FTSE 250 companies have all male boards.

MD: How likely do you feel legislative measures will be implemented by the government and do you feel this will be an effective route to take?

DW: If we do not act voluntarily and quickly to create more gender balanced boards, it is entirely possible resolution will be taken out of our hands. This isn't just a UK problem; it is global with many governments around the world paying keen attention. Several have already introduced legislation to force businesses to address the imbalance and the EU is currently considering the same and will opine in March next year. A business led approach, as set out in the Davies Review, where Chairs, their CEO's, headhunters, FRC and Investors all work towards the same outcome, is clearly preferable to sanctions and quotas. However, if British businesses prove unable to achieve this on their own legislation will follow. This would be a shame as no one size fits all in business and companies need the flexibility to do what is best for them. More seriously, it starts to undermine the principle of "comply or explain" which UK boardrooms hold dear.

MD: Which three ways should businesses focus their efforts to improve boardroom diversity?

DW: Firstly, take the issue seriously and act now. Next set out your own aspirational targets for 2015, affect a boardroom diversity policy including measurable objectives and be prepared to speak openly and meaningfully about progress. Lastly, look wider across different business sectors and deeper into larger organisations to find talented senior females - they are not necessarily hovering on your doorstep saying "look at me".

MD: What do you see as the biggest threat to achieving better balanced board diversity?

DW: I have quite a few! - Failure to recognize this issue is about improving board performance for one. Well balanced boards bring fresh perspectives, new ideas and better decision making than any homogeneous group, it is about quality not equality. In addition, failure to recognise we are in last chance saloon territory and grasp the nettle before others do so for us.

MD: Are there any businesses you admire for their work to promote boardroom diversity, and why?

DW: There are many, many companies are now working extremely hard in this area. Some in the FTSE100 doing really well include Aviva, Marks & Spencer, Anglo American, Barclays, Lloyds, GKN, BSKYB and Old Mutual PLC. FTSE 250 champions include Pennon Group, WS Atkins, Phoenix Group, Rentokil and TUI Travel. Leadership plays an enormous part in both appetite and progress, as does an underlying culture that actively seeks out diversity and doesn't just tolerate it.

Denise Wilson sits on the Steering Group of the Lord Davies Review of Women on Boards and is an advisor to the Technician Council. She is a Non-Executive Director of Ecclesiastical Insurance Group, a member of their Audit Committee and Trustee on the Board of AllChurches Trust, the UK's largest donor. She sits on the Friend's Board of the Royal Academy of Arts and is a Trustee of the charity Kids in Need of Education.

A former Director at National Grid, she ran a division serving 12 million customers, set up and directed a large Shared Services organisation and the Global Transformation programme consolidating systems & operations across UK and US businesses.

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ingoodcompany@snowdontate.com

www.snowdontate.com