

When in doubt, aim high

For many women, a lack of self-belief is a major obstacle to career progression. But, as Rebecca Smithers discovers, it is possible to overcome fear and compete for the top jobs

Thirty-odd years ago, as a teenager in Manchester, Alison Platt was rifling through the contents of the box files in the careers section of her school library. She only got as far as "B". She found that British Airways ran a management training scheme for school leavers with A-levels and so, despite having an offer of a university place, she applied and got the job. "I went to London for the first time in my life and that was it," she recalls. "The rest is history."

Platt stayed at the airline for 13 years, working her way up to become senior manager, corporate sales. For the past 18 years she has been at the health insurer Bupa, since last year divisional managing director of the group's business in the UK, Europe and North America, which accounts for 40% of its worldwide revenue of £7.5bn.

Platt, who is 48, believes that her meteoric rise was due to being fortunate enough to work for employers with visionary management who had a "gender-blind" approach to promoting and rewarding staff.

"I worked at British Airways at a fantastic time," she says. "Lord King and

Colin Marshall were then at the top and Marshall ran a total meritocracy. His attitude was: 'I don't care about your experience or qualifications. If you think you are up to the job, just get on with it.' And, of course, we were given excellent training too."

She reflects: "I realise now just how little I knew then. I could have frightened myself witless but what I did have was confidence, and that was thanks partly to having some fabulous female role models at both BA and Bupa."

Confidence is more crucial to women's career ambitions than many people realise, as a research study published this week has confirmed. It found that women set their ambitions far lower than men's right from the start of their working life.

Only half of women said that, on beginning their career, they had expected to become managers, compared with almost two thirds of men. Far more women than men did not expect to become managers at all (20% compared with just 11% of men).

Nearly 3,000 managers were surveyed for the report, published by the Institute of Leadership and Management. It revealed that more than a third of women (36%) felt that their

gender hindered their career progression. This figure rises to 44% among women over 45.

The report asked respondents about the management role they hoped to have later in their working life: after the first 10 years, 10 years from now, and by the end of their career. At every step the career ambitions of women lagged behind their male counterparts. Significantly, the research revealed that female managers have far lower levels of self-confidence than men, and higher levels of self-doubt.

In fact men are more personally confident than women across all age groups. Some 70% of men have high, or fairly high, levels of self-confidence, compared with 50% of women. Half of the women managers admit to feelings of self-doubt, compared with only 31%

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of men. A strong link between confidence levels and ambition has been identified by the research. So those such as Platt, oozing self-confidence, are more likely to have a very clear idea of their career path, as well as greater expectations to take on a management or leadership role, and have these expectations met.

The ILM findings on women's confidence and ambition are timely, as they come amid ongoing debate about how to boost female representation in the UK's boardrooms. This week Lord Davies of Abersoch urged companies to set voluntary targets but ruled out mandatory quotas.

Add to this recent research by the London School of Economics suggesting that over 70% of women aged between 16 and 24 have ambitions to set up their own businesses - a trend towards entrepreneurialism also identified by the ILM survey - and a picture emerges of more women seeking to advance their careers on their own terms, rather than on those of patriarchally structured organisations.

Penny de Valk, the ILM's chief executive, says the research lifts the lid on some of the more complex dynamics of what is, in many cases, still a

male-centric work culture. "Women feel a greater sense of risk around promotion, which leads to a more cautious approach to career opportunities. And yet we also found that younger women in particular are more likely to aspire to run their own business - they are not adjusting their expectations to the same degree when it comes to the risk of starting their own ventures."

De Valk says it is crucial that employers who are serious about gender diversity take steps to find ways to nurture women's ambitions. "This means developing transparent talent management systems and introducing leadership career models and develop-

ment approaches that flex to meet individuals' differing needs," she says.

"Coaching and mentoring, in particular, have an invaluable role to play. We know that gender diversity drives organisations' financial performance. Business leaders should need no encouragement to ensure their most talented employees move into leadership roles, regardless of their gender."

Lindsay Maclean runs workshops through her business, I Elevate, to teach people to be confident and communicate effectively, for clients including Barclays bank



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and fashion retailers Topshop and ASOS. She says better communication skills are often key to women gaining more confidence at work.

In her experience this is often a big obstacle to women seeking a promotion or going for a major job move. "At the end of the day there is still a perception of business as a masculine world," she says. "Look at Alan Sugar in *The Apprentice*, four male dragons in *Dragons' Den* and Donald Trump. I advise women to find a role model - someone like Karren Brady - who is strong but with a touch of femininity."

Are voluntary targets enough to redress the shortage of senior women in UK firms? Of 1,076 FTSE100 board roles, only 135 are held by women; and last year only 13.3% of new appointees were women. There are 20 FTSE 100 companies that do not have any women on the board. Of these, eight have denied board places to women for at least five years.

Among the women on British boards is Judith McKenna, finance director of supermarket giant Asda, who has been tipped for even higher things at the company. She will soon be joined on the board by Hayley Tatum, currently personnel director at Tesco and joining Asda later this year as people director. McKenna, 44, says she is "not a fan of quotas", adding: "It is an incredibly

difficult area but I do not think this is the answer. An enlightened approach to diversity is what is important."

In terms of her own rise up the corporate ladder she stresses that she set out to aim high, not necessarily to reach board level, but to do every job she got with the best of her ability. With seniority came more confidence, she adds: "As you move higher up the company inevitably you become more confident. But you have to challenge yourself as well. We all have career wobbles but it's probably no bad thing when you get a new job that gives you the butterflies. Of course it helps to

have supportive people around you at work and good support at home too."

McKenna has two children aged 15 and 19. She says: "Technology has been a wonderful thing by helping me to do my job but my rule is that when I'm at home, I'm at home. And there is absolutely no point feeling guilty."

Platt, who has two stepchildren and a nine-year-old son, agrees: "I love my job, I am well-paid and it is intellectually stimulating. I have made a decision to do this and my family understand that. Guilt never comes into it."

Those concerned about lack of female representation at the top of the corporate tree could do worse than visit Nottingham, where the number of women in key civic and commercial positions recently left an impression on former Downing Street head of communications Alastair Campbell.

Following a charity dinner in the city, Campbell wrote in his blog: "Nottinghamshire's great and good were out in force, including the chief constable, the city council's chief executive, the head of the probation service, the governor of a sex offenders' prison, the sheriff, the high sheriff, the university's pro-vice chancellor, a former chief nursing officer, the head of children's services... and every one of them was a woman. Also there was the country's first female black high court judge.

"In addition the whole evening was put together by a woman, aforementioned high sheriff Amanda Farr, and Mental Health Research UK, founded by a woman, [Professor] Clair Chilvers."

Nottingham council is currently running 100 Women of Substance, a campaign to celebrate women who have made a difference to the city, which will lead up to the 100th International Women's Day on 8 March.

"Perhaps the World Economic Forum should send a fact-finding mission to the city to work out how they do it," Campbell wrote. "The cocktails won't be as fancy; there is no skiing

and very little self-importance. But there certainly were a lot of impressive women in high places.”

Any other business Driven to succeed Ronda Holder, a mother from Tampa, Florida, forced her academically underachieving 15-year-old son to stand by the roadside wearing a sign stating: 'Honk if I need education.' **Touchline trends** A sports coach's clothing choices can have a direct effect on a team's performances, say scientists from the University of Portsmouth. Players thought coaches in tracksuits had the best technical and character-building abilities while those who were suited and booted were seen as better strategists.

Assert yourself in the office

Executive coach Elizabeth Kuhnke offers some simple tips that can make the difference between being perceived as powerful or merely part of the pack.

● **Consider your stance.** Place your hands facing each other and steeple your fingers. This forces your palms apart and, whether you are sitting or standing, your arms will take up more space. This is a highly effective negotiating posture; watch how CEOs, politicians and solicitors use it.

● **Delay your introduction.** When you first meet a person, engage them person in conversation for a few seconds before giving your name. By then he or she will have a reason to remember it.

● **Be aware of your body language.** If you nod to show empathy, it can be misinterpreted as agreement. If you disagree with something, say so verbally. This will avoid misunderstanding.



When talking, keep your head upright, evenly balanced on your neck. Relax your shoulders, keeping your upper chest softly opened like a book. This position will give you a look of authority and influence.

● **Practise speaking with a lower, more even delivery.** A lower voice has more credibility, which is why most commercial voiceovers are done by men. If your voice rises at the end of sentences, force the intonation down.

● **Don't allow others to interrupt you.** If co-workers try to interrupt you, increase the volume of your voice and keep speaking. If they continue to speak over you, put up one finger to indicate that you have not yet finished. If that doesn't produce the desired result, hold up your hand as if to say, "Stop!" Or say, "Excuse me, I hadn't finished."

Assertiveness shows that you are confident and aware of your rights. The more you practise, the easier it will get. You'll feel good about yourself, too.