

# Be bold for change

*Reshma Johar* recognises International Women's Day and introduces the Women in Tax group, which encourages confidence and career progression.

## TEN SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 The Women in Tax network was formed to raise the voice of women working in all tax areas.
- 2 Do organisations measure work performed or the appearance of work performed?
- 3 Are firms doing enough to support women who want a career and have a family? Must women choose one or the other?

International Women's Day on 8 March celebrated the achievements and contributions women have made in the world, both at home and at work. The need for the day is often questioned, but when consultations are required to help close the gender pay gap, clearly equality is not as equal as one may imagine. In many organisations men comprise most staff between managers and partners/directors. The theme of this year's day was "Be bold for change" with the aim of forging a better, more inclusive and gender equal working world. So what is happening to women at work?

The "Women in Tax" organisation was established in November 2015 to raise the voice of women who work in all spheres of tax. Its aim is to build a network to offer support, provide guidance and increase awareness to help women progress further within their respective fields. Throughout the year, various evening sessions are held covering both technical and, more recently, soft skills. Our events offer a supportive forum to showcase the different areas of tax, as well as professional and academic women in tax. The evening seminars are offered to all women who work or are returning to work, but men in tax are also welcome and do attend these events.

The main reason why I wanted to be involved in this network was to find out why so many women cease to progress past a certain level. I have been privileged to work alongside a dedicated committee that has enabled the network to span the UK and, more recently, the Isle of Man. It is clear that there is a demand for it.

I have interviewed a number of tax professionals and academics and have been able to outline considerations that every organisation should take to improve their working environment.

### Work banter

Cultural behaviour plays a huge part not only in how people see each other, but also how they are treated in the workplace. When is a joke or conversation taking something too far?

An organisation should take office banter that targets someone's sexuality, sex, race or disability seriously and show that this is not tolerated. Accepting or ignoring these types of banter can have a direct effect on staff morale. It also demonstrates the type of culture and image that an organisation has. If this behaviour continues to be accepted, a vicious circle may appear where younger professionals see it as acceptable. Some organisations have training on diversity which addresses exactly these sorts of issues.

Office banter that objectifies women plays a part in why women are not taken seriously when being considered for promotions.

### Productivity

In some organisations, promotions are more likely to be based on hours at work. But does working longer result in increased productivity?

As an example, in a number of cases, despite being unwell or unable to work, some employees feel obliged to come to work, perhaps because they will not be remunerated or are pressured by management. This does not increase productivity, but has the opposite effect according to a recent Work Foundation report ([tinyurl.com/zzs9vkr](http://tinyurl.com/zzs9vkr)).

Unfortunately, rather than focusing on output, employees often have a better chance of promotion from hours at work than productivity. This makes flexible working even more of a challenge if the mindset is "working flexibly means working less". In those instances, employees working within their contracted hours and producing good work may be overlooked and their contributions ignored.

Oliver Burkeman highlighted an important point: hours in the office do not equal hours of productivity and many employees become masters of disguise, seemingly in a constant state of motion, but actually getting little done.

Although not only restricted to them, women are more likely to be affected because they tend to have more family and carer commitments outside of work. As such, women will not be able to be present beyond their contractual hours and may be seen as not doing enough. Organisations that understand their staff will identify "presenteeism".

### The family dilemma

Rita De La Feria, a tax professor at Leeds University, writes policies for various governments as well as being a conference speaker. She tells me that her career choices have always been driven by



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opportunities, but as a woman she has had to sacrifice a lot of her personal time to showcase the diversity of her employment. Rita juggles her career, relationship and five-year old twins daily, and says that the key to all this is having a supportive and encouraging partner.

Throughout most women's careers, there will be a time where the question of family will arise. Are firms doing enough to support women who want to have a career as well as a family? Must women choose one or the other?

### The work culture

Recruiters are keen to promote candidates who are "different and stand out", but does this always work? Many organisations promote themselves as diverse and seek candidates who can bring something new and exciting to a firm. Jo Maughan was a tax director at BP and left to be a career coach. Jo believes that good judgement and influence is essential and this boiled down to environment rather than position.

Women need to have more judgement and awareness of the environment being offered, and this could be by simply looking at the percentage of women in each level of an organisation.

Jo's view is that women have two points to consider: stay in an organisation with a view to influencing the culture, or leave. Think about the personal costs of staying in an organisation that may be not the right fit. How will this affect happiness at work, motivation, personal morale and career progression?

### Supporting confidence

Those wishing to progress should be supported, mentored and guided positively to help them reach their personal goals. This could mean the employee stays because of the opportunities presented or leaves to further their career.

Organisations should consider personal situations and, where possible, try to accommodate flexible or home working.

Jo Wakeman OBE, Director of Large Businesses for HMRC says: "As an organisation we face a demographic challenge – a significant proportion of our workforce are the wrong side of 50. This is why we are bringing new tax trainees in at a number of different levels, as well as recruiting existing talents and skills from outside HMRC; in other words, from industry and practice.

"Women won't apply for a position until they are confident they can do 100% of the role, while men are happier to take the risk – applying when they can do 50%. We need to do more to support women to have greater confidence so that opportunities are taken and not missed."

It is evident that women tend to be less self-assured than men. Confidence matters as much as competence, so it is beneficial for women to recognise this and form associations with network groups within their field of expertise such as Women in Tax. That way they are supported,

mentored and guided positively. It is important that women do not feel isolated in their place of employment and have positive role models to turn to when they need support or common understanding.

### Final thoughts

Women are strong and resilient to change and I have no doubt that we will continue to "raise our voices" to ensure that equality and diversity exists both in the workplace and at home. Organisations are doing a great deal more to ensure that they are seen and behaving equally to all staff members. However, it is important to remember that we all have different drives, needs and responsibilities, if a firm wants diversity it needs to cater to all.



#### FURTHER INFORMATION

Women in Tax: <http://womenin.tax/>  
 Twitter: @WomenInTax  
 International Women's Day: [www.internationalwomensday.com](http://www.internationalwomensday.com)  
 Oliver Burkeman: "Is shirking just a smarter way of working?": [tinyurl.com/hkt5bdo](http://tinyurl.com/hkt5bdo)

