



So why is the talent pool of executive women in South Africa not being utilised to its full potential? And why are organisations not creating a pipeline of future female leaders? In a country with such a widespread skills shortage, organisations are not thinking laterally enough about how to attract, develop and retain approximately 50% of the potential pool of talent. What is even more absurd is that they are willing to lose their talented leaders after investing heavily in their skills and career development.

## **Paradigm shift**

A paradigm shift is, therefore, required. Talent management solutions should be gender neutral. Smart organisations know that diversification on their boards and executive and leadership teams will lead to greater innovation, but they need to 'walk the talk'. They need to develop solutions that offer women (and men) more incentives to remain in the corporate world.

Women are no more difficult to employ than men and they are not necessarily demanding special treatment, but some creativity needs to be applied to attracting and keeping the best employees. Organisations should be creating cultures and career models that attract a much broader pool of candidates and ensure satisfied employees who can realise their work/life goals.

An example of a smart company is Deloitte LLP, which has become a pioneer in workplace innovation with its recently launched agile working programme. The company allows all employees to request a formal flexible working arrangement and a block of four weeks of unpaid leave each year. Also, by using collaborative technologies and adaptable work spaces, Deloitte allows employees to work where and how they want.

## **Voluntary vs mandatory reform**

The UK's 30% Club is achieving its aims without mandatory quotas, believing that voluntary business-led action is the way to achieve meaningful change. With our history of mandatory reforms in South Africa, there is much debate about whether we should mandate gender equality.

Personally, while I can see the point of the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality (WEGE) Bill - which is calling for a very ambitious 50% female representation across all senior and top management positions - I believe that if corporates are not voluntarily putting strategies in place to continually attract and retain all elements of diversity, which include women leaders, change will not occur.

The solution really requires a cooperative approach between the government and business to set and achieve realistic gender-equality goals and establish a framework that makes commercial sense. We could all certainly learn from countries such as Iceland and the Nordic states where gender equality is regarded as the best in the world.

According to the WEF Gender Gap Report of 2013, the Nordic countries are considered leaders in gender equality. The key reasons for this are that their labour participation rates for women are amongst the highest in the world. Salary gaps between men and women (although still present) are amongst the smallest in the world. These economies encourage the creation of opportunities for women to hold senior leadership positions. As a result parents now combine work and family responsibilities; resulting in higher female employment, shared participation in child rearing and a balanced distribution of home-related tasks.

While we wait for the WEGE bill to be enacted into law and for initiatives like the 30% Club to gain momentum, women continue to exit formal employment, looking for more appealing - but really they mean more flexible - options, like pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities and starting or managing smaller businesses. They are leaving the corporate world to find and create new business models that suit their goals, preferences and desires and, ultimately, they are taking their institutional knowledge and valuable skills with them.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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