

FLEXIBILITY

KEY TO PROGRESS FOR WOMEN

Janelle Hopkins, Chief Financial Officer of Australia Post, recalls two distinct turning points in her career. The first was when working as a manager at a large professional services firm she had come to the point where she was deciding whether to stay. Then she overheard a female partner on the phone saying, “Don’t come to me with a problem, come to me with a solution”.

“I thought, ‘Wow, I wonder who is in trouble’,” recalls Hopkins, only to realise the woman was talking to her partner about their children. While Hopkins acknowledges the stresses of balancing career and family, to her the moment signified how difficult that can be in certain environments.

“I thought that was not the kind of female leader that I wanted to become,” she says. It also impressed on her the value of role models for women. “When I looked up, the view of leadership that I saw was not what I wanted it to be. It was an interesting lesson that I carried with me as to who I needed to be in the office for future female leaders.”

So, instead of carrying on up the partner path, Hopkins stepped into a finance role at MLC in 2001 before moving to its parent, National Australia Bank, in 2005. There she came to a second turning point. This was when she realised how hard it could be to break through into a leadership role after being at one organisation for a while.

“I looked up and I could see people above me moving around to different roles and it was hard to break through — for men and women,” she recalls. “I ran out of patience and realised that I needed to take the leap and go somewhere else where I might be able to break through.”

Her next move was to Australia Post in 2012, where she quickly rose to the top, becoming CFO in 2013. And with Christine Holgate as the CEO of Australia Post, there are now no shortage of role models for aspiring female leaders. But Hopkins remains as cognisant as ever as to how hard it is for women to break through, particularly in finance.

She doesn’t shy away from the fact that being head of finance is a tough role that is not to everyone’s liking. When she considers where her graduate peers have taken their careers, she sees that very few chose to work in finance teams. Instead,



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they have moved into superannuation, investment management and asset consulting. “The reality is that the CFO role is a hard one,” she says. “Finance can be a tough environment.”

She recognises that because the role is a difficult one, this gives currency to the impression that CFOs have to be hard. “The quintessential CFO is technical and hard-nosed and that feeds into a bias that women can’t be hard enough.” She thinks this may create another hurdle for women who want to get into the CFO seat.

Despite a broad range of initiatives at Australia Post, the next level down from Hopkins in the finance function is predominantly male. She has eight direct reports and two are women. But the main pain point is in the level below, where the female pipeline starts to narrow drastically.

One of the key Australia Post initiatives is around flexibility and job-sharing or working part-time. In Hopkins’ leadership team, there is one role that is shared by two women. Flexibility and a broader acceptance of flexible working arrangements is key, she says. “In particular, I would like to see more men working part-time or job-sharing so it becomes more accepted. If we had men embracing more flexible lifestyles, then any stigma around working flexibly would disappear.”

Hopkins, a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand, sees company Boards as being critical to encouraging the diversity conversation. The fact that most major Boards have made good progress in appointing women is a first step because “if you never see women in senior executive or Board roles, it inherently means younger women won’t try to get there because they don’t think that they can,” she says.