

STAY ON TRACK

WITH HARD WORK

Pam Bains, Chief Financial Officer and Group Executive Strategy at Aurizon, arrived in Australia in 2009 after 20 years of working in senior finance roles for global companies in the UK, including project work across Europe and India.

However, despite this experience and “a stellar CV”, finding that first great role in Australia was harder than expected. She laughs now as she recalls recruiters telling her that despite the depth of her international experience, she had to realise she had no local experience, which would make it harder to place her at the same level for her first role.

That international experience began with Arthur Andersen before she moved to GE. “You couldn’t get much bigger than GE at the time,” she recalls. At that point, the legendary Jack Welch ran the show and working at GE meant being trained in six sigma, being comfortable with change and transformation and getting exposure to international businesses. It was, she says, tough making the move from public practice into industry, but GE “trained their young leaders really well”.

Her next move was to UK clothing, footwear and home products retailer Next Plc, where she built on her experience as group financial controller whilst at the same time taking on a project to set up an offshore subsidiary, which involved travelling back and forth to India for 18 months with two young children at home. “It was a tough choice but I put my hand up for it and I wanted to take the lead on the India project,” she says. “I wanted to have the exposure to an environment where I could be challenged and learn, I thought it would broaden my skills beyond traditional finance, understanding the culture and being able to speak the language was a bonus and I felt passionate about it.”

After five years at Next Plc, she moved to Telefonica O2 UK, the mobile phone operator owned by Spain’s Telefonica. It was a case of working in another fast-moving industry as part of a customer service leadership team undergoing a large digital transformation and the large change requirement appealed to Bains’s love of challenge and drive to achieve.

Throughout all of this, Bains and her husband had often toyed with moving to Australia as they had family that had moved to Brisbane. They had visited often and in 2009 they decided to take the plunge.

Originally, the move was intended as a two-year sabbatical and Bains began with a finance role at Queensland Rail. The appeal was to work for a government-owned entity that was about to demerge and list. She joined on the basis that she would be



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able to transfer with the listed entity. The eight-month experience of working on the IPO was amazing, she says. “I can’t remember seeing daylight during that period and worked almost every weekend,” she recalls. “But it was worth the hard work when I reflect back on the huge learning opportunity and seeing the shares list for the first time provided a real sense of achievement.”

After the IPO, she became the group controller and worked her way up through a divisional CFO role of the regulated network business to the group CFO role in late 2016. In 2017, she also took on the head of strategy role.

For most of her career in Australia, Bains has been one of the few women in the room, sometimes the only woman — and she says this is much more noticeable than in the UK where there was a higher proportion of senior female leaders. “The UK seemed to be much further ahead and you saw more senior women because there were more opportunities, so the gap did not appear as wide,” she says.

This has been even more marked for Bains because transport and logistics traditionally has been a male-dominated industry. She says the company has had to work hard to shake off that perception. “We have had to look at everything from how we recruit to how to understand and highlight unconscious bias,” she says.

While the finance team overall is 60 per cent female, Bains indicates there are not enough women coming through the ranks to fill senior finance roles, and she currently doesn’t have any female direct reports. She is actively working to develop the next level of leaders and a part of her strategy is to give future female leaders as much exposure to the executive team and Board as possible. This will build their experience and demonstrates that, as the Aurizon Board has three female directors, “it is an aspiration that is possible to achieve”.

She thinks that having had exposure to the Board before taking on the role was helpful to her getting the top finance job. ‘I was an internal candidate who had not had listed CFO experience,’ she says. ‘But the CEO and Board knew who I was and what I was capable of – external candidates would have been considered, and the CEO and Board understood the strengths and experience I possessed and were confident my track record showed I could develop and grow the required skills with their support.’

Bains knows that there is an ongoing challenge within Australia to get greater gender balance across all levels and industries. Her words of advice to women are: “Be willing to challenge yourself and keep striving towards the next stretch activity, the next learning. Seek out leaders and mentors you can learn from and sponsors who will assist you to make better career choices.

“Lastly, have confidence in yourself and your own abilities – be comfortable with being uncomfortable and ask for the feedback, build your skills but don’t forget to have faith in what you are capable of achieving.”