

FINANCIAL REVIEW

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NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR WINNER

► 50pc of senior roles filled by women within a decade ► CEOs to be tested for 'unconscious bias'

BCA's radical gender targets

By Fiona Smith

The Business Council of Australia is pushing radical measures to promote women into senior executive jobs, including regular testing of chief executives and board members for unconscious gender bias and female-only hiring shortlists.

Suggesting that a range of inherent biases have produced a "male-gendered concept of merit-based assess-

Senior hiring

Female breadwinners are confiding in each other about a difficult aspect of career success they didn't predict.

Taking points from King's "ment" in many companies, the business lobby group proposes a suite of interventions to improve diversity in

fast-track women into top jobs and ultimately reduce the male dominance of boards.

The members of the business council, which represents 120 of Australia's biggest companies, have committed to having 50 per cent of their senior roles filled by women in the next decade.

The group will release checklists on Tuesday to help companies achieve the target.

They include: promoting women earlier in their careers; expanding existing executive teams so that women can

be quickly included; filling vacancies with interim appointments until a suitably qualified woman is found; proactively hiring women.

CEOs who are tested for their own unconscious biases are encouraged to share their results. Boards are advised to hire leaders who can demonstrate a good record in advancing women.

Senior leaders should have their bonuses riding on their performance in achieving gender diversity.

The business council's deputy chief executive, Maria Tarrant, said positive

discrimination does not mean that people will be promoted into jobs before they are ready. "You want to see women with appropriate competencies on the list," she said.

While a number of the proposals may be confronting for some businesses, recruiters report some of the biggest companies are already aggressively trying to meet diversity targets by only targeting women to fill vacant

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WORKPLACE EQUALITY Business Council wants employers to be proactive about parental leave

Serendipity is not a career plan

Fiona Smith

If it wasn't for a single phone call towards the end of her maternity leave, Antonette Elias might never have returned to work and professional services firm EY might not have the benefit of one of its most prominent female partners.

Ms Elias' manager was keen to get her back and, after six months, came to ask when she would be starting again. "If I didn't get that call, I'd probably still be at home, being a mum," she says.

Twenty-six years after the birth of the first of her three sons, Ms Elias has added several leadership roles to her tax work, including her membership of the firm's Asia-Pacific advisory council.

But until recent years, her career has advanced with the serendipitous help of well-wishers, rather than a process of human resources policies.

If I didn't get that call, I'd probably still be at home, being a mum.
Antonette Elias, EY tax partner

"At critical times of my career, when I wasn't sure if I should continue, people have said that I must come back, that it is not too hard," she says.

But proactive policies encouraging women's employment, such as those supported by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) which has released recommendations to member companies on addressing a gender imbalance, would have helped a great deal, she says. "I think it would have made a huge difference."

In the 1950s and early '60s, women with children progressed in senior ranks if they were very driven, or if someone was looking out for them. Ms Elias says in 25 years of working life, as a woman in tax accounting, her career has rung up a series of "flukes".

She and a colleague became the first female tax partners at Arthur Andersen before it was folded into EY (then Ernst & Young) in 2002.

"This didn't happen until 2000 so it really took me a lot longer to get partnership, but I am happy because I got to balance being a mother to my children and being married," she says.

One of the BCA's recommendations is to fast-track women's careers in their pre-child-rearing years, so that they are at a more senior level when they take maternity leave.

Research shows that women in more senior roles are more likely to come back to work.

This advancement would also mean that when they do return from maternity leave, they face less of an age disadvantage when competing with people who have had an unbroken career.

When Ms Elias returned after her first son, no one thought to allocate her any work and she had to sort it out herself. By the time she returned from work after her third son, was born, seven years later, the firm had learned to accommodate her.

"When I told people I was pregnant, they basically wrote me off. They didn't think I'd come back."

The BCA also recommends that women on parental leave are invited to take part in team activities, training and networking and are included in performance reviews, remuneration reviews and promotion opportunities. It also suggests identifying talented women at an early stage and coaching them to overcome any tendencies to underestimate themselves.

Ms Elias says that, over the years, she has been encouraged numerous times by men in a male-dominated environment to put herself forward for more challenging roles. However, not all women benefit from such supportive colleagues.

"That's the challenge. Until you systems and institutionalise practices, you are continually relying on the luck of the draw or people saying, 'proactively, that they want that role'."



Phone calls at important times were key to EY partner Antonette Elias's return. PHOTO: ANDY HOLLER

BCA's radical gender targets

spots in these cases, there is an informal understanding that a hiring manager cannot recruit a new person unless they are female, recruiters said.

The president of the Australian Human Resources Institute, Peter Wilson, said smaller companies may balk at the suggested measures but larger, publicly-listed organisations "will not blink an eye."

"It is interventionist, but it needs to be," he said. "It is unexpected from a group generally considered as one that doesn't like interventionist activity."

Ms Tarrant said the approach involved re-evaluating what talent looks like and making sure that people are not promoted into roles just

because they fit a traditional mould. Hiring, development and promotion processes that removed unconscious bias could benefit men as much as it does women.

"Putting this in place enhances all merit-based appointments," she said. In a letter to members, BCA president Tony Shepherd says the report reflects the best practices in recruitment, appointment and promotion.

"The low representation of women in senior levels of management cannot continue. We risk not getting the best talent for the job and women not reaching their true potential, such a situation is not good for individuals, business or the economy," he said.

It will be up to individual companies to decide if they will implement the measures.

The progress of women into the top jobs is often described as "glacial". Women comprise around 46 per cent

of the workforce, hold 16.4 per cent of board seats and 3.5 per cent of chief executive positions in the ASX.

"Women lag in terms of career prospects and remuneration, from day one on the job," the report says.

"As their careers progress, the gender gap widens, with men nine times more likely to reach senior executive ranks than women. Time has not proved to be the answer."

Ms Tarrant said member companies that missed the 50 per cent female target by 2023 would be given further resources rather than penalised.

"We are not declaring here," she said. "People are going to need to be trained." The report, *Increasing the Number of Women in Senior Executive Positions: Improving Recruitment, Selection and Retention Practices*, also recommends that decision makers should... avoid lowering the bar for candidates pursued by them.