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## INTERVIEW: Ambition and work ethic led to boss's seat

Dina Medland October 25, 2012

At school she was “the girl with the funny name”. Today Zillah Byng-Maddick is more concerned that she does not live up to the exotic potential of that name: “I always think people are slightly disappointed,” she says.

Her name is an amalgam of Scottish and Irish ancestry, an acquired old English surname through marriage, and working class parents who were artists in the 1960s and chose Zillah for its Indian and Hebrew roots. “My parents had a friend who inspired the name,” she says.

She grew up in “a little town outside Glasgow” with strongly socialist parents who both became teachers after art school. They divorced when she was small but had instilled in her “a desire to dream big and go outside your norm”. She lived with her mother, who “worked very hard” and gave her a strong work ethic.

Last month, that hard work resulted in her being appointed interim chief executive at Trader Media Group, Europe’s largest digital vehicle marketplace which has motoring website Auto Trader as its leading brand.

The top role at TMG comes after three years as its group finance director and her close involvement in its digital transformation.

A consumer focus has been in her background from the start of her career, which began in September 1996 at Nestlé as a graduate trainee, moving around the UK. But she had originally wanted to be a psychologist and studied psychology and IT at Glasgow University.

She recalls: “After the first year, it was clear I wasn’t a computer programmer and I didn’t think I was clever enough to be a psychologist – and I wanted to be successful. So I switched to business studies.” To her, this seemed like “common sense”.

“My father used to make us negotiate increases in pocket money,” she laughs. “I like to understand how things work. I found I was good at finance – at the end of university I decided to be an accountant and understand how businesses worked from a financial perspective.”

In her early 20s she became excited at the idea of being a treasury analyst: “I started my treasury exams at Nestlé, moved on to HMV – and then failed my exams the first time I took them. It was probably what I needed – it placed a really healthy respect in me for how hard people work to get where they are,” she says.

It made her realise the limits of her knowledge, and that she had specialised at too young an age: “I wanted to broaden my experience,” she says.

Ms Byng-Maddick’s HMV career included a spell at Waterstone’s, the book retailer, where she was commercial controller: “I loved Waterstone’s – a British institution. I felt a sense of people working for a company out of pure passion. I was sales and marketing controller and signed something off in a big hurry and we ended up losing money – and I cried. I felt I had let people down who trusted me.”

Being forthright and hard on herself are noticeable and strong characteristics. She is also open about her ambitions: “It wasn’t that I wanted to be chief finance officer before turning 30 but that I thought, I want my boss’s boss’s job. If I had known then what I know now, I would have realised how hard that was.”

There was another ambition, too – a difficult one for many female executives to reveal: “My biggest ambition in life was to have children,” she says. “And I didn’t want to leave it too long.”

Feeling she needed “an old-fashioned P&L job”, she joined GE as a financial planning and analysis manager – and got married.

“I was in GE Capital and I decided I didn’t like financial services – it wasn’t something I could touch or engage with,” she says. She moved on in 2004 to join First Quench Retailing/Thresher Group.

“David Williams, chief executive at the time, saw something in me and gave me a lot of opportunities. He let me attend executive meetings even when I was not an executive. I joined as financial planning and analysis manager and went on to become chief finance officer after two years, when my son was only 10 weeks old.

“I was also lucky, as my boss decided to leave,” she says. “It was a very difficult business and after I left it ended up in administration.”

But becoming chief finance officer caused her to stop and reassess: “At that moment I felt ‘I’m 30, married, baby, a big job’ – and I was worried about juggling it all.”

Her mother moved from Scotland to be nearby: “I really struggled hard in the job with the negative numbers and I always worried I had only got it because I happened to be there,” she reveals.

In 2006 she moved to be chief finance officer of Fitness First, a company operating in 21 countries. It was divided into five business units, one of which was in Germany and under-performing. “This was a test of whether I could run a business. I have no talent for

languages, had no German and they were not thrilled to see me,” says Ms Byng-Maddick. With two small children at home, she commuted to Germany three days a week: “The business had lost its self-esteem, which meant ‘walking the walk’ and getting management on board. I would learn my speeches and speak them phonetically and they knew I had no idea what I was saying, but they liked me for trying.”

Now at TMG, she has three sons aged eight, six and three and says she is “surrounded by men”. She still has time for a non-executive director role at Mecom, the UK publisher, a role she was offered by the chairman who approached her at a conference.

Ms Byng-Maddick is also studying for an MSc in coaching and behavioural change at Henley Management College: “I knew one day I would like to lead a company and be a chief executive and I wanted to challenge my mind,” she explains.

## **Secret CV**

### **Who were your mentors?**

My mother’s work ethic and my father’s attitude really helped, and David Williams gave me so many opportunities at Thresher’s.

### **Your first big break ?**

It was probably going to GE and being part of the culture of “striving to be better”, which had a big impact on me as a future chief finance officer.

### **What else might you have done?**

I think I would have liked to have been a psychologist.

### **Your best career advice to others ?**

Be brave and set unrealistic goals – because you never know what might happen. Being generative is also very important: find a way to make things better.

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