

Career profiles on FT.com and in printed FT

By Dina Medland

Published: May 25 2011 17:14 | Last updated: May 25 2011 17:14

Andrea Blance

Andrea Blance is group chief risk officer at Legal & General Group, a position she has held since August 2010. She joined L&G's graduate training programme in 1985 from the London School of Economics and has progressed through the company. She told Dina Medland:

“I've never felt that being a woman at Legal & General was particularly significant. As a company, it operates a true meritocracy and treats people as people. But 20 years ago being a woman probably helped – at the time we were the unusual ones.

“My career has been actively developed while I have been there. Early on, L&G paid for me to do an MBA. I've also held a variety of jobs within the organisation which ‘took a bet’ on me – they weren't jobs I would necessarily have got if I'd gone for them externally. For example, I moved from a head office financial planning job to that of finance director of a private medical insurance start-up (both jobs within the L&G Group).

“This is also true of my current job as group chief risk officer – I don't necessarily ‘tick all the boxes’.

“My previous boss felt that I could benefit from further development and involved me in investor presentations and capital management programmes. As part of this broader development it was then suggested I join a mentoring programme – which was instrumental when applying for my latest role.

“I don't have children, but it's important to me that L&G doesn't have an ‘excessive hours’ culture, but does reward hard work. Colleagues are encouraged both to challenge and respect one another.

“Do I find it hard as a woman to speak up in meetings? It depends. In meetings with colleagues I find it difficult to hold back! But in those meetings where you want to impress – say at two levels above me – I have a tendency to hold back and be more hesitant. But it helps that we have a culture where challenge is welcome in the room.

“In something like investment banking, the room isn't necessarily a better room to be in today than it was 20 years ago. For me, finding the right culture has been very important to my career.”

Nadia Ridout-Jamieson

Nadia Ridout-Jamieson is director of investor relations and communications at Experian. After a PhD in surface sciences from Cambridge University, she spent 10 years in investment

banking as a media analyst, first at Cazenove and then Lehman Brothers. She has been at Experian since 2006. She told Dina Medland:

“I have to say that being a woman hasn’t had much of an impact on my career. In the late 1990s investment banking was a very exciting and colourful place to be, and the dot.com boom was just beginning.

“I was in the media sector seeing companies with new business models – some were flaky and some proved to be the companies of the future. I was involved with capital raising and IPOs and it was fascinating and enjoyable.

“The City was male-dominated, but I wouldn’t say I felt compelled to work harder or stay longer hours because I was a woman. You’re conditioned by the role and what needs to be done within it. Some of the highest-ranking analysts at that time were, in fact, women.

“But having been an observer of companies, I wanted to experience corporate life for myself, and ‘get underneath the covers’ at a company. It’s a very different business – from commenting on a company to being part of it and part of its development of capital strategy.

“I joined Experian as an investor relations manager just before it de-merged from GUS. It wasn’t well known in City terms, but it was such an opportunity. Within a year I had been promoted to director of IR and am now also head of global communications.

“In a way there are more opportunities available within the corporate world, regardless of your gender. In the City you can get ‘silo-ed’ into a discipline, and that is true whether you are a man or woman.

“Of course, luck comes into any career progression, and to me it’s about making the most of lucky breaks. Having mentors – formally appointed or not – along the way, who give you support and guidance, and help you obtain an inner confidence, is very important.

“Our mentoring programme at Experian is now in its third year, and we are surprised at the difference it has made to the people who have gone through it. Sometimes I wish that when I started I’d had access to such an initiative to accelerate my own development.”

Janette Wilkinson

Janette Wilkinson is a partner at KPMG, the professional services firm, and is chief operating officer of the Tax Practice. She joined the organisation in 1987 from university and, apart from 18 months at HSBC, has been there since. She told Dina Medland:

“I’ve stayed at KPMG because they are fair and flexible. There’s a collegiate atmosphere, so whenever I have wanted to change my hours, people have listened.

“I have two young children and when I had my second I took my working time down to four days a week. Now I’m back to 4.5 days, which gives me the flexibility to go to school plays etc and I’m determined not to give that up – my youngest child is six.

“As a working woman it’s very important to be treated openly and fairly. But you also need to have flexible childcare – if you have to get in at 9am and leave at 5pm on the dot it’s very

hard to progress through any organisation. No matter where you work it's a two-way thing, with give and take required.

“In professional services companies you often need to be there in a physical sense – your clients demand it – but progress in IT and communications has certainly helped. For example, conference calls can take place from anywhere.

“I've never experienced any discrimination in becoming a partner, but I do think it's important to have a sponsor who can help you think through what to do next. I was lucky in that my mentor was a senior partner who had been with the firm for many years – and he found me rather than the other way round.

“One problem for women is that men are better at informal networking – they tend to bond well through things like sport. As a woman, if you have a family then when you're not working you often just want to get home, so you have to work harder at building a network

“Some women are also not good at speaking up in meetings because it can be intimidating. They often won't speak unless it seems worth saying, whereas that doesn't seem to deter men! Women tend to need to think about how to make an impact, be confident but also be themselves.”

Helen Wyatt

Helen Wyatt is senior vice president, responsible for HR at Unilever, in charge of all product and global HR functions and leading on diversity. She has been with the company for four years, and previously held HR positions at HP and Motorola.

She told Dina Medland:

“I've been very fortunate that I've been able to achieve things, but I've also been able to be authentic and be myself. Early on I got feedback that I needed to 'toughen up' and be more assertive.

“I found I could just as easily get results by focusing on my own approach which involved maintaining the relationship, defining the problem and achieving results. It was just as effective, if not more so, than that adopted by some of my more confrontational colleagues.

“Motorola was incredibly results-oriented. which was very helpful to me. A couple of mentors taught me well on the importance of building up a network and strong relationships.

“Apart from authenticity, I think that as a woman – and I have three children – you do have to be incredibly well organised. I've always worked a full week. I've been lucky in that working for technology companies meant people did not consider 'presence in the office' as a high priority, and e-mails could be cleared wherever you were. In another world, such as financial services, that can be a real challenge.

“You have to find your own way of succeeding in an organisation, but I do believe that performance-oriented organisations with very clear goals suit women well. I haven't had a sense in any of the three organisations in which I've worked that HR is a 'touchy-feely' profession only for women, and I've worked with some excellent men.

“I believe strongly in the value of mentoring. It has been happening since the dawn of time in the corporate world for men but for some strange reason not for women. Research done at Unilever with Insead showed that men tend to identify between one and three people early on in their careers as mentors, while women feel alone and uncertain about how to go about it. We’re making sure we change that at Unilever today.”