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CHRISTINE HODGSON: ‘MY GENDER HAS NEVER HELD ME BACK’

By Dina Medland September 19 2013



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Christine Hodgson: ‘Once you get on a plc board you become suddenly more visible’

Christine Hodgson has been working in senior management since the age of 30 – and has never felt her gender to be a barrier. “I don’t feel like I’ve ever been discriminated against in any way,” she says.

She has a rare ability to cut through a conversation and get to the point – one of the skills that have helped her in a career that sees her today in the role of executive chairman of Capgemini UK, the IT and consultancy firm. She also sits on its group management

committee, is a non-executive director on a FTSE 250 company board and joins a FTSE 100 board as a non-executive this month.

Before becoming executive chairman at Capgemini UK, Ms Hodgson spent 10 years as its finance director – a role that placed her “below the parapet”. But she says: “Once you get on a plc board you become suddenly more visible.”

She might never have felt discriminated against, but she still welcomes Lord Davies’s report on the underrepresentation of women in the UK’s boardrooms. She says it has made more talent visible, which “has to be a good thing as long as we have a rigorous recruitment process”.

Ms Hodgson grew up on a poultry farm in Lancashire, the youngest of four children. At school, she was good at maths and was drawn to Loughborough University, partly because of its high standards in sport. She played squash regularly and achieved a first-class degree in accounting and financial management.

As part of her four-year course, she spent the third year working for what was then the accountancy firm, Coopers & Lybrand. “I loved it – and the partnership culture,” she recalls.

After graduation, she took a job there but did not enjoy being an auditor for the first three years. “In those days you spent a lot of time in dusty basements,” she says. Moving into corporate finance, she found it far more enjoyable and her experience broadened to include contested takeover work, mergers and acquisitions, corporate recovery, and then advising small companies.

The advisory role led to her first career breakthrough, when her client, Howard Hodgson, chief executive of Ronson, asked her to join the company. Ms Hodgson, who later married him, says: “My aim had been to be a Coopers & Lybrand partner. I still remain very loyal to PwC, as it now is, because I had great training and they have a great alumni network.”

But the opportunity offered by the move was too big to be missed, despite the media spotlight on her personal relationship with the boss.

She acknowledges the importance of mentors and sponsors to her career progress, and credits that first approach by Mr Hodgson as one of a series of instances in which a male sponsor was critical to her making the next step. At 29, she leapt from accountancy to the corporate world, and a year later became Ronson’s corporate development director, a role she held for four years and that gave her a seat on the executive board.

“Everything was going well and the banks were keen to lend us money, and then, in my last 18 months in the role, we had a fire, which wiped out stocks. The battle started with the insurance companies, and the banks wanted their money back – it was the best learning experience of my life,” she says.

In 1997, there were a string of departures from Ronson – including Mr Hodgson. Ms Hodgson had to consider her options: “I had to decide whether to go back to the professions or stay in corporate life,” she says.

Looking back, she stresses the importance of trusting her instincts – and good timing. These led to a meeting with headhunters about a role at an unidentified company. “I thought the job sounded so dull I had to turn it down,” she says. But the headhunter called back and said the managing director wanted to meet her.

The company was Capgemini UK, then run by Tony Robinson. Ms Hodgson already had a job offer from a professional services firm up her sleeve but went to meet Mr Robinson. “He blew me away,” she says. “He agreed that the job was dull but said it was a meritocracy and asked me to join. He was just so obviously a very good leader. He was one of those people who changes lives. My husband thought I was crazy, but I followed my instincts and joined.”

The big attraction was that it combined her background in professional services at Coopers & Lybrand with a role as a principal. “It was the mix between corporate and professional services that was so appealing,” she says.

Ms Hodgson became finance director of Capgemini UK and stepped up to be chief finance officer of the global organisation, as well as finance director of its global outsourcing business. “When Capgemini bought the Ernst & Young consulting business 15 years ago, I became finance director of both,” she says.

Being finance director of the global outsourcing business involved much travelling, and it was at this time, aged 42, that she experienced a “midlife surprise” – having a baby. “Capgemini was very supportive,” she says. “I took five months off and came back to the same job, and about two years later I came out of finance and became chief executive of the European business – Technology Services North West Europe.”

Although her background is finance, rather than technology, she is passionate about encouraging young people into IT careers. “We have a five-year apprenticeship programme offered with the Open University, which combines work experience with learning and earning, rather than student debt,” says Ms Hodgson.

She admits it might always be difficult getting parity for women working in IT, because of the flexibility it requires, but she adds: “These days, I get more men asking for flexibility, either around children or having other interests, which is healthy.”

She has been on the boards of two charities for several years, and joined Ladbrokes – her first company board – in May 2012, and found it made her “suddenly more visible” to those making boardroom appointments.

This month, she joins the board of Standard Chartered, when she becomes a non-executive director there. Still in her 40s, it puts her among the youngest non-executives in

a UK company boardroom.