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## RISKS, PAY CUTS – AND AN INSTINCT TO COMPETE

By Dina Medland

A female senior executive in the UK ready to admit to being extremely competitive is a rare find. But Emer Timmons is not coy on the subject.

As president of BT Global Services UK, she has responsibility for a budget of about £4bn and for more than 17 years has held key roles at multi-billion pound telecoms and professional services businesses.

Right from the start, she says, the instinct to compete “has been in my DNA”.

Growing up as the youngest of five children in Ireland, Ms Timmons says she comes from a highly competitive family: “We have 16 university degrees between us and I grew up surrounded by finance people. I was naturally competitive as a child, I had to win – I couldn’t just have the odd dance lesson, or just ride my pony. I had to do it all, and compete,” she says.

Her “very logical brain” coped well enough with maths at school, but it was when she went to university at the National University of Ireland that she excelled. She also studied for an international marketing diploma in French and Spanish as she didn’t want to be labelled as either “maths or languages”: “After my Spanish exam they did suggest it might be wise not to continue a career in that language – I had the oddest accent,” she says, laughing

She finds it hard to support women who cry foul when denied opportunities: “Everything is choice in your career,” she says.

Joining Accenture in Ireland as her first job, it was not long before Irish entrepreneur Denis O’Brien, today Ireland’s richest man, spotted her and offered her a job – with a big pay cut. “He was an incredible man who immediately put me at my ease. Even at a young age I could tell he was going to be something big in the business world,” she says. “I was earning up to £30,000 a year, which was a lot of money, and he offered me £8,000 a year for what was essentially cold calling.”

She would be a sales representative for Esat Telecom after it won a mobile licence in 1995. She took the job: “I took a calculated risk as he was so passionate about what he did.”

She went from sales rep to strategic sales to sales manager to business development. “I learnt it was very hard work. People who are very keen to progress need to understand how to do the hard work. I would never ask someone to do something I hadn’t done myself, and we did work seven days a week,” she says.

“My core strength is sales and through my career I have built the other skills that are necessary for a leadership role,” says Ms Timmons.

She next moved to Energis, a “technology-driven communications company”, based in the UK and Ireland; John Pluthero and Archie Norman were chief executive and chairman.

It gave her experience of working in a struggling sector – the telecoms market crashed and Energis went into administration in 2002 – but not before she had become country manager, run the Northern Ireland business, and made it top in the call centre market. “I learnt how important it

is to focus on where your core is and where your assets are and how to try and make a difference to your customer,” she says.

Mr O’Brien then provided another opportunity – and another “calculated risk”. She recalls: “He said he was up for buying a licence for a mobile telecoms company in the Caribbean. I had never been to the Caribbean before, and I flew into Jamaica on my own with about 10 bags. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but every role I’ve started has evolved into many others, and this was my first mobile role.”

Speaking very quickly, she captures every detail. The small, privately held company, Digicel, founded by Mr O’Brien in 2001 with the launch of a GSM cellular phone service in the Caribbean, is today one of the fastest growing mobile operators in the world. “Every country in the Caribbean required different sales strategies; within a year we took the incumbent out of every country,” says Ms Timmons.

She speaks very highly of her predominantly female team – “incredibly focused, with a very strong work ethic and an excellent understanding of how to multi-task, have a family and still study for university at night”.

Recalling one Christmas when Digicel celebrated its millionth subscriber, she says: “I was still in Jamaica and was asked ‘how’s the family’ and I had to say I didn’t really know – I flew back on Christmas day.”

Approached then by John Caudwell of The Caudwell Group, she became global managing director for 20:20 logistics, which used sales, marketing and logistical expertise to provide products and services to customers.

“I remember going into Nokia and saying can I have a licence to operate and they said ‘No’. So I asked to be given a chance to prove myself in a few countries – and they gave me Afghanistan and Iraq.”

While in the Caribbean she married an Englishman who took leave of absence from his job to allow Ms Timmons to do hers, but parental ill health led the couple to set up home in the UK. Using executive search consultants for the first time, she took a call from BT: “I had been approached before, but at a time when I felt my career was still international and entrepreneurial in a high-risk, high-reward environment where if you don’t deliver you get fired,” she says. Starting at BT in 2007 as vice-president for cross sector practices, then professional services, she was appointed president for BT Global professional services in the UK and the Emea region the following year. She was also responsible for the integration of all 31 of BT Global’s acquisitions, completed in a year.

“People say you can’t bring an entrepreneurial spirit to a big corporation – oh yes, you can,” says Ms Timmons.

The pressures of the job mean she has been unable to find time for enough flying hours to maintain her private pilot’s licence, gained at university.

But her enthusiasm for delivering whatever it takes to succeed is undiminished: “Getting to the top means you have to manage your own career,” she says. And to women, she adds: “There is a mirror in the ‘glass ceiling’ and what is stopping you is you.”

## **Secret CV**

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

Three people have made a big impact on me: Denis O'Brien, my external mentor; Helen Pitcher, chief executive of Iddas; and Ian Livingston, chief executive at BT Group.

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

Going to work for Denis O'Brien at Esat Telecom.

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

I would love to be the captain of a Jumbo jet, a 747. I love flying, it's the ultimate company car: to be able to rock up and say "fill her up".

### **Best career advice to others**

You need to decide very early on in your career what sector you want to be in and gain experience. Be self-critical and close the gaps where they exist. You can be whoever you want to be – it's very important to have that self-confidence. It's also important to enjoy what you do – you need to have fun doing it.