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Late starter catches up fast in a role that keeps growing

By Dina Medland

Jann Brown keeps a bag packed at all times, ready for a trip to India – and she admits to having “three bags tripping everyone up in the hall at home at the moment”.

Travel at short notice has become an integral part of her life in a senior post at a multinational business.

“India is such an energetic and vibrant economy, it’s a privilege to work there,” says the finance director and managing director of Cairn Energy, the UK-based oil and gas exploration and production company.

On a day-to-day level, Ms Brown says it is “the diversity of the work, the variety of the locations and the people I am interacting with” that give her job the “buzz” she relishes.

But her growing seniority within the organisation is partly unexpected. When Cairn Energy floated Cairn India Ltd – a “pretty large Indian business” – on the Indian market in 2006, Sir Bill Gammell, chief executive at the time, said that post-IPO, there would be a smaller role for the finance director of the company in its Edinburgh head office – Ms Brown’s job at the time. Before the IPO, Cairn Energy’s Indian operations made up 90 per cent of the company’s business.

In the event, by the time Sir Bill stepped down to become non-executive chairman and handed over the chief executive role to Cairn’s legal and commercial director Simon Thomson in June this year, Jann Brown’s role in Scotland was much expanded.

Today, as managing director as well as finance director, Ms Brown has line management responsibility for corporate affairs, human resources, governance and risk – as well as the company secretary function. How does she juggle all those roles?

“I have fantastic people working for me and the number two in all those roles is top-notch,” she says. “The major focus of my role in this business is making sure we have balance sheet strength and financial flexibility at all times.”

All this has been achieved after a delayed start to her career. An “all-rounder” at school, she was encouraged to read history by a teacher who took “a real personal interest” and she “loved the subject” at the University of Edinburgh.

After graduating, she started a family and “children came first”. It was more than 10 years later that she first entered the world of accounting.

A one-year diploma in accounting at Edinburgh’s Heriot Watt University allowed her to begin training as a chartered accountant and she was “lucky enough”, she says, to win a training contract with KPMG.

“I quickly realised I was particularly interested in tax, so I moved into that department quite early on. One of the key benefits is that every corporate transaction always comes down to tax, so I had a higher than normal exposure to corporate deal-making and knew very early on that I thrived in that environment,” she says.

“I have a lot of sympathy with those who go to university or even come out with very little idea of what they want to do. It can take time and a bit of maturity to find your *métier*,” she says.

Looking back, she agrees that getting on in the world of work is “really about being able to spot the opportunities that feel right for you, and grabbing them”. She also speaks highly of the institutes – the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland and the Chartered Institute of Taxation, and the support she found there.

After moving to and working briefly at Deloitte, she received a call from Cairn Energy in 1998, when it was looking for a tax manager to complement its finance team. Kevin Hart, finance director at the time, “pulled me out of tax and put me in position as number two”, she says.

As group financial controller she stepped up to the board in the finance director position in 2006 when Mr Hart moved to become chief executive at AIM-listed oil explorer BowLeven.

Although based in Edinburgh, Cairn Energy was developing significant production capacity in India and exploring in Greenland, and an important part of Ms Brown’s role during 2005 and 2006 concerned the flotation of Cairn India Ltd.

“As finance director of the Indian business and project manager for the initial public offering, I found this to be a most complex and fascinating project. We did it in 10 and a half months – at that stage it was the biggest ever IPO in the Indian market, raising just under \$2bn.” Since then she has been a non-executive director on the board of the Indian-listed company.

With the IPO, Cairn Energy “demonstrated its financial flexibility. It was quite a novel way for a UK-based company to raise money in the Indian market,” says Ms Brown.

A key part of her role continues to be City-facing activity in both the debt and equity markets. Since 2008 she has also been the senior independent director on the board of Hansen Transmissions, the Belgian wind turbine gearbox maker, adding Antwerp to her list of flying destinations.

“There is no better board experience for an executive director to sit as a non-executive director and be required to pick up very quickly what is going on”, she adds.

Today, she also sits on the board of ICAS and says that the support the institute can give anyone considering accountancy in Scotland is “invaluable”. “The accounting qualification is one of the broadest trainings you can give yourself in the shortest period of time,” says Ms Brown.

Secret CV

Your first big break?

The call from Cairn Energy in 1998 – there are a limited number of in-house tax roles outside the financial services sector and it was a real privilege to be asked.

Who were your mentors?

No one in particular, but I have been open to learning throughout my career from a great many people.

What else might you have done?

Going back to 1986 I think I wanted to be an air hostess – Jane Morgan was the most glamorous character in Bunty [the comic-strip story magazine for girls].

Best career advice to others

I really believe that we create our own luck and can do so by spotting the opportunities. But it is important that you have a plan to grow and develop every year – a flexible plan – which also includes being a non-executive director at the right time in your career.