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Are women more loyal to employers than men?

By Dina Medland

Men are known to be ready to change jobs – and employers – frequently in search of promotion, better prospects and more pay. But are women as happy to move, or do they tend to stay loyal to an employer for longer?

Anecdotal evidence suggests the latter. I have spoken to many senior female executives across a range of jobs and sectors, and it appears that women stay loyal for a very long time at some organisations.

For example, Christine Hodgson, executive chairman of Capgemini UK, the IT and consulting firm, has been with the company for 14 years and is also its first female board director. I asked her whether women stay longer with an employer than men.

“My gut reaction is yes, absolutely,” she says. “But looking at the statistics, it doesn’t stand up. That is – until I looked at the upper echelons of the company.” There, she found that among the top three pay grades, women stayed longer with the firm.

“Personally, I think women do tend to be loyal to a situation. If they enjoy what they’re doing they are likely to stay on. When you’re balancing other things in your life why introduce an unknown?” says Ms Hodgson, referring to the greater need for women to balance work with the demands of family life.

In her career she has worked for three employers. “I would probably have stayed at the first one if a client hadn’t offered me a great opportunity. But at the time I had no family.”

Flexible working is very important to her today, with a young child. But so is the fact that, as an industry, IT and consulting can provide a very dynamic environment with a constantly changing role for an individual.

Sarah Bond, head of diversity for Europe at professional services firm KPMG, is passionate about flexible working as a tool for retention across the gender divide. “People who work flexibly across the company and also those who work part-time do show lower turnover rates – flexible working definitely binds people to an organisation,” she says.

KPMG tax partner, Paula Claisse, is an example. She has been at KPMG for 13 years and a partner for four. “I was made a partner while working part-time – I became a partner the day I

had my second child, and I felt that was very important to my relationship with my employer,” she says.

But few people make the ease of managing the rest of their life the top priority when developing a career. “Cultural fit” seems to be a far more important factor – and one that places the onus on the employer to ensure the relationship with employees can grow and adapt.

Laura Whyte, personnel director with the John Lewis Partnership, has been with the company for 29 years – it was her second employer after university. She says: “The longest I have spent in one role is four years. There has been a huge variety, and I was lucky enough to join an organisation that fits my culture and personality.” She has been on the John Lewis board since 2004.

For employers, encouraging loyalty has many benefits, one of which, as Ms Whyte points out, is personal development: “When length of service is above average, you can afford as a company to invest in training.”

Staying interested and feeling valued seems key to many senior executive women. In financial services, Andrea Blance, group risk officer at Legal & General, where she has been for 26 years, says: “For me, looking outside just didn’t look interesting.”

But does this tendency for senior women to remain loyal indicate a lack of ambition?

Michelle McDowell, chair of structural engineering at BDP – and the only woman on the board – replies: “In engineering, the women I come across tend to be very ambitious and focused on their career – and not risk-averse,” she says.

“Women tend to stay longer if they find a mentor – male or female – who recognises their skills, ignores gender and helps them find their place.” She has been with BDP since 1997 and was with her previous employer for 10 years.

Flexible working is important, she says. “But it’s about the woman finding the employer who accommodates what she wants to achieve.” She agrees that it is difficult to find senior women in engineering, and adds: “The way in which men and women express themselves is very different. A man may routinely say in a meeting ‘I’ve just brought in a £10m fee’ whereas women are slightly more reluctant to blow their own trumpet. It’s not shyness or lack of confidence, they just believe in saying what is pertinent and leaving it at that.”

At Unilever, Helen Wyatt, HR director, is seeking to tackle such issues to staunch the attrition rate among Unilever’s senior women: “Women are probably much less ready to put themselves forward for promotion – they will tell you what they haven’t done, and point out the gaps on their CV – which is directly opposite to what men will do,” she says. “We need therefore to allow for it, and to work it into our thinking.”

A survey at Unilever, now a few years old, showed “many women feel that the price of advancement is too high. They see their lives much more broadly [than men],” says Ms Wyatt.

Unilever is addressing this: “We’re asking whether ‘extreme jobs’ need to be constructed that way. They were probably constructed by men in the first place, and it might be that you don’t need to be able to fly to Australia at short notice.”

Flexible thinking about roles can have a big influence on loyalty. Sue Albion is legal director and company secretary at Molson Coors, the brewer, and joined its board in February. She joined the legal department, moved into strategy, then left to be chief commercial officer and company secretary at Inspired Gaming Group from 2006 to 2008.

In 2009 she rejoined Molson Coors after having a baby. Ms Albion says: “The familiarity of an organisation can be a double-edged sword. It is definitely a pull, but part of me also wondered whether I should go forward, and not move back. But Molson Coors had backed me in stretching roles before, and there has been constant opportunity. I knew they were investing in people.”

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