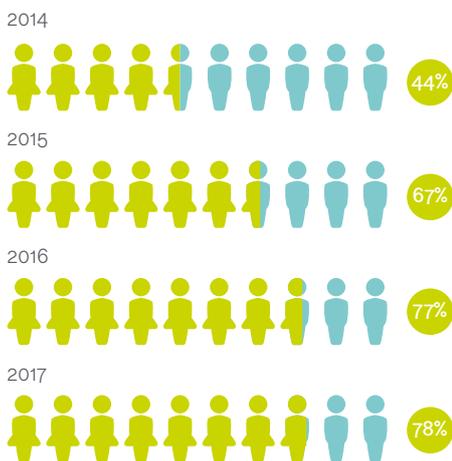


Goodbye, glass ceiling?

Female Group HRDs now dominate the FTSE 100

Percentage of female Group HRD appointments 2014-2017



In the FTSE 100 there are now 52 female HR Directors in the C-suite. In 2011, there were just 29.

Furthermore, this rise in female appointments is accelerating with women having won 44% of all new FTSE 100 Group HRD appointments in 2014, 67% in 2015, 77% in 2016 and 78% in 2017.

This would appear to be very positive news for gender equality and finally a sign that blue-chip companies are addressing the issue of female underrepresentation in the C-suite.

Is the function that champions equality and inclusion excluding men?

There is also a concern that the function that champions equality and inclusion may be excluding men. Reverse discrimination at the most senior levels would be a poor outcome if this were the case.

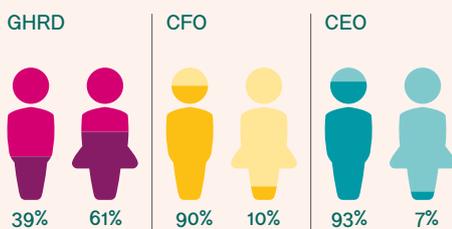
The over-representation of either sex also risks gender stereotyping which all the research (admittedly mainly on having a preponderance of men) suggests limits performance.

There is also an accusation that HR has been branded as a 'profession for women'. In other words, one that requires a softer, less commercial or a less analytical set of skills.

Whether there is any validity in these arguments or not, there is a bigger picture at play.

A milestone for celebration or a false indicator of gender diversity?

2018 gender split of FTSE 100 Group HRD, CFO and CEO population



From transformed function to transformer

The dramatic shift in the gender balance of FTSE 100 HRDs has been paralleled by a significant shift in the professionalisation and elevation of the HR function.

Once a function that did not necessarily even merit a place on the executive committee, now not only are there more HRDs on the executive committees of major businesses but more are winning roles on FTSE Boards as NEDs.

The very best Group HRDs are helping to transform their organisations by creating new strategies for leadership development and performance management.

They are also seizing the opportunities offered by digital technology and driving operational excellence while unlocking potential through diversity and inclusion to build more empowering cultures.



These critical agendas have gained momentum in recent years and the best Group HRDs – male or female – blend an understanding of how to create talent-driven organisations with an ability to analyse data and make insight-based people decisions. In a business environment where the talent agenda is so central to sustainable success, high quality HRDs really are a competitive advantage.

First stop HR, next stop CEO

So, despite the body of opinion that considers this ‘progress’ a false indicator of organisational commitment to gender diversity, it would be genuinely perverse if we did not celebrate the first senior executive role to flip over to a female majority. In time, this milestone may prove to be the inflection point – HR leading the way followed by a ripple through other functional roles and divisional management ultimately to CEO.

Whether that proves to be the case will depend on this current set of Group HRDs, and their effectiveness at influencing talent management, succession planning and compensation policy, areas where so many of the barriers of the past have resided. HR is the first to have broken the Glass Ceiling – we look forward to seeing the role it will take in shattering it for everyone else.



Hedley May is unique in the world of executive search. We specialise in senior functional roles for major corporates, financial institutions and professional services firms, operating globally from our offices in London and New York.

Our commitment to Diversity and Inclusion, a transparent process and collaborative culture stand us apart, ensuring every client gets the best of Hedley May’s collective energy wherever they are in the world.

Hedley May thinking is a series of insights that tests accepted wisdom to increase understanding of the senior functional market we service. Our aim is to challenge the status quo, develop the talent agenda and enhance inclusion across our client base.



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Karen joined Hedley May in 2017 to create a market leading and genuinely future focussed HR practice operating across Europe, the US and Asia. Karen is dedicated to finding the most transformative HR leaders with the skillset to outperform not just in the economy of today, but also meeting the demands of tomorrow.