

Women in hospitality must make sacrifices to succeed, finds briefing

Sacrifices, a fantastic support network, the help of mentors and role models and a gritty determination to succeed in a male-dominated environment are must-haves if women want to achieve senior roles in the global hospitality sector.

Women must also take the lead from their male counterparts and draw more attention to their successes, particularly when it comes to salary negotiations.

These were the conclusions from a topical breakfast briefing held at London's Dukes Hotel yesterday [21 June 2011] where a panel of successful senior female executives discussed perceived career roadblocks for women in hospitality and outlined their own experiences in the route to success.

The briefing was organised by global search company HVS Executive Search and the Leading Ladies of London Association, the organisation set up for female general managers in London's five-star hotels. Setting the scene, HVS Executive Search director Lorenza Alessie, moderating the session, said that out of 190 heads of state across the globe only nine were women and that only 15 percent of corporate jobs were occupied by women, something that has not changed since 2002.

Research by People 1st shows that women are the backbone of the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism industry, making up 60% of the sector's workforce but only 6 percent of senior board executives, half the national average, she said. It seems that whilst many women progress to supervisor or unit manager level, few are currently able to make the step up to the next level. In the hospitality industry, on average, 25 percent of the male workforce is employed as managers and are in senior positions compared with 18 percent of females.

Panellist Debrah Dhugga, general manager of Dukes Hotel and one of the founders of the Leading Ladies of London Association, said that there were now an impressive eight general managers of five star hotels in London a number that has actually grown, having been a traditionally male preserve. Women need to demonstrate that there is a career to be had in hospitality and that we, as women, can make it to the top, she said. However, the sacrifices she admitted making in order to get there included seeing the long-term benefit of a job which paid no more than the cost of her childcare, missing her children's school events and living away from home five days a week.

This industry is a lifestyle. Many times my friends have said to me that they can't believe I could leave my children. These comments hurt, but I had to rise above it. I did it because I wanted to. The cost can be great, but I wanted a career and although that can be perceived as selfish, you have to put yourself first. My children certainly haven't suffered as a result.

Fellow panellist Alison Frith, owner and managing director of Artizian catering, also admitted to making huge sacrifices in her pursuit of career success. Frith, who set up Artizian in 1997, said that contract catering was still a male dominated sector and that the majority of female executives were those who had set up their own companies.

I had a choice children or my own business - and I chose to set up my own business. When I am working 48-hour stints I realise I made the right decision. I couldn't work those sort of hours with children.

Jillian MacLean, managing director of restaurant and bar group Drake & Morgan, called for women to take a more balanced view about their careers. MacLean, who established Drake & Morgan through frustration with other restaurants and bars in the market, said: I think many women sometimes work enormously hard and perhaps need to be a bit more balanced, she said.

But rather than demanding more flexibility from employers in the industry, it seems that successful women are now more willing to make the sacrifices required of them in order to reach the top jobs, and that involves having good back-up and understanding partners. The more senior you are the more difficult it is for employers to be flexible. A network of support is absolutely critical and you can never under-estimate that, said Frith.

Debrah Dhugga struck an equally realistic note: "Anyone who comes into our industry and thinks it is a nine to five job never lasts. It's a lifestyle. You can be flexible up to a point, but you still have a business to run and you've got to be prepared to work for it."

In order to attempt to reduce the massive £2.8bn cost of females leaving the sector, the panelists called for women to be more open with their employers about their career aspirations and plans, particularly regarding returning to work after maternity leave. Mentoring was also advocated for women to discuss their career issues and to help find a way of working through these issues. "The further up the ladder you go the lonelier it is. A network of women and mentors gives you someone to discuss things with, and that can be extremely useful," said Dhugga.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

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