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Gender Hub, 19th May 2015 – Agenda

Dual Career Management. Locally and internationally

Introduction

The focus of the session was how to deal with the challenges and opportunities associated with dual careers – both internationally and locally.

- What organisations and women can do to increase the number of women in international roles
- Which competencies successful women leaders have in common when taking up international careers
- How international work experience can work to your advantage, speeding up your career
- How to act as a couple when confronted with dual careers / how to support each other as a couple
- Risks of dual careers or working abroad

These issues brought together 3 experts and 26 participants from 15 companies reflecting a diversity of industry sectors, experience and perspectives.

Expert Presentation

Caroline Kersten, Partner, Leverage HR (<http://leveragehr.com/>) and co-author of 'Worldly Women', drew on recent research conducted over a 2-year period through interviews with 62 senior level women who had experienced expat/international assignment roles in a range of companies. Their experience covered different countries and functions as well as corporate and non-profit entities. Beware of perceived barriers to mobility:

- **Self-imposed barriers, due to work/life balance constraints:** Many women choose not to put themselves forward for international assignments due to the potential impact on family life. Yet 63% of those interviewed had children and talked about the rich experience they had gained as a family living abroad. They said that an essential component for success was the support and training provided for accompanying spouse. This needs to be substantial and include career counseling and networking opportunities (social and professional).
- **Assumed lack of interest:** Businesses tend to default to 'a woman doesn't want it' mode when considering candidates for international assignments. Caroline urges

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companies to 'knock three times', giving the woman a chance to reflect and consider and talk about her concerns and issues. Men are more likely to say 'yes' immediately. If a woman wants to think about it, let her do just that. Don't take the initial response to mean a lack of interest.

- **Conflict between potential and performance:** Catalyst and other organizations have conducted research that demonstrates that men are promoted on potential whereas women are promoted on performance. Caroline says that conversations need to take place sooner in the career development process with women who have an interest in (and potential for) international roles. This will enable them to develop the necessary skills to help them progress and be considered as meaningful candidates, such as networking, communication and gaining appropriate visibility.

The research identified some core competencies for women to be successful in expat roles:

- Self awareness – understanding your strengths, weaknesses, impact on others
- Conscious 'imbalance' – acknowledging that 'imbalance' is OK if understood and managed – focus on what energizes you
- Ability to operate outside your comfort zone – being prepared to stretch and take on the unknown.
- Active career management - knowing what you want from your career and working with intention to achieve those goals.

The research also highlighted the importance of preparing for repatriation, as this can often be more challenging than the initial expatriation. It is important for companies to create an environment where the experience gained abroad can be leveraged and that the returning manager can demonstrate the value her international assignment brings to the business.

Company Testimonial

Martine Veyssiére, Vice President Career Management, Total, talked about how Total manages international assignments.

Total is the world's fourth-largest oil and gas company and second-largest solar energy operator with operations in more than 130 countries and more than 100,000 employees. 70% of Total's new recruits are 'young grads' who are typically moved into new roles every 3-5 years with the help of dedicated career managers and associated HR policies.

During her 30-year career at Total she has held a range of roles, in line with the company philosophy of encouraging and facilitating job mobility, nationally and internationally. She herself is part of a dual career couple with children and says that mutual support is very important.

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Total has been focusing on Diversity for over 10 years, founded on three pillars:

- Diverse teams deliver better performance and efficiency, bringing benefits to the business as a whole
- As a company with French origins operating in 130 countries, it needs to reflect the communities in which it is present
- To attract the best people, means recruiting diverse talent.

The focus was initially on ‘women and international’ with an objective of 20% of women in senior executive roles and 50% of senior roles being held by non-French or ‘international’ leaders (eg, have African leaders in the African businesses).

On the topic of dual careers, over the years Total has shifted from giving couples support and tools to be geographically mobile to offering more specific career counseling. They are members of Cindex, an association of companies that help each other with international mobility. <http://www.cindex.fr/index.php?clang=en>

Total has also recently joined IDCN <http://www.idcn.info/> a non-profit association formed in 2012. It is made up of global organizations and local entities across a range of cities, with the purpose of facilitating job searches for mobile employees’ partners, and providing member companies access to a turnkey pool of talent.

Total is hosting the first meeting of the Belgian chapter on 24 June which will provide an opportunity for accompanying spouse participants to learn about the Belgian job market, network with each other and meet recruiters etc.

From her own experience, Martine stresses the importance of discussing the implications of mobility opportunities ahead of making a final decision – saying this applies equally to national and international assignments. This is in line with Caroline’s ‘knock three times’ principle. In some instances, Total has created successful outcomes by hiring the spouse.

Maija Van Langendonck, HR change and Diversity Lead for EMEA, Global IT, Cargill shared her experiences from Cargill which is itself a very diverse company. Privately-owned, it provides food, agriculture, financial and industrial products and services, has 152,000 employees in 67 countries and has the concept of ‘people and relationships’ in its DNA.

Maija shared the outcomes from some recent research that was done to support Cargill’s desire to be a preferred employer of choice for women. The research was built around a series of hypotheses that they sought to prove/disprove, such as “women self-select out of career opportunities”. Whilst the research didn’t result in any big ‘AHAs’ it did show:

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- Women have the same ambitions as men
- More women are in individual contributor roles (rather than managerial)
- More women are in functional roles (eg HR, Finance)
- Less women are in business/commercial roles (eg sales, engineering, operations)

So, currently, women are not in the roles that are most likely to be considered for international assignments. Cargill now has an objective to redress this and will be re-conducting the research to assess progress.

Maija's personal reflection is that dual careers don't peak at the same time, so there are opportunities to 'give and take' as long as both parties show flexibility, and each can 'have it all' at different times.

Panel Discussion

The lively discussion that followed covered a range of topics:

The challenge of a career as a single mother / father

This applies for travel as well, let alone international mobility. The panelists agreed that it is always important for companies to try to adapt to different circumstances and take a case-by-case approach whilst ensuring that HR policies and support structures reflect changing social and family dynamics and norms.

Does age factor in decisions about international assignments – when is one too young / too old and is there too much emphasis on Gen Y?

The panelists felt that age should not be a constraining factor but different factors do need to be taken into consideration.

- You need a certain level of experience in order to take on an international role, and for women this may coincide with when they are considering having a family, so this needs to be openly discussed.
- It is essential to have the right conversations with people at the right stages of their career life cycle – and not to pre-judge based on past assumptions. It is about matching life and work expectations at a point in time. For instance, women are increasingly initiating requests for expat assignments at an age that is relevant for them.
- Enlightened companies are reviewing their female talent pool and looking to see who may now be ready and able to take on a challenge that would not have been appropriate earlier.

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- Companies are also increasingly looking at 'second wave' careers (eg. above 45) and even third wave (for those of pensionable age who still wish to work) – a suggestion was made that business schools should target more women in the 40-50 year old bracket for MBAs as returning to education can be an alternative to returning to the workplace for some women.
- Companies are already adapting to the changing dynamics because of the increasing impact of Gen Y employees in the workforce. However, recent research by HBR showed that 50% of the male respondents believe they should have the prime career, and 26% of the female respondents agreed with that statement. So there is still a long way to go to achieve true equality in dual careers.

Dual career strategies: companies need to accept that dual careers will be more commonplace than in the past and adapt to the realities of this, including how they expatriate and repatriate

- Encourage and facilitate mobility conversations within couples and within the companies before reaching a decision point, eg. one partner being offered an international role.
- Be attentive to the age and stages in the career of both partners (even if not working in the same company)
- Accept higher turnover, which will become inevitable as couples become more mobile, with both being potential followers or leaders and willing to swap roles when necessary.
- Research shows that many returnees leave within two years, as companies do not place enough emphasis on re-integration. International assignments may be 3-5 years in length and companies cannot necessarily foresee roles for the returnee that far out, so it is essential for both parties to stay in touch throughout the assignment to discuss different options. This should be a shared responsibility.
- Never send an expat off without having a plan for 'where to next'. It is important to recognize that the expat is taking on the challenge of a new role in a different place and is ready to face the unknown, so should expect support from the company once the assignment is over. This may include new skills development as well as ensuring the returnee appreciates (and is recognised for) the value she is still adding to the company.
- Companies with decentralized decision-making structures (eg regional structures and regional HQs) may have more opportunities for international roles.

Women are increasingly asking questions about making choices between career / family at much younger ages than previously (and even before they are in a long-term partnership). How should one deal with this?

In the book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg refers to this as the 'don't leave before you leave' syndrome. The panelists felt it was essential to understand what is prompting young women to ask express such concerns.

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- Focus on where the person is in her career now and what her immediate motivations are and how to support those – take into account conscious ‘imbalance’.
- Encourage women to grow fast early on, eg by developing more skills, being visible and establishing the value they are bringing to the company, so that if/when they decide to take a break for family reasons, their value is known and established and a return will be encouraged and welcomed.
- Mentoring programmes can be highly valuable in supporting young women at the early stages of their career. Because the mentor-mentee relationship is confidential and private it can be easier to ask questions and seek answers to help build self-confidence.

How do we attract a dual career couple to take up a short-term contract in a different geographical location?

Panelists recognized the particular challenge of recruiting for a limited duration contract vs a permanent contract, and in particular the implications for the accompanying spouse. They suggested creative solutions such as:

- Commuting / flexi time / work from home options – if appropriate
- Being clear about the value associated with taking on the assignment in terms of future career opportunities – eg, experienced gained, willingness to be flexible and take a risk with a short-term assignment, etc
- Explore possible sabbatical opportunities for the accompanying spouse, if the employment/legal framework allows this
- The IDCN could be a useful resource