



WOMEN AT THE TOP

The view from Poland

CEOs talk about overcoming the barriers to leadership

About Spencer Stuart

Spencer Stuart is one of the world's leading executive search consulting firms. Privately held since 1956, Spencer Stuart applies its extensive knowledge of industries, functions and talent to advise select clients — ranging from major multinationals to emerging companies to nonprofit organisations — and address their leadership requirements. Through 53 offices in 29 countries and a broad range of practice groups, Spencer Stuart consultants focus on senior-level executive search, board director appointments, succession planning and in-depth senior executive management assessments.

Executive summary

With diversity an increasingly important item on the corporate agenda, Spencer Stuart interviewed more than 20 CEOs of Polish companies, both women and men, about the widespread under-representation of women on boards and at senior executive level. In common with many other markets, the percentage of women occupying management positions falls as roles get more senior. Such inequality is harmful to Polish business, so it is helpful to understand the barriers to progress and learn what women leaders have done to overcome them.

QUOTAS ARE NOT THE ANSWER. Forcing organisations to achieve gender parity is not a popular solution, particularly among women, many of whom view quotas as insulting and potentially counter-productive. Female CEOs believe that the route to the top should be a natural rather than a forced progression.

THE GLASS CEILING IS NO LONGER THE ISSUE IT WAS. Today it is not prejudice that holds women back, so much as their lack of ambition to assume leadership positions and their lack of skill in promoting their own achievements.

CONFIDENCE IS A CRITICAL ISSUE. Women tend to be hesitant about putting themselves forward for promotion. Their self-doubt may reflect both honesty and modesty, but it hinders career progression. Women who succeed generally come across as confident as well as focused, motivated and determined. Many women CEOs believe their early career progression was helped by working in a multinational company, with its culturally diverse environment.

NETWORKING IS DIFFICULT FOR WOMEN. Informal networking plays an important part in business life in Poland, but the reality is that women do not thrive on networking, mainly because most traditional networking activities are built around male interests.

WOMEN HAVE SEVERAL CLEAR ADVANTAGES OVER MEN. Women are less afraid to hire strong, talented people, tend to have more empathy, and possess a temperament that equips them to work well in teams. If they can combine emotional intelligence with decisiveness, pursue ambitious goals and be assertive they can achieve extraordinary success.

WOMEN HAVE A MORE BALANCED ATTITUDE TO RISK. Women approach risk differently from men. They are more mindful of consequences and less affected by ego when weighing up risk factors.

WORK & FAMILY — AN AGE-OLD DILEMMA. Achieving work/life balance is a strong cultural theme in Poland. Many people do not question the fact that so many women opt out of senior-level careers to choose a life at home. Flexible working policies are considered essential to keeping women in the workforce, and 70 per cent of those we interviewed work for companies that now provide special support to women during pregnancy and maternity leave.

DO WOMEN NEED TO BE BETTER THAN MEN TO GET TO THE TOP?

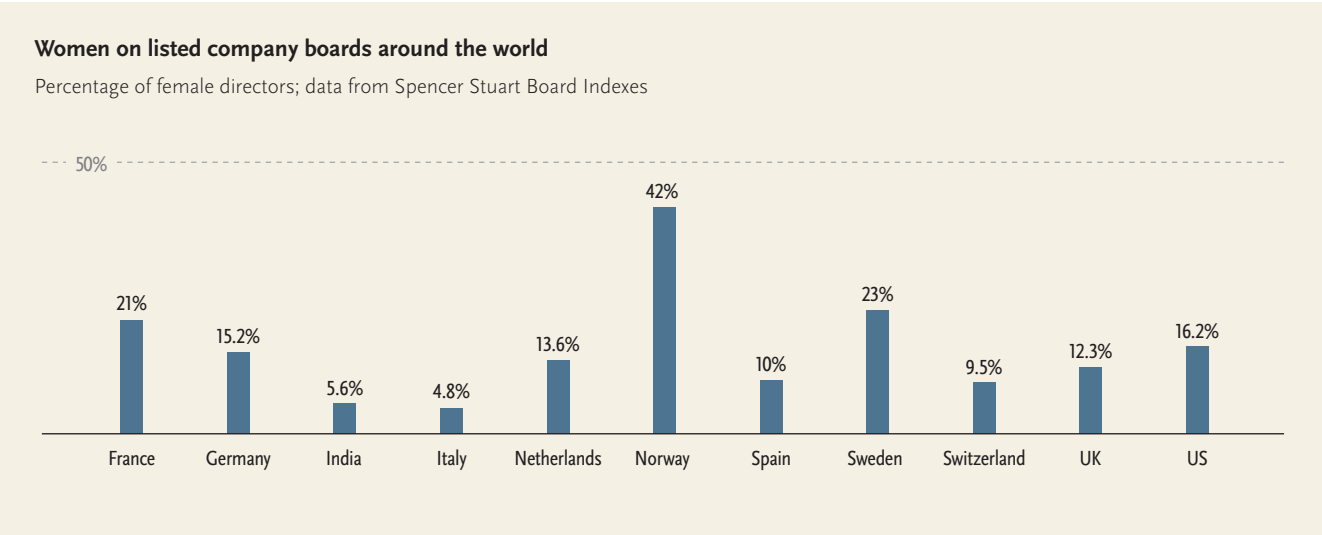
The female leaders we spoke to were divided on this issue, but there is no doubt that women must be at the top of their game to succeed in what is often described as a “man’s world”. Ultimately, women who succeed in becoming president or CEO have to be the best candidate, better than all the other men and women.

Introduction

The debate over the need for greater gender diversity at senior executive level and in the boardrooms of global publicly listed companies has been capturing headlines across the world over in the past few years. A number of European governments have also been focusing on the under-representation of women in senior management positions and the potential need for legislation to bring about change.

In the UK, the Davies Review concluded that FTSE 100 company boards should have 25 per cent female directors by 2015, but avoided recommending legislation to achieve that change. A year later, the UK is still resisting quotas as the answer to achieving a significant increase in the number of women on boards, while struggling with the fundamental issue of how to increase the ‘pipeline’ of qualified women for the most senior executive positions. The latest findings from the Professional Boards Forum’s Boardwatch initiative show that as of January 17, 2012, just 6.5 per cent of FTSE 100 executive directors and 14.9 per cent of non-executive directors were women.

The under-representation of women at director level is a widespread issue, crossing many geographical borders. As the chart below shows, few countries have so far achieved anything approaching parity for women in the boardroom.



In Poland, only four per cent of women holding managerial positions are at the level of president. With women leading only three per cent of large and medium-sized companies in the country, the pipeline of qualified senior women remains an important issue.

There are many historic and cultural reasons why women in Poland and other CEE countries have traditionally been engaged both in looking after the household and holding positions in the professional workplace.

The number of women in mid-level managerial positions is relatively high, but the ratio of women to men drops as positions get more senior. It would appear, therefore, that women in CEE countries including Poland reflect the widespread global trend in finding it difficult to reach the very top of their companies.

While considerable global interest has focused on the relatively small numbers of women in senior positions in business, there has been limited exploration of how women themselves feel about this situation.

In order to get a better understanding of women at the top in Poland, we conducted a survey of senior women in business across different industry sectors. Most of our interviewees run a subsidiary of a global multinational company, which suggests that one of the things that distinguishes them as a group is that they have had the opportunity to develop a global mindset. We sought their confidential views on the realities of being a woman in business, their perceptions of any tangible differences between men and women in key strategic functions, and whether they felt they had encountered a 'glass ceiling' en route to the top. We also asked them how they felt about the introduction of quotas.

The results of our research are sometimes surprising. We hope that our findings make a useful contribution to this important debate.

Survey findings

QUOTAS ARE NOT THE RIGHT SOLUTION

The survey respondents were largely against the introduction of artificial quotas to bring more women into senior executive positions in business in Poland. Their reasons for being negative about this method of raising the numbers of women were partly based on an instinctive, emotional reaction, but also on a strong sense of belief in their own ability.

“I would rather feel humiliated than awarded with a position due to the regulations. One must know how to gain power in order to know how to use it. Quotas are humiliating for women. I believe that women are able to fight discrimination with their own strength, determination and intelligence — they are smart enough to know how to reach the top.”

“I do not think it should be mechanically enforced. It is very good that women are there, but let's consider whether providing positions in companies for women through quotas will result in real parity? A woman who gets a job in this way will find it more difficult to succeed than one who achieves the position through her own efforts.”

Many of the women spoke of the flexible work policies at their own companies as useful in attracting and retaining women. The few who backed quotas, or some form of regulation, pointed out that flexible working practices are also mandated by law and without legislation they might not otherwise exist.

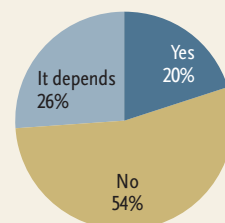
But many women who are willing to consider that it may be necessary to have regulations increasing the numbers of women in senior positions are nevertheless uncomfortable with having to adopt that position.

“Maybe it is worth it. Maybe when there is pressure, women will be given a chance. But I do not care whether a man or a woman takes the post — the person must simply be better.”

“I believe that reaching gender parity depends on shaping the right attitudes, providing that they are not based on empty, superficial slogans. Women do lack professional opportunities, they get low wages and their aspirations are not stimulated.”

Are quotas a solution?

Opinions of women in top executive positions

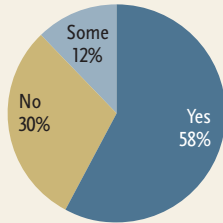


Yes: Quotas are necessary to dramatically change the proportion of women holding the top positions in business.

No: I would prefer to see a natural progression in appointing more women, rather than an enforced solution.

It depends: quotas may be necessary in other cultures but are not needed in Poland.

Do you offer work/life balance solutions?



Some: Yes, but only in special cases.

Most of our respondents pointed out that it would be much more efficient to provide women with the necessary social and infrastructural support that would enable young mothers in particular to fulfil their duties at home and in the workforce. In most of the companies run by the women we interviewed, there are programmes and solutions that make it easier for young women (and also young men) to balance their family lives with professional careers.

HESITATION: WOMEN CAN BE THEIR OWN WORST ENEMIES

Alongside an antipathy to the enforced appointment of women to senior positions, many of the survey’s respondents agreed that women are often hesitant about progressing their careers. Whereas men often exhibit over-confidence when considered for promotion, women have the opposite problem. They tend to doubt themselves, not fully recognising the extent of their skills and talents. Many women do not put themselves forward for promotion because they are concerned they are not fully equipped to take on the new role, whereas men are more likely to put themselves forward with confidence — whether they have the skills or not. Several CEOs we spoke to remarked that this hesitancy on the part of women candidates does not come across well at interview.

“When I talk to a woman who is not sure of herself, I start having doubts myself, thinking that perhaps she does not really want the promotion. If she is not convinced, then maybe I should not be convinced either. This is the fundamental problem that women have.”

This response suggests that women may simply need to receive training, coaching and mentoring when embarking on the process of job progression within a company.

However, the following observation points to another, more tangible reason why women may not get ahead as fast as men — the reality of not belonging to predominantly male clubs or business networks.

“I believe that a lack of self-promotion is the fundamental problem for women....it is obvious that women self-exclude themselves. This also overlaps with the so-called men’s club, which is very difficult to overcome.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING

Many of the respondents spoke confidently of their drive and determination to get ahead, which has been a significant factor in their success to date. But many of them also spoke of the importance in their career of using their

innate sense of empathy to become better senior managers and to build good teams.

The survey reveals that female CEOs believed they were often excluded from “outside work” and “predominantly male” networking activities — such as meeting at the golf club or soccer games. They were more likely to be at home looking after the children once they had finished their professional role for the day.

“The most important part of the business is networking — the sociable, informal part. This sphere revolves entirely around the things that men like, for example playing golf and football matches. This is really a male world: it is possible to get there, but it is not easy — it is not natural for women.”

... AND TEAM BUILDING

The women we interviewed also pointed to their ability to hire well, to build good teams of individuals, and to be unafraid to recruit people who are as good — if not better — than they are themselves. In that way, we can generalise by saying that women use networking in a more professional sense within their senior roles and may even be natural leaders in doing so. It could just be that they need to learn to use the same skills better in order to help climb the corporate ladder in the first place.

“Women who are successful can easily combine typical female traits, like co-operation skills, team work and empathy — so-called ‘emotional intelligence’ — with traits that are normally ascribed to men, like the ability to make quick decisions, assertiveness, and pursuing one’s goals. Combining these two aspects is the key to success.”

“Certain predispositions that women demonstrate are valuable and can be used in business. The fact that we are not competitive, that we tend more towards cooperation than confrontation, helps us to create and integrate teams. The fact that we are emotional also helps, because it is good to work with someone who shows their true feelings, who cares and also has empathy. I am not scared of competition and as a result I build my team from strong, top-level managers. Men compete with one another and try to be alpha males. As a consequence, they tend to hire weaker personalities on their teams. They may not even realise that they are doing so, but women often surround themselves with stronger people than men do.”

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DO WOMEN NEED TO BE 'BETTER THAN MEN'?

This emotionally charged question unsurprisingly received an emotional response. Opinions were divided as to whether a woman needs to be better than a man to compete successfully for the same role. The strongly held views that came through, however, all focused on being “the best candidate” regardless of gender. It was acknowledged, however, that if you were the female candidate, you had to make sure you were noticed — for something other than being female.

“In order to gain a position of power one must be the best candidate. Therefore, a woman must be better than any man or any other woman if she wants to achieve success.”

Questions on whether women were fundamentally different from men in their approach to risk also elicited a variety of responses. However, if there was a consensus, it seemed to be that women take more care in making decisions, which was generally seen as a positive trait.

“I consider this to be an issue of personality rather than gender. There are people who are more analytical and consider matters to the core. On the other hand, there are intuitive people who possess certain character traits that will help them make quick decisions. I can say, however, that women are more responsible about the decisions they make; they are less likely to take risks and want to avoid doing any harm to people or the business.”

“Women definitely have much lower level of aggression. They are more oriented towards communication and it is anthropologically proved that, from the point of view of female and male brain structure, certain parts responsible for communication are shaped differently. As a result, we have a different style and different approach towards management. This does not mean that it is less or more effective — it is simply different.”

DOES THE GLASS CEILING REALLY EXIST?

The notion of a glass ceiling inhibiting women from progressing any further within the organisation was not recognised by the majority of respondents as a reality. Some women CEOs could recall specific instances in their careers when they felt an unidentified barrier preventing their progress. Sometimes the impediment may even have been the attitude of another woman. However, no women believed the term ‘glass ceiling’ to be a helpful one.

We ought to pose the question: are people willing or not willing to sacrifice certain things in their lives?

Instead, their focus was on the multitude of complex and intertwined factors that can play an important role in determining career choice and path.

“A chairperson’s life is entirely different to that of a lower-level manager. We ought to pose the question: are people willing or not willing to sacrifice certain things in their lives? Women often have more social roles to perform and sometimes they have to let go, because they cannot cope with everything at the same time. Some may like their current position as a sales or HR manager and do not need to reach the top of the organisation in order to feel satisfied.”

As a number of people noted, some obstacles to progress are set by women themselves, through their own behaviour.

“To compete successfully with men a woman has to speak loudly about her achievements. I notice that men simply know how to put themselves forward for promotion: they boast about every little detail and only then feel that they are appreciated. Women do not do that. They do great things, achieve a lot, and we only find out about it if we start enquiring.”

“There is certainly a difference in the way men look at other men versus women. When a man is looking at another man, he pays attention to what he is saying or presenting; he does not look at his clothes. By contrast, if a woman is standing in front of men, they will be often staring at her rather than listening, which is quite embarrassing.”

THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

During our many conversations with women leaders, a majority revealed that they see Poland as a deeply conservative country, with a culture that expects women to opt out at some point and choose a commitment to home over the workplace.

Many of the women we spoke to hold senior positions in multinational companies and believe their early career progression had a lot to do with having worked in an eclectic, culturally diverse environment. Some of them felt they had benefited from a work ethos and mindset different to that found in a purely Polish organisation. When working within Poland, by contrast, they have come across cultural barriers.

“Women’s behaviour derives from culture and education. The way that we educate in this society is reflected in hierarchies and behavioural models.”

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“I have never thought I had to hire men, but in reality most of the CVs of people aspiring for top positions have been from men. Too often, women do not give themselves a chance to make a career. They do not take advantage of the opportunities in front of them.”

“The most important thing is to change attitudes and awareness. It terrifies me when a young man comes to me and says he has to be promoted because his wife is expecting a baby and he wants her to stay at home. One can see how the system works at moments like that, where a woman giving birth to a second child wonders whether to return to all that mess at work or to listen to the advice of her husband and family. These attitudes are deeply ingrained in Poland.”

THE FUTURE

The women we interviewed have all been successful in their chosen fields. Although they have all had different experiences and hold differing views, their commitment, determination and confidence in their own ability make them (and others like them) the best role models for other women in Polish business.

“I have always been the youngest person or the only woman on the team. The more experience I gained, the more opportunities came my way. I made everything happen for myself and never waited for somebody to come and give me permission to act. I always knew that initiative was on my side and that everything depends on me.”

“It was due to my persistence and consistency that I suppressed the softer, typically female traits. If a woman enters a male world, the so-called ‘male game’, she has to behave according to the proverb: ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’”

“I hope that as women take over more top positions, women’s issues will be taken into consideration, like the fact that there has to be a balance between work and private life. The more women hold top jobs, the more understanding they will create for other women.”

CONCLUSION

Over the last 30 years we have witnessed a rapid growth in opportunities for women to get to the top of the professional world. The media, ever more powerful and global, has broadened awareness of the world’s diversity, helping society to arrive at greater acceptance of the benefits that diversity can bring.

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Progress is not as fast as it could be, however. According to the British Equality and Human Rights Commission, at the current rate of progress it will take 73 years for women to gain equal representation on the boards of FTSE 100 companies. This may sound disappointing, but the majority of women who have reached the top believe that they could not have achieved that goal in any other way than by determination and hard work. Quotas would not have got them there.

The increasing number of female executives in CEO positions will encourage more women to start believing that reaching the top is truly achievable. To make their passage a little easier, we offer the following suggestions for women aspiring to be CEOs.

Advice for aspiring female CEOs

ATTITUDE

- > Combine your ambition with determination and a 'don't give up' approach.
- > Be persistent. It is not easy to get to the top — it is a marathon, not a sprint.
- > Always aim to have a seat at the table — do not exclude yourself from the strategic decision-making process.

PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

- > Aim to gain experience beyond your professional responsibilities.
- > Always be looking for new opportunities to increase your knowledge and exposure to the business.
- > Adopt a positive attitude to new challenges rather than saying "I am not sure whether I am capable of managing it".

SELF-PROMOTION

- > Never underestimate your achievements, capabilities and talents.
- > Do not attribute your success to external factors alone. Work on projecting a positive image of yourself.

PRIVATE LIFE

- > Encourage your partner to understand and fully support your professional development — you will need that support more than you think.
- > Be prepared to compromise on your family and social life — those at the top rarely have it all.
- > Remember, it is still a man's world and you will sometimes have to play a man's game.

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- > Sanofi Aventis
- > Tchibo GmbH
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