

BOARD GAMES

Women are still under-represented when it comes to running businesses, but why? Does motherhood get in the way, or are those doing the hiring to blame? Juliette Wills thinks it's more complicated than that...

How was your morning? A frantic, noisy rush to get your children up, dressed and to breakfast club while you barely had time to check you left the house in matching shoes? It's the same story all over the country, but some women are fortunate enough to work for a company that makes their life a little easier when it comes to the 'spinning plates' issue of balancing a career and motherhood.

Having children is, at the end of the day, a lifestyle choice (just as it is to not have them). As such, any benefits like flexible or reduced working hours – or even an on-site crèche – are optional, not mandatory. Many women view the benefits put in place to help them raise a family while working as something they're entitled to, but we should remember that companies don't employ people on the basis of accommodating their private lives. It may sound obvious, but if you intend to start a family, it pays to do your homework before applying for a job, actively seeking out a company that offers flexibility to working mothers over

one that doesn't. This is something Caroline Allen from Brighton knows a thing or two about.

As vice president of sales for e-learning software company Elucidat, Caroline manages a seven-person sales team – six of whom are female – and is proud of the company's flexible working policy. "Flexible working is actively encouraged, rather than something you have to ask for," says Caroline, "which makes a massive difference when considering childcare issues."

The founders of the company (three men, each with two children) lead by example, realising that taking time off for sports days and special assemblies is a key part of parenting. "I'm currently recruiting," adds Caroline, "and I'm happy to take people on either in a part-time role or just during school hours. Everyone from the board down understands that women dropping out of the workforce is a real issue when they have problems juggling work and family."

Another company that is heavily invested in making its workplace female-friendly is Sky. It runs a 'Women in Leadership' initiative, which aims to see women in 50% of senior-management roles. It also insists on 50/50 male/female shortlists for relevant job openings. Banking giant First Direct has an on-site crèche (and gym!) at their HQ in Leeds, while Manchester-based data company UKFast and Vodafone offer new parents 16 weeks of fully paid maternity leave. In recent years, businesses have also begun offering parental leave to employees who have adopted a child. So with all these measures in place, why are there still so

few women in the boardroom? According to a recent report from The Directory of Social Change published in *The Guardian*, companies with equal numbers of female and male directors, or with female-led boards, were rare at just under 4%.

Surprisingly, the six companies that were female-led included a co-operative, a pharmaceutical group, a manufacturing company, an electronics company, an engineering firm and an information technology service provider. That blows apart the common assumption that women don't excel in male-dominated industries. The issue is: how do we get them there? A 2015 study showed that 74% of all students studying engineering, manufacturing and construction-related subjects were male. In the same year, 78% of students studying education and 72% of students studying health and welfare-related subjects were female. Perhaps the issue isn't that women aren't being given jobs in Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths) sectors, but more that they're not studying them in the first place.

Renishaw plc is an engineering company with 70% women on its board who are hoping to turn that tide. It runs engagement programmes with schools, universities and the government to overcome the stereotypes and discrimination preventing more women from working in Stem.

This is what we need more of – and it should begin at grass-roots level, but with

school technology budgets falling year on year, it doesn't look like the government are doing anything to ensure they are equipping school-leavers with a skill set applicable to a 21st century workforce. A basic grasp of arable farming in Brazil (filed loosely under 'geography') won't be much use to anyone when it comes to getting a job (unless, of course, they want to be an arable farmer in Brazil, in which case they'll ace their interview).

While we wait for the government to get its act together, we have innovators like TechnoKids to turn to. An external learning company based in Surrey, it offers parents at selected schools (and even nurseries) the opportunity to enrol their children – both girls and boys – in extra-curricular gaming and coding classes. That's right, coding. For three year olds.

Wait, what?

"My girls absolutely love tech club," says interior designer Bo Fentum,

mother to seven-year-old twins, who have been attending TechnoKids classes since they were five. "It fits in with the other subjects they enjoy – one loves coding and art, the other loves coding and maths, so it's conceivable that they may both end up in careers which combine these core subjects. We don't see tech as something for boys, neither does the school, and neither do they."

Hopefully, in the not too distant future, young women will be able to make career choices based on their passion and ability, rather than their gender. ■

