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Who needs to change: women or organisations?

By Sarah O' Carroll

Women do not traditionally possess some of the characteristics and social skills needed to progress in the workplace, according to Maureen Frank, managing director of Emberin, a consulting firm which helps women at work.

While not doubting women's work capabilities, Frank said that women need to build up their confidence and develop skills such as networking and self-promotion if they are to advance to senior positions at the same rate as men.

"Guys are better at raising their visibility in the workplace – they will take the credit. Whereas the way a woman traditionally works is that they will do a really good job – they will do an exceptional job, and then expect people to recognise that they've done a good job – whereas a guy will tell you," said Frank. "Also, men network better about work-related things, but when we get together we often talk about our hair, shoes and our boyfriends. We've got to start talking about helping each other out in a work context," she added.

However, Anna McPhee, director of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA), believes it is organisations and not women that need to change if they are to progress to more senior positions.

"It's not the women that have to fix themselves. It is organisations that have to recognise the systemic barriers in their organisations and remove them, if they are going to attain and attract the best talent," she said. "The women are there. The women are qualified and we will only see more women take on more leadership positions within business if organisations remain vigilant to the issues."

However, Frank said that gender discrimination in organisations is often not malicious and not deliberate. "On the male side of things I think there is a lot of non-malicious, kind of silent discrimination these days. It's often men not even realising they are doing it," said Frank.

"Women need to take charge and work out what they want, and what suits them. Then they need to come to their organisation with solutions, not with the problems. And most importantly women need to build their confidence," she said. "It makes me sad to see some young girls who are extremely capable but just have no confidence in their capabilities."

McPhee does not believe that this lack of confidence is an innate characteristic of women, but puts this down to the way they are treated in the workplace. "It's no wonder if that's the case. If women are paid less than men, then they may start to believe that they are worth less," she said.

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