

GETTING TO THE TOP

Glass ceiling still tough to crack

Women's advancement has faltered, new report finds, despite compelling reasons why companies should fix the imbalance in executive ranks, VIRGINIA GALT writes

By VIRGINIA GALT
WORKPLACE REPORTER

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George Cooke, chief executive officer of Dominion of Canada General Insurance Co., did not notice when, exactly, The Skirts outnumbered The Suits on his executive team.

"I knew we had a number of female executives. I didn't realize they had gone past 50 per cent," Mr. Cooke said.

In fact, seven of the 12 senior executives at the Toronto-based property and casualty insurer are women.

And that places the firm well above the national average in the most recent audit of the percentage of women who have made it to the executive ranks of 500 of Canada's top companies by Catalyst Canada, a research and advisory organization dedicated to the advancement of women in business.

Catalyst reported that women held 14.4 per cent of corporate officer positions in the 500 companies examined in 2004, up only marginally from 14 per cent in 2002.

While 95 of those 500 companies had a "critical mass of women in their corporate officer pools" -- that is, 25 per cent or more, in 2004 -- 193 of them had no women in their executive ranks at all.

The advancement of women in corporate leadership has faltered, said Catalyst Canada president Susan Black.

"At the pace of change we are reporting . . . women's overall representation in Corporate Canada will not reach 25 per cent until 2025. It will not reach parity until close to the end of the century."

Mr. Cooke, whose company was cited by Catalyst Canada as a star performer in the advancement of women, was astounded by Catalyst's findings.

Why would any CEO, he wondered in an interview, overlook any group of candidates if the goal is to identify and promote the best?

Ms. Black said that, beyond the basic equity issue, there are compelling reasons why businesses should care, and fix the imbalance in their executive ranks.

"Women form a large part of the labour force and an equal part of the talent pool that's coming into the labour force. They influence a huge number of consumer decisions and they generate their own income that is in the billions of dollars," she said.

"So clearly, for a population this large, it needs to be reflected all the way through an organization if that organization is really going to be the best it can be."

Furthermore, she added, talented young women will not go where they do not feel welcome. "Young men and women who are graduating from school, but young women in particular, are asking very astute, sophisticated questions. They look at the company and they ask, 'Are there any senior women here. Are there role models?'

"If there are senior women, it says to the younger women coming into the talent pool: 'Yes, you have a future, yes, there is potential, yes there is an advancement path.' "

There is still a widespread, if unspoken, attitude in business that women will have less time and energy to devote to executive duties because of their family responsibilities, Mr. Cooke said. "It's a huge barrier to get out of the way for competent women."

He said there is a conscious recognition in his company that families are important, that meetings can be rescheduled if someone's child is ill and that, as long as the work gets done, it doesn't matter if it is done early in the morning, late at night or from home.

And, noted Brigid Murphy, a senior vice-president at the firm: "This has become as much of an issue for the males as the females, because our young executive males are pretty hands-on dads."

Companies that fail to realize this will run into recruitment problems, especially as the postwar baby-boom generation retires and the talent pool shrinks, she said.

"It's not a gender issue any more. Family-friendly is just family-friendly," Ms. Murphy said. "Young men these days are not willing to give up their fatherhood. They want to be there when their kid is sick and calling for daddy just as much as the mothers do."

Mr. Cooke said he did not deliberately set out to promote women.

"It was by design in the sense that they are competent people, but it was not by design that they are female," he said.

"If someone is going to be promoted here or hired, they are going to be the most competent. Then you remove the barriers."

Catalyst reported that a number of industries have continued to improve the representation of women in their "top-of-house" positions. These include the financial services, publishing and printing, multimedia and specialty retail sectors.

"Not surprisingly, industries that we might think of as stereotypically male continue to have the lowest representation, less than 10 per cent," Ms. Black said. These include paper and forest products, steel production, motor vehicles and parts, oil and gas and general manufacturing and construction.

These industries have not traditionally been regarded as "very appealing" to women, conceded Shirley Duffy, a former member of the board of directors at Toronto-based Aecon Group Inc., a construction and development company.

Currently, none of Aecon's 14 corporate officers is a woman, but "we have a lot more women now who are in junior and middle management and working their way up," said Ms. Duffy, who rose through the ranks in her 25-year-career and is now easing into retirement.

"I did work on supervising in the manufacturing and construction side and visited job sites. I have my boots and hard hat, I rose through the ranks, I was on the board for several years, so there is potential."

Ms. Duffy, a member of the National Association of Women in Construction, said women are still being steered away from courses in school that would give them a competitive edge in construction management. She recalled the frustration of a girl she met at a recent high-school career fair whose ambition was to eventually take over her father's construction company -- but he was only inviting her brothers into the family firm.

Still, Ms. Duffy said, a lot more women are choosing non-traditional careers and moving more confidently into management roles.

"We [at Aecon] have a lot of women who are in project management now and have all the potential to become senior management in the company. Ten years ago, we had one or two at most.

"So, it will happen," Ms. Duffy said. But it will take time to totally break through the concrete ceiling.

Ms. Black hopes to push the process along by publishing progress reports every two years. The University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management is working to develop the next generation of female CEOs through its participation in the Judy Project, a leadership forum for executive women established in memory of the late Microsoft Canada Co. executive Judy Elder. And a number of major companies, as a matter of policy, are working to introduce more gender and cultural diversity into management ranks.

"Advancement of women is a high priority for us," said Sylvia Chrominska, executive vice-president of human resources at Bank of Nova Scotia which, just last week, announced the appointments of Barbara Mason as executive vice-president of marketing, sales and service and Wendy Hannam as executive vice-president of domestic branch banking.

Ms. Chrominska said five of the bank's 21 most senior executives are women which, she believes, can only lead to better decision making.

At Dominion of Canada last week, Vivian Bercovici, vice-president, general counsel and corporate secretary, was balancing her work duties with her parental duties, doing some work from home.

"You are judged on how you perform. If you have to leave early, and catch up on the work later, it's not held against you," said Ms. Bercovici, adding that she believes the firm inspires incredible productivity and loyalty from employees who know that other employers are not as accommodating.

Mr. Cooke is a rarity among CEOs in his "gender-neutral" approach, Ms. Bercovici said. "Unfortunately, it's not as common as it should be."

Women in the executive ranks

14.4%: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO HOLD CORPORATE OFFICER POSITIONS IN 500 of CANADA'S LARGEST COMPANIES, UP FROM 14 PER CENT IN 2002.

95: NUMBER OF COMPANIES AMONG THE 500 THAT HAVE 25 PER CENT OR MORE FEMALE CORPORATE OFFICERS, UP FROM 87 COMPANIES IN 2002.

61.4%: PERCENTAGE OF THOSE COMPANIES THAT HAVE AT LEAST ONE FEMALE CORPORATE OFFICER, DOWN FROM 62.3 PER CENT IN 2002.

19: NUMBER OF WOMEN WHO LEAD THESE COMPANIES, UP FROM 13 WOMEN IN 2002.

SOURCE: CATALYST CANADA

