

The Paula Principle



David Fielding MBE takes a look at how women's talents are underused and why charities need to do more to support women in the workplace.

Tony Blair's 1996 'Education, Education, Education' pronouncement endures. We know success in education brings rewards. We tell our children that the better they do at school, the more they can expect later in life.

Common sense dictates that employers should make best use of the skills and talents people have. In almost every subject (the exceptions being maths, physics and perhaps engineering) girls routinely outperform boys at school, and young women outperform young men at college and university. This is the case at every level. 59% of women got 'good' degrees (a first or upper second) compared with 54% of men. There are half a million more women than men in further education. Fewer women than men lack basic skills and have no qualifications. Once in work, women participate more frequently in training activities. 42% of women with a degree had some training compared with 34% of men. On top of the greater success at school; women are adding additional skills from training at a faster rate.

Overall, women's human capital is now significantly greater than men's but this is not evidenced within the workplace in terms of pay and securing the top jobs. The most recent *ACEVO/attenti Pay Survey* confirmed what we all instinctively know. Career paths

remain flatter for women. The pay gap remains obstinately high at around 20%. The Chartered Management Institute's recent survey observed that at the current rate, it would take another 98 years for the pay gap to disappear.

How can this be explained? With Tom Schuller's brainchild the 'Paula Principle'. So named because it mirrors the Peter Principle: that people rise to their level of incompetence. In other words, you go on being promoted until you're doing the job poorly and not promoted any further. When Professor Peter produced his principle in the 1960s, he was primarily referring to men. The Paula Principle, by contrast, suggests that working women tend to remain at a level below that of their full competence or qualification.

The Paula Principle applies not just when women are seeking to become Chairs or CEOs, but refers to jobs at every level. There are a number of factors at work here. Straight forward discrimination; structural blockages most notably the absence or sheer expense of childcare; and psychology. I have written previously about women's lack of self-confidence when going for more senior roles which they are eminently qualified to take on and their reluctance to network.

There is another factor. In many cases women may make

the positive choice not to rise as high as they might. They may opt for a better work/life balance and consciously choose not to subject themselves to the stresses of working at full or overextended capacity.

Clearly this is a choice many women are making but given the old mantra that 'people are our key assets' it surely makes sense to do more to establish diverse top teams. All the evidence tells us diversity makes for better teams. Flexible working, shadowing, mentoring, secondments, and coaching are just some of the CEO tools which should be used more widely.

Women's superior educational achievements mean that we cannot afford to ignore the dissipation of talent at every level implied by the Paula Principle. Changing this will not be robbing Peter to pay Paula, but a step towards greater equity and efficiency - something charities need now more than ever before.

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