

# Equality still some way off

There's a gradual change afoot, writes **Linda Doke**

**W**OMEN are making a significant contribution to South Africa's economy, and many are reaching the top echelons of management.

But there is still much work to be done at all levels of business and society before gender equality is achieved in the workplace.

Historically, the world over, men have dominated business, establishing and entrenching the rules of corporate culture. Over the past several decades, this has been gradually changing, with more women entering business and shifting cultural norms.

However, ambitious women climbing the corporate ladder are still not viewed in the same light as male counterparts — for no other reason than the archaic social view that it is acceptable for men to be ambitious, and career-oriented women are often taken less seriously.

Natalie Davies, MD of Cscan Interim and Beyond, says the problem is attitude.

"There's a belief among both sexes that women in executive positions and leadership roles need to earn their credibility, and to justify their right to be there. Women feel they've got to be tough, that they need to join 'the boys' club' and partake in the pack mentality that is so much a part of the political game men play in business.

"But the most successful women in business do not try to join that game. They simply change the rules. Women are not good at political games, and by unsubscribing and leveraging their strengths, particularly their ability to negotiate, they build a better power base."

The need to prove themselves is another common trap women in business fall into. Many organisations subscribe to time rather than output when assessing a person's value to the business. Women often make the mistake of joining the long-hours game in an effort to prove their worth, rather than focusing on their output and the value they bring.



**YELL:** Yegs Ramiah, Santam executive head for people and brand

"Businesswomen do not need to apologise for their families, nor for wanting to achieve a healthy balance between career and family life. Family is an important part of who they are, and women need to make that clear," says Davies.

The need for a good work-home balance has been acknowledged by many forward-thinking companies who recognise that if they do not adapt their policies, they risk losing valuable employees.

Santam, for example, with its

57.7% female employees, is strides ahead in SA's corporate transformation process, and offers its "Yell for Yellow" concierge service for all employees, regardless of level or gender. The service helps staff manage their time by taking care of their essential chores so they can focus on work.

Yegs Ramiah, Santam executive head for people and brand, says the reality is that organisations that value their people respect their needs.

"Women shouldn't have to

choose between having a family or a career — they have the right to both. What it requires is a mind set change by them, their partners and their organisation. If the organisation values its employees, it will find ways to tailor flexible work arrangements into its work processes," says Ramiah.

Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahni Recruitment Group, says in the past women were prejudiced in the job market because of a difference in skills and experience, in education and the career choices they made.

Today women are moving into roles that have operational and financial responsibilities. More are studying in accounting and technical areas. They are returning to work sooner after having children, or starting businesses at home while raising their children. Many re-enter the workplace with new, updated skills.

"In corporations, many women are ambitious and committed to self-empowerment. They want to feel that their development as professionals is as important to their company as it is to them. They welcome the opportunity to be fast-tracked in their career based on recognition of their worth, rather than the company's need to tick quota boxes," says Burmeister.

Ramiah believes that the key to the gender gap closing in the workplace is the killing of the myth that women have different skills from men.

Ramiah says the glaring difference between men and women in the workplace is that men raise their hands and ask, while women tend to wait to be asked.

"Women can be relied on to get the job done well. But when the position they want becomes available, they don't put up their hands and ask — instead they just hope they will be noticed. Women need to learn to be more assertive in the workplace, more confident in themselves and their abilities, and to ensure that they get what they work hard for."