

Are you still useful?

■ What companies are looking for

Monique Vanek

THE number of women directors and those heading up large corporations in SA is declining and yet there is a growing amount of literature suggesting women's skills are more useful than men's.

The latest *Economist* reports that "technology and globalisation are undermining the usefulness of male skills".

It adds: "Wise chaps seeking professional advancement should therefore spend their free time with groups of women, boning up on how to undermine somebody's confidence while pretending to boost it, and how to turn an entire lunch table against an absent colleague without saying a mean word. Such skills are likely to have a greater influence on their lifetime earnings than the ability to spin an icosahedron."

Dan Pink, in his book titled "A Whole New Mind", reckons the future belongs to those with strong right brains, creative people with people skills. These are the forte of women.

But are women's skills really more useful in management roles?

According to Gusti Coetzer, a founding partner at Leaders Unlimited, women's relevance in the workplace is not necessarily growing because of the usefulness of their skills but because companies have a greater willingness today to have a diverse set of skills than in the past.

"There is a growing awareness as to what customers need in business for which a diverse board is best suited," says Coetzer. For

example, Woolworths recently appointed a marketing director who changed the packaging on its

meat to bring it closer to customers' needs.

Also BEE and meeting targets are playing a role in women being hired, says Coetzer, resulting in middle to senior management among black women earning the highest salaries.

Sandra Burmeister, CEO of

Landelahni Business Leaders, reckons that women have become more relevant in the workplace by virtue of their number and presence and not for skills like emotional intelligence, though such skills are relevant. She concurs with Coetzer that legislation, measurement and targets have made them more relevant.

Anne Pratt, a director at Memela Pratt & Associates, says women are not being hired because there is an acute awareness of what they bring to an organisation but because companies are becoming conscience of the need to be gender focused.

However, Burmeister says, "in environments outside of government like the corporate market, women's salaries are still not equal to men". Pratt reckons that the difference can be as much as 10-20%.

Also the number of women at the top are declining because of the huge demand being placed on them, making it difficult for them to find a balance between family life and their international careers, notes Coetzer.

Pratt reckons another reason is that the old-boys' network is still alive and well. In addition, the salary levels paid for the increasing legal risks and fiduciary duties required by directors is not always worth it. – monique@moneyweb.co.za



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