

Gender equality and the rise of businesswomen in South Africa

Sandra Burmeister, CEO of Landelahni Recruitment, spoke to Alan de Sousa Caires about women in business, and gender equality in the boardroom.

By Bronwyn Engelbrecht

Sandra Burmeister is a founding member of Landelahni, and she has done a great deal to develop this recruitment company into one that supplies services to executives, professionals and general management. She has especially championed the development of women in business, and Landelahni now places more women in executive and non-executive roles than any of their 50 partner companies worldwide.

"Women bring an array of unique skills, strengths and qualities to the business arena and are shaping their own futures" Sandra Burmeister, CEO Landelahni. Landelahni is not simply focused on finding you a job, they are also involved in research and they conduct surveys to know the employment environment better, and to assist with mentoring and training. They are forerunners in the leadership development business, from below the mid-management level right up to board level – they also look at the gaps in the markets that could be filled, and the trends.

In 2001, they began an annual research

project in the mining sector – looking at gender equality, race equality and skills development. The project focused on looking at where the skills were, what the graduate numbers were, and other key areas that companies are focussing on. This project was such a huge success that Landelahni now run four biannual surveys that each focus respectively on the mining infrastructure, financial services, ICT and global mobility.

Sandra is personally committed to gender issues and since 2004 Landelahni also have three annual surveys that focus particularly on gender issues in the workplace, such as women's earning differentials and women on executive boards.

These surveys help to see what women can do for themselves as individuals, and as there is plenty of comparative data between 5 and 10 years, the trends in skills development become very apparent. South Africa has had a big issue with skills moving offshore, and now many skills are coming back. These surveys conducted by Landelahni help to see the implications of these

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– Sandra Burmeister, CEO of Landelahni Recruitment

skills returning to the South African workforce. Sandra says, “At the moment, we see the growth in the African market and the implications on our local skills, so many banks and mining companies and big infrastructure projects see that it is obvious to get skills from here”.

In terms of gender equality in the boardroom, Sandra has mentioned before that at the current rate of change there would only be gender equality in this area by 2050 – this was a strictly mathematical equation based on the shifts from year to year over a 5 year period. However, her feeling is that in South Africa we are making better progress than in many other countries. One of the reasons for this is that South Africa has a legislative framework that has been particularly gender-friendly. Sandra states, “Even though the Employment Equity Act doesn’t set specific targets, you yourself need to set gender targets in your company, based on the industry. But then industry charters have set specific targets against which they are now being measured, so all of those frameworks have really elevated the gender issues in boardrooms in this country, in government, and we have seen really significant increases in gender equality”. A good example that she provides of this comes from 2004 data – in the mining industry in 2001 only 0.01% of board members were women,

now the figure is closer to 30-40%. This is a very significant change over a 10 year period.

Organisations such as the International Women’s Forum and the Businesswoman’s Association of SA are helping to promote women in business with various programmes. They have interesting programmes from SMME development to coaching and mentoring that you might not find in other areas.

Although the Employment Equity Act and other legislative frameworks in South Africa can be seen as putting pressure on companies to comply with gender equality, it is also a fact that you don’t want to put people on your board just to make up the numbers. So, the question remains whether

companies are actively doing more to develop and promote women and give women the right opportunities to get up to board level, rather than just implementing so-called ‘window-dressing’.

Sandra answers quite fervently that companies are definitely pulling their weight in this department. She says that “The big driver is the tenders in governance, and what we’ve seen – and one of the reasons why board sizes have increased so substantially in the last couple of years – is that there are very onerous governance requirements”. She explains that in a 2006 board survey, just over 80% of JSE Top 100 board members held more than 4 seats. Last year, 89% of these board members held only one seat. This is because of the strict



requirements which led to members holding fewer positions. According to Sandra, this translates to "...only really professional board members that will hold more than one, but if you're in an executive role or senior role, then you would not take on more than one, and that in turn has opened opportunities for new people."

In South Africa, we also have the unique situation of BEE requirements, so what we find here is that very often BEE partners or representatives would be sitting on the board. Now your governance requirements for independents means that the more involved your directors are, the more independent directors you need to have. And therein lies the opportunities for women because all boards are having to put in more first-timers on their boards.

Even though opportunities for women have grown significantly, Sandra still believes that women executives need to step up to the plate - historically, women have not positioned themselves well to be ready for the board or a top job in South Africa. She says, "This is largely because of the traditional networking, such as playing golf, or going to very particular places where one might find executives getting to know one another outside of a formal process. I think that that has shifted, but what has also changed quite radically is a much more transparent process for appointing board members, so it's not really about the social networking anymore. It's about having a whole set of skills to function as a board".



About Landelahni

Established in 1977, Landelahni was the country's first black-owned and women-owned executive search company. Today, the Landelahni Recruitment Group consists of a number of companies offering recruitment and coaching services across all levels of employment in both the public and private sectors.

The group consists of:

- Landelahni Business Leaders (part of the global Amrop group) – executive recruitment and executive search
- Landelahni Leadership Development – Board and executive coaching and mentoring
- Landelahni Assessments – Executive and management assessments to identify leadership skills
- Landelahni Professional and Technical Appointments – large project professional and technical recruitment
- Landelahni Workforce Management – on-site managed staffing

Since inception, Landelahni has built a substantial track record in the appointment of black executives, and more than 40% of the executive appointments made by Landelahni are black women.



She believes that women themselves need to position themselves better by doing reading outside of their industry, and spending more time on looking at broader commercial issues. It is a fact that 75% of MBA classes around the world are still men. So, women need to broaden their capacity to contribute at a board level.

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Sandra Burmeister, CEO Landelahni.

Another big topic in gender equality issues focuses on the earning differences between genders.

Sandra says, "Traditionally, global research shows that graduates, male and female, in all fields earn about the same, until about mid to late 20s; then men's earnings accelerate, and women's earnings decline". The main reason for this is that women take time out

to raise families, and so they either exit the workplace or take on a less aggressive career focus due to other priorities. This research is now skewed because women are having children so much later in life, but the truth remains that women are going to exit the market for a period of time at some point, or spend less time on a career.

Overall, it is clear that women are rising fast through the ranks of executive boards, and the promotion and development of businesswomen in South Africa is a very important strategy that all companies need to adopt. To emphasise this point, Sandra said in this interview, "Catalyst Research did a survey on Fortune 500 gender-diverse boards - all of the boards that had gender diversity performed better financially than boards that didn't have diversity".

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