

Headline	WORKING TOWARDS A FAIRER WORKPLACE		
MediaTitle	The Edge		
Date	08 Dec 2014	Color	Full Color
Section	Supplement	Circulation	22,244
Page No	3	Readership	66,732
Language	English	ArticleSize	741 cm ²
Journalist	Jo-Ann Tan	AdValue	RM 12,758
Frequency	Weekly	PR Value	RM 38,274



WORKING TOWARDS A FAIRER WORKPLACE

BY Jo-Ann Tan

Women make up almost half the population in Malaysia and 70% of graduates here are female. When it comes to the workforce, however, it is a different matter.

Data from the TalentCorp-PwC Diversity in the Workplace Survey 2013 shows that only 24% of those in top management and 8.6% at board level positions in public listed companies are women.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2013, which highlights gender-based disparities in workplaces in various countries, Malaysia is ranked 102, behind Singapore (58), Thailand (65) and Indonesia (95).

But the numbers only tell half the story.

One of the widely known reasons for women to leave the workforce earlier than men is family demands. Hence, they may not have sufficient time to climb the corporate ladder to more senior positions.

Another reason that is not talked about enough is unconscious bias in the workplace. #edGY speaks to Marina Jankovic, global diversity & inclusion manager at British American Tobacco PLC, and Fiona Geddes, human resources director at British American Tobacco (M) Bhd (BAT), about the firm's new initiative to tackle gender imbalance in the workplace.

What is unconscious bias?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, bias is defined as "inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair".

"The decisions we make on a daily basis are usually unconscious ones and sometimes, we may have very positive intentions but we might make a different decision based on gender, race, cultural background, religion or even educational background," says Jankovic.

Unconscious bias can heavily influence how we view and evaluate others and ourselves.

"People tend to like or be more attuned to people who operate and think the same way as them," says Geddes. "For example,

a line manager who likes to have a to-do list and tick things off, and if he has a subordinate who maybe doesn't work in that manner and another who does, he will be more comfortable with the subordinate who works the same way [as him] and that in itself is unconscious biasness."

When given a choice to promote either one, the line manager will most likely promote the one who works in the same way as he does because it's only natural for him to think that that individual is better.

"This way of thinking will only promote and develop moulds and replicas," Geddes points out.

Unconscious bias affecting women

As the old (and outdated) adage goes: Man the fixer, woman the nurturer. Women are generally viewed as the caretakers of the family and it is sometimes presumed by both men and women that it is only natural for the latter to want to put their family first.

"As a working mother, assumptions are made about what I will and won't do. When I was offered a great opportunity in Hong Kong, the assumption was that I wouldn't take it before it was even discussed with me," Geddes says.

"It was a corridor conversation — 'Of course you won't do that because you've got a family and you can't leave them'. So, somebody was making that assumption on my behalf based on their views of how a mother should be."

This belief has hindered job and promotion opportunities in the workplace for women.

Another example of unconscious bias occurs when a woman is pregnant.

"In the companies that I was previously in, they would take away responsibilities thinking, 'Well maybe she might not want to work. We won't give her any stress.' That to me is discrimination bias," Geddes stresses.

Whether a woman is willing to work until the day she gives birth should be entirely up to her. If a great opportunity arrives while an employee is on maternity leave, she should be given the option to

take it up if she can and wants to.

Although the intention may be good, we should always ask and offer that opportunity, and then discuss with the individual if it works for her, says Jankovic.

"We shouldn't prevent those discussions just because we ourselves would do things differently in that situation or we have a different picture of how society should look like," she adds.

Due to these presumptions, some women have put off starting a family because they feel uncomfortable about taking time off work to do so.

"In BAT, we won't tolerate that. Whether you want to have a baby and take time off at the beginning of your career or at the top of your career, it should be the same," says Geddes.

However, she believes that one of the greatest challenges women face is the fear of employers not hiring them when they are of childbearing age because the employers believe they will go on maternity leave.

As an HR director, she feels that this is less of a challenge in Asia because the maternity leave is short — three months compared with 52 weeks for Statutory Maternity Leave in the UK.

"Women shouldn't feel or see that taking time off to have a baby is a disadvantage to them," says Geddes.

According to her, women are not treated differently in BAT. The organisation allows women the advancement they deserve and ensures that they integrate successfully when they return to work.

Women in Leadership Programme

Some 25% of BAT's top management and those holding board level positions are women, which sends a strong message that the company supports gender diversity.

The firm's Women in Leadership Programme is a six months in-house course aimed at increasing gender diversity in the company, particularly in senior positions.

Launched in October 2013, it aims to remove the barriers to progression and to create a larger and more sustainable pool of female talent. Delegates are coached on developing skills in areas such as con-

Headline	WORKING TOWARDS A FAIRER WORKPLACE		
MediaTitle	The Edge		
Date	08 Dec 2014	Color	Full Color
Section	Supplement	Circulation	22,244
Page No	3	Readership	66,732
Language	English	ArticleSize	741 cm ²
Journalist	Jo-Ann Tan	AdValue	RM 12,758
Frequency	Weekly	PR Value	RM 38,274

fidence building and networking.

While professional coaches are there for the women, there are also discussions with the line managers, who are mostly men, to ensure clarity and shared responsibility.

“This is not about fixing women. It’s about helping them understand that sometimes the character and behaviour traits they have, because of cultural conditioning, give them less of a chance to succeed in the workplace,” says Geddes.

Women are viewed and described differently by both men and other women, she says. What may be seen as having leadership qualities in a man is sometimes interpreted as being bossy in a woman.

“The programme is about how to manage careers and to let people know the risks you’re willing to take and sacrifices you can make. You don’t want to miss opportunities just because people make assumptions based on what they think their mother, sister or somebody else will do, just because they see you as a female as opposed to an individual talent,” Geddes asserts. **E**



Jankovic (left) and Geddes say unconscious bias affects gender diversity in a company

PICTURE COURTESY OF BRITISH AMERICAN TOBACCO MALAYSIA