



Women who don't want to run with the wolves

Business can be ruthless and male-oriented, which is why many working women opt out of the 'games'

ANYONE in top management has done a certain amount of playing the game to get to where they are. The skills for this are learnt in the school playground and are second nature to many men.

But for increasing numbers of women, although they are familiar with the rules, this game-playing is a turn-off. In their 30s and 40s, many opt out of their careers as personal pressures come into play or they have chalked up enough experience to start up on their own.

It's happening in New Zealand and it's well-documented in the rest of the world.

A McKinsey report, "Women Matter", drawing on a *Harvard Business Review* survey, says there is a strong trend for women to voluntarily discontinue their career; 45 per cent of those who do so say it's to spend more time with their families.

But it's also because they don't like the work culture, says Galia BarHava-Monteith, co-director of Professionelle, an online community for working professional women.

When the 600 Professionelle members were asked in a recent survey what



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barriers they saw in reaching the top in their workplace, those who responded listed "inhospitable corporate culture including masculine leadership styles and norms".

This was followed by women opting out because they didn't want to put up with the "corporate crap".

"Of our users who are aged between 36-46, less than half work full-time and more than a third opt to pursue their own work arrangement: contractors, own businesses and self-employment," says BarHava-Monteith.

Opting out does not come lightly. Women don't give up at the first hurdle.

"If they feel they are doing something of value, have good relationships and are

emotionally fulfilled, they are more likely to put up with stuff that men wouldn't," says BarHava-Monteith.

When Di Humphries resigned as managing director of Glassons recently to spend more time with her 18-month-old, her decision was met with general understanding. If a man had done so, would the reactions have been so sympathetic?

In many cases, women do come back to the corporate world later in life.

Belinda, 43, resigned two years ago from her senior position in a professional services firm. She had been a capable worker and was, therefore, given many projects to work on. She always said yes to the increasing workload and consequently became burnt out after a couple of

years, quitting suddenly with no new job in mind.

She had no problem getting her next post and her career has not been harmed, but why did she have to go through the grief?

Women have to get better at saying no, says Catherine McDowell, chairwoman of ANZ National Bank's diversity and inclusion council and managing director of private banking.

"Women can sometimes be their own worst enemies. They need to read the signals when they are being dumped on," she says.

"I think they will walk away quicker than a guy because of their personality, their genetic make-up.

"There is still very much a male, sporty, high-testosterone culture in New Zealand and the paradox is that it is politically correct."

When you look at the schools and workplace, it is still quite male, she says.

At ANZ National, McDowell has helped organise a networking group for the bank's women executives called Banking on Women. Women taking part attend

career success and resilience seminars, and have coaching on self-confidence.

"I think women are more honest about their strengths and weaknesses; they tend to concentrate on their weaknesses," says McDowell.

Ambitious women can get themselves into impossible positions as they climb the career ladder, which can lead to rather public falls from grace.

Women's Affairs Minister Lianne Dalziel talked about the term "glass cliff" at a recent meeting of businesswomen. *Women in the Boardroom: The Risks of Being at the Top* is a study by two Exeter University academics who coined the phrase.

It refers to the trend for women on the rise to accept doomed-to-fail jobs in a bid to get to the top; something a man would only do with certain conditions.

"There is still a little bit of that around women in their quest to get into senior positions," says McDowell.

This doesn't have to happen. "It's about having that self-confidence, recognising that you do have choices," she says.

Philippa Reed, chief executive of the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, decided to leave her partner-track job at KPMG when her daughter was young.

Although management was saying the right things about flexibility, the culture was then still very male and intolerant of interruptions from peoples' personal lives.

Reed remembers dropping her child off at childcare and arriving at work to be

greeted by a male colleague: "Afternoon."

In a survey soon to be published by the trust on work-life balance and workplace culture, employees complained that while there were work-life balance policies, short staffing meant employees often had too much work on to take advantage of them.

While many wanted to work from home, this was only available to a third of respondents.

This kind of workplace inflexibility is what drives women to leave.

"So much comes down to expectations of what the workplace should be like; some of these expectations are quite reasonable, others are impossible to meet," says wealth coach and business consultant Joan Baker, author of *A Man is Not a Financial Plan*.

"The problem is, it's not a price that they are prepared to pay; sacrificing either not having the kids or giving [the care of the children] over to others. I'm not sure that a high percentage of women are prepared to do that."

For those who don't enjoy the "how high" corporate environment, a change could be coming. BarHava-Monteith believes Generation Y want a work environment with women's values.

"Things will change with Generation Y because they are thinking a lot more like women," says the developmental psychologist. ■

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