

ASIA'S FASTEST GROWING BUSINESS MAGAZINE

SME
MALAYSIA EDITION
JUNE 2014
HOW RESILIENT IS YOUR BUSINESS?

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13 – 15 August 2014

SME
SOLUTIONS EXPO 2014

ISSN 2289-134X
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PP15304/06/2013(032762)
MICA(P)095/07/2009

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INTELLIGENCE
FOR SMES!



NEW NETWORKS WILL DRIVE THE FUTURE BOARDROOM

The first International Business Women's Conference (IBWC 2014) in Ireland is a timely reminder that new networks are emerging to not only reshape the boardroom, but also fuel vital growth in the SME sector.

SHARING WISDOM

If there is one lesson to be learned from the financial turmoil of the past decade, it is the value of sharing business wisdom and experience. So it was a great pleasure to be among the panel speakers and give the closing keynote at IBWC 2014 in Belfast, hosted by Women in Business Northern Ireland. Drawing business people (most but not all women) from across three continents, it was a conference full of inspiring perspectives from corporations, SMEs, political/civic leaders and media commentators. Among all the fascinating insights, one in particular struck me forcefully for its simplicity and fundamental truth. Helena Morrissey CBE, co-founder of the 30% Club, pointed out that workplace gender diversity is not just a women's issue – it is a business issue.

BALANCE MEANS BETTER

PERFORMANCE

Morrissey, who is CEO of Newton Investment Management, twice winner of Investment Week Global Fund Manager of the Year and mother of nine, co-founded the club in 2010. It is now operating in the US and Hong Kong with further clubs planned for Canada, Ireland, South Africa and Australia. Its overriding aim is simple – collaboration to drive gender balance across every level of organisations. The UK arm is looking to achieve 30% females on FTSE-100 boards by 2015. Increasingly, it's being recognised that balanced boardrooms and workplaces drive business dynamism and innovation.

ADDRESSING THE FEMALE DIGITAL SKILLS GAP

Less than three in ten of European entrepreneurs are women and the European Commission now promotes entrepreneurship as a career choice. Since two out of three graduates in advanced economies will be women by 2020, it is clear we need to enable female talent to feel comfortable working across sectors and at every level. Currently, there is a digital skills shortage in Europe – only 19% of ICT bosses are women – compared with 45% frequently

achieved in other sectors. This skills gap must be addressed with, for example, more coding in education. In the UK, 'Code Club' has set out to introduce a coding network in 25% of primary schools by the end of 2015.

THE WORLD NEEDS MORE WOMEN IN TECH

In an article in the China daily in March, Google's Cai Xinmei said: 'The digital gender gap is greater across developing Asia than elsewhere'. Xinmei says that the business case for more female tech creators is easy to see. With more women shaping the technology sector, its relevance will increase. Diversity simply leads to more creativity and better performance. According to Intel's 'Women in Web' report, bringing an additional 600 million women and girls online could boost GDP globally by as much as US\$18 billion. In Asia, Google are working on new programmes and networks to tell inspiring tech stories to girls and women.

NURTURING EASTERN HIGH FLIERS

In China, women make up 46% of the workforce. It performs strongly in female business start-ups – with over 29m female entrepreneurs

(a quarter of the total number), according to 2011 All-China Women's Federation figures. The Economist suggests China is the most open-minded nation in East Asia when it comes to female entrepreneurship – possibly its history means women have a tradition of working. Among more conservative nations of the Middle East, entrepreneurship is also being nurtured. Nadine Halabi of Dubai Women's Business Council spoke at IBWC 2014 about its strong female entrepreneurship agenda – recently it partnered with Unilever to build training and internship opportunities to empower females across UAE.

NEW NETWORKS MANIFESTO

We simply must have a more diverse talent pool so that nations across the world can reach their full potential, thereby enabling SMEs to flourish. Unlike old boys' clubs and societies, new networks – defined by openness and inclusivity – develop fresh skills and focus on what really matters: better business performance. Belfast's IBWC conference was one shining example, and many business relationships were forged in a very short time. As women and Millennial generations gain influence in the workplace, we can expect many more open meeting points based around access, collaboration and 4P principles of people, planet, purpose, profit. To my mind, these are the networks that all visionary men and women need to build successful 21st century businesses.

*Anne Lise Kjaer is a futurist and Copenhagen Goodwill Ambassador and the founder of London-based Trend Management consultancy Kjaer Global. Client includes Accenture, BBVA, European Union, EY, McKinsey, IKEA, Samsung, Sony, Telefonica and Toyota. Anne Lise Kjaer is also a visiting lecturer at Cranfield University, Hertfordshire Business School and Lund University. She has written the book, TREND MANAGEMENT TOOLKIT: How Businesses can Understand and Shape Key Trends in Tomorrow's Society, published by Palgrave Macmillan business in 2014. Follow Anne Lise Kjaer on Facebook and Twitter@kjaerglobal **SME***