

Connecting Senior Women (CSW)

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The challenges facing women in progressing to senior and top management roles have been well researched. Senior management is an area of employment where gender segregation is pronounced and where women are poorly represented and often exist as 'tokens' in a predominantly male environment. Despite the numbers of women in paid work being almost equal to that of men, this has not resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of women in senior management positions in the UK. The official figures speak for themselves: in 2004, less than 10 per cent of FTSE directors in the UK were women (Women and Equality Unit, 2008); less than 20 per cent of MPs were female; and the pay gap between full time men and women was around 17 per cent (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007). Researchers continue to question the reasons for women's under-representation at senior levels.

To enhance our understanding of senior women's experiences and to go some way in addressing the problems they face, Sue Durbin and John Neugebauer set up *Connecting Senior Women* (CSW) as a Forum in April 2007. The Forum was founded for senior women from commercial, professional and academic backgrounds in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors of the UK. It acts as a conduit through which women from a range of organisations, sectors and backgrounds can come together to share experiences and learning. CSW represents a channel through which senior women from a range of organisations can share their experiences with women in similar positions and academics who have an interest in this area.

The aims of the Forum are to: enable senior women to meet and exchange knowledge, information and ideas; to discuss issues faced by senior women in today's organisations; to share best practice; and to debate issues and experiences with academics who are researching in this area. The Forum offers a space where organisational experiences and academic research can be combined and debated, thus enabling a richer understanding of organisational life from the perspective of senior women and academics.

Why a Forum for senior women?

Sue Durbin has been extensively involved in research interviews with senior women in organisations in the private and public sectors of the UK. This research focuses upon senior women's careers, networking behaviours and work-life balance. The women interviewed so far are employed in a range of organisations, including financial services, construction/architecture, management consultancy, research and development and technology solutions.

Some of the women interviewed have expressed a wish to get together with other women involved in the research in order to share their experiences and hear the feedback from the interviews. During interviews, it became apparent that most of these women were operating in a male dominated environment which, for some, was an additional challenge to their responsibilities as a senior manager. These women were particularly interested in other senior women's coping strategies, the ways in which they had progressed their careers and the extent to which this had been achieved through networking.

John Neugebauer's research is with both men and women in senior management roles, in financial services, management consultancy, not-for profit, manufacturing, and public sectors. Whilst the interest for a women's forum was less explicitly stated, several women interviewed had expressed their wish to be involved with 'something' where they might share experiences of career progression issues.

Against these expressions of interest, there was an awareness that a wide range of women's networks already existed in the South West, both within organisations and the wider business community. Therefore, the approach to connecting senior women needed to be more distinctive and offer a facility that senior women managers recognised as adding value in developing knowledge and contacts.

It was decided that CSW should be a Forum rather than a network. This decision was also based upon the advice of some of the senior women who had stated that although interested in the Forum, they would not be interested in joining 'yet another women's network'. Offering a Forum that would bring together senior women and academics would also offer a unique angle to the Forum. Attendance at a range of women's networking events has enabled us to 'benchmark' the range of activities, talk to other attendees about what they look for in a network and consider how we might offer something new, rather than 'just another network'. The CSW Forum has been designed to enable senior women to openly and freely exchange views, unfettered by the normal organisational constraints and operating within a confidential environment.

CSW Format

Each Forum event is based on a member presenting on any aspect of their organisational life – for example, career progression, networking, work-life balance. An academic member of the forum then presents the 'academic' perspective on the subject under discussion. This is then followed by an open discussion based upon organisational experiences and academic research. In order to promote a free exchange of ideas and information, discussions are informal. Members themselves decide upon topics for discussion and issues to be explored in subsequent meetings. Speakers are drawn from a range of members and invited speakers come from both the academic and business communities.

The Forum is chaired by two academics and two business members, who discuss and set up formal meeting dates, times and venues. Discussions within the Forum are confidential, membership being by invitation only via the four Committee members. Discussions are documented by the two academic committee members. Meetings are arranged approximately five times per year, on the fourth Thursday evening of the month and are held at different venues in and around the Bristol area. The Forum has so far been supported by a financial services and research and development company in the Bristol area. These organisations have kindly agreed to provide the venue and a light buffet for Forum events.

Launch Meeting

The Forum was launched on Thursday 25th October, in Bristol. The evening began with a general welcome, from a senior woman manager. Sue Durbin then presented her interim findings of women's networking experiences and strategies, based on 33 interviews with senior women so far. Sue reported that the women interviewed perceived networking as a necessity rather than a social event; some stating that it was not their 'natural inclination' to network or that they 'don't set out to network'.

Reasons for networking were mainly instrumental (to gain business related knowledge and information, to meet people who were useful in a business context, to get the job done, to increase business contacts and raise their own profiles). Very few women mentioned that they networked for social reasons but those that did emphasised that this was to express concerns and share experiences. There was an overwhelming recognition by these senior women managers that networking had made a contribution to their career progression.

Interestingly, although around 40 per cent of interviewees were members of women only networks, there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm for these. Interviewees commented that they would prefer networks to be mixed gender and that they did not want to be singled out for special treatment, to limit themselves to a network that only involves one element of networking (e.g. single gender) nor attract the negative perception of women only networks throughout the organisation. Some were also concerned that women only networks may be perceived as advocating positive discrimination. This latter finding stimulated an interesting discussion amongst the group. Following on from this, Forum members agreed that the preference would be for a women-only forum where men could be invited to certain events.

Other topics discussed during the evening included the future of the Forum, what members wanted from the forum as well as timing of events, venues, etc. There was a consensus that members were keen to develop networks outside of their own organisations and were keen for cross organisation mentoring. Some members expressed a preference for events to be held in London but given that the network is not currently funded, it was agreed that events would be held in Bristol, especially given the support that had been offered by three organisations in the Bristol area to host events.

There was particular interest amongst members for one of the most senior women present to talk about her experiences in her home (southern hemisphere) country where she believed that women do not expect or experience any limitation to their careers based on their gender. This would be an interesting topic, especially given that the academic research does identify gender discrimination as a problem for senior female managers worldwide.

Taking CSW Forward

This first CSW meeting has demonstrated both the demand for this type of forum, and some of the challenges to be faced in developing the concept. We are acutely aware of the time pressures on both senior women managers and academics. Organising events at times and venues which will be attractive to a widening membership will be a challenge: currently, 60 senior women managers have expressed an interest in being involved with the forum. It is intended to attempt to address the needs of members by organising the events through a small group of academics and commercial managers.

To date, the CSW has had no funding support, even though it has the potential to become a signature forum for senior women. In 2008, we will be relying on hospitality and accommodation from member locations.

Finally, experience has shown us that whilst some of the most senior women may have expressed an interest and support in the forum, converting this support into secure booking dates can be problematic. Given that the Forum is in its formative stage, getting a 'high profile' woman along to talk about her experiences would help to both attract members to the event as well as raising the profile of the Forum generally. This is also reflective of the issue in top management roles: all managers are busy, and find it challenging to commit time to wider activities. But to find and arrange senior women to engage in these forums is more difficult because the potential pool of women in these senior leadership categories is disproportionately lower than for men. Despite these challenges, the rewards of developing CSW will be significant. Women unable to attend the first session have asked to be contacted when the arrangements for the next forum have been finalised.

Longer term aims for the Forum include informal mentoring and the possibility of a dedicated website. However, these plans must be conditional on finding financial support. CSW has opportunities and challenges for its future development, and we will report back on progress to CESR in 12 months time.

As one senior woman said at the opening meeting

'Why didn't we think about a forum like this ages ago!'

In spite of the challenges in establishing a vibrant, focused Forum, we remain convinced of its value and potential.