

Keep women on board; Too many top females are leaving by Widget Finn

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Women MBA graduates are more likely to drop out of the workforce than female doctors and lawyers, according to a study that has looked at 1,000 female Harvard graduates 15 years after graduation.

The study, *Opt-out Patterns Across Careers*, found 28 per cent of MBA graduates were stay-at-home mothers, compared with 6 per cent of those with medical degrees and 21 per cent for female lawyers.

Alison Maitland, senior visiting fellow at **Cass Business School** and co-author of *Why Women Mean Business*, points out that America lacks the infrastructure and policies to support working parents. "In Europe the situation varies, but generally women are missing from the top leadership ranks in business and the law. They quit companies, usually in their 30s and 40s, though often they become entrepreneurs, where they have more flexibility. Business remains a world created by males for males." Deborah Millett, who at 33 was Accenture's youngest director in outsourcing, says her company has several women in key positions and encourages women into leadership roles. Millett, who took an Open Business School MBA, says: "I felt it would give me credibility, and I've now got a much more commercial view and a broader business outlook." Kate Grussing, founder of Sapphire Partners, a recruitment company specialising in flexible working for senior professionals, says that the MBA provides classical training for corporate careers that are highly demanding.

Many banks and management consultancy firms excel at making recruiting approaches female-focused, she says, "but the challenge is how to keep women in the organisation."

When Grussing was faced with the challenge of combining work with being a mother, her employer at the time was supportive. "I had my first baby while at McKinsey & Co. and returning after maternity leave found my first project was abroad. I had organised childcare, but hadn't anticipated having a child with learning difficulties, which made me rethink how to juggle what I'd already known would be a tough part of my career.

"McKinsey put me on to a pro-bono project with a charity which took away the immediate pressure as I didn't have to travel, and I was able to reduce my working hours." For Viviane Yan Qin, an MBA from ESCP-EAP in Paris expanded her career options. Brought up in China, she is now a strategy manager for Accor, the French hotel group.

"When I left China in 1999 it was still a closed country where your working scope was restricted to China and it was very difficult for professional women to reach senior levels in business. But if I returned to China now there would be huge opportunities, especially as European MBAs are highly valued," she says.

What can employers do to help women MBA graduates stay the course? Maitland argues that first, top management must be convinced of the business case for gender balance in the leadership team, and understand the differences between men and women's career patterns and communication styles.

Millett would like to see more women role models recognised internally and with public awards.

Clearly if more employers adopted women-friendly policies, fewer talented women would be forced to opt out..

TV food inspector inspired by Cranfield

Sarah Willingham, above, an inspector on the panel of the BBC2 series *The Restaurant* and managing director of the Indian catering chain *The Bombay Bicycle Club*, attributes her business success partly to lessons learnt during her Cranfield MBA.

"At Cranfield I learnt my core strengths and many weaknesses." Claims that women MBAs drop out of their careers concern her.

"A one-year MBA costs around £50,000, so it's an expensive decision if you don't then pursue your career. But the leading business schools gear their MBAs towards people in big business and management consultancy.

"I was always conscious that I wanted a family, which is why I became an entrepreneur so I say where I have to be at 9am on Monday, not someone else. I would have had less choice and flexibility in a traditional career.

"As an employer I recognise the benefits of flexibility. Working mums are terrific. They're so committed and happy to work." "Business remains a world created by males for males