

# Women walk the tokenism tightrope

Sexism finds new life when firms treat equity as mere window-dressing, writes **Margaret Harris**

**F**EMALE employees require a schedule to keep them busy throughout the day, otherwise they will bother management because they lack the initiative to find work for themselves.

This is some of the useful advice given to, obviously, male managers in a "Guide to Hiring Women" that appeared in *Transportation Magazine* in July 1943.

Other important points included hiring women "who are a little on the heavy side as they are more even tempered and efficient than their underweight sisters" and the fact that "older women who have never contacted the public are inclined to be cantankerous and fussy".

We have moved on since then, and in the past 15 years female representation in South African boardrooms has increased from 4% to 16.6%.

"There is no doubt that in the last 10 years professional women have become more sought after by employers," says Auguste Coetzer, a director of Talent Africa, a talent solutions company.

However, a perception that women cannot be expected to fulfil the roles traditionally held by men persists. Talent Africa recently ran an informal poll among senior male executives to ascertain whether they be-

lieved that women were getting ahead because of their own abilities or due to favourable legislation.

"According to our survey, the primary danger facing women is the perception that some may be appointed by companies concentrating on 'ticking off' their compliance on their company BEE and gender scorecards, rather than the professional achievements of appointees," says Coetzer.

She says that in industries where there is a shortage of professional women in particular fields, there is a chance of this happening because of the strong competition between companies to secure their talents.

However, she adds, in most cases there is little truth in this belief. "Being a top executive is, after all, about competence, commitment to self-development and delivery rather than gender."

Vicki Marais-Swanepoel, the managing director of PAG, also says that the perception is likely to persist, partly because women are sometimes hired to check certain boxes on a scorecard rather than because they have the skills and experience.

"In some instances this may very well be the case, but I do not believe this is the norm. I like to believe appointments are rational, and need to make good business sense. Careful scrutiny of senior management po-

sitions will confirm that more and more women are being appointed to strategic roles, and not simply human resources and corporate affairs positions, which are, unfortunately, often misconstrued as softer, non-strategic roles."

One of the ways that companies can ensure that they have women with the relevant skills and experience is to put a plan in place. Sandra Burmeister, CEO of the Landelahn Recruitment Group, says companies that have a number of women in leadership roles are the ones that have made an effort to get it right.

"They have an unequivocal commitment to increasing the number of women in leadership positions and are actively sourcing women to join the board and the executive team. They are committed to developing women who may not necessarily have years of experience. Instead they focus on developing talent — whether formally or informally."

Ultimately, says Marais-Swanepoel, "companies operate in a tough global environment. With their very survival at stake, companies have experienced a paradigm shift in recent years. While they may need to comply with sector transformation charter targets and legislation, they recognise that there is no room for tokenism or window dressing."



NOT MADE UP: Women still face sexism in the workplace despite the Constitution barring gender discrimination

Picture: GALLO/GETTY IMAGES

