

Which BoardroomMum Are You? Around Our Board Table Book Club Board Statistics Blog Events Concierge

Around Our Board Table

INTRODUCTION

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CEO, CHAIRMAN &
NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Gillian Wilmot

CEO, Chairman & Non-Executive Director



Today we meet Gillian Wilmot, a board director with 30 years' experience in the retail & consumer sector. Gillian is currently Non-Executive Director at NISA Retail, ELEXON, Vice-Chair of International Women's Forum (IWF UK), Board Member of the Industrial Development Advisory Board and Founder & CEO of Board Mentoring.

Gillian won the 2014 Non-Executive Director (NED) Awards Unquoted/Private Equity Category in 2014.

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Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Gillian Wilmot

After studying Business Studies I joined the Marks and Spencer graduate training programme. I had been working in a variety of jobs since I was 14 and had been a supervisor at Marks & Spencer at 16, so I knew I wanted to go into business.

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Can you please provide some information on your career to this point?

Gillian Wilmot

I started my career on the M&S graduate scheme. At that time it was very male and the company had no female store managers. Also, men held all the senior positions at head office. I wanted to work in head office and specifically in marketing and M&S at that time did not have a marketing department, so I left to go to Boots.

I was at Boots three and a half years. While I was there, I did four or five

Women on Boards Countdown

00 **06** **08**
YEARS MONTHS DAYS

2015 is the deadline set by Lord Davies of Abersoch for all FTSE350 boards to have 25% female representation.

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different jobs including setting up their merchandising systems, in marketing and buying. I was very fortunate that I was promoted several times and through a company restructure become marketing manager of their personal care business.

I then moved to Next, joining as a marketing manager. I subsequently became Marketing Director. I launched the Next Directory, which was revolutionary at the time as it was not about providing credit but was about the product, which was the US model. I was also responsible for setting up Next's retail marketing structure. It was the 1980's and there was a transformation happening in retail. Next was at the forefront of that.

I left Next when I was pregnant and worked part time for a couple of years. I learnt some very useful lessons in that role (for example that as a part time MD you can end up doing the same amount of work for 3/5ths of the salary)

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Did you make a return to full time employment?

Gillian Wilmot

Yes, I returned to full time work, firstly with Avon UK in a variety of leadership and marketing roles across Europe. I was also travelling frequently to New York, which was not too great with young children but with my husband's support we made it work.

Later I joined Littlewoods, running Index Extra their home shopping business. I wanted to run businesses. It was what I enjoyed and was drawn to.

I then joined Royal Mail. This was a complex business and I had to manage the multi-faceted relationships with unions and regulator as well as the complexities of the business. My predecessor had dropped the price of postage just before the start of regulation, which was a problem.

You often find that women are appointed to jobs where there is risk involved and there is complexity so the business has to look outside for leadership.

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What was your first board appointment?

Gillian Wilmot

My first appointment was as Marketing Director at Next.

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Are you a mum? If so how many children do you have?

Gillian Wilmot

Yes, I have two sons who are now in their early 20s.

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How do you combine career with family life?

Gillian Wilmot

I have the most supportive husband. We live out of London to be near his work, so he was able to help care for the children. I was travelling a lot. It was challenging but we made compromises, which worked for us. We also spent an enormous amount of money on paying for child care and help out of post tax income so by the time we paid employers NI out of post tax income my true tax rate was really enormous which is still a great injustice for working mothers.

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What can we do for more women to reach these levels/fulfil their potential?

Gillian Wilmot

I honestly believe that in order to be successful you have to take risks. I am a big risk taker. Nothing really fazes me. You really need to stand out. It worries me that there seems to be a general belief that you can carefully plan everything and that decisions are risk free. This is really not the case. If you look at successful people they take risks.

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How can young women prepare to be board directors of the future?

Gillian Wilmot

Women face many difficulties as they build their careers. Female employees are held to different standards by society, colleagues and bosses. Women need to develop a resilience and toughness and not take everything to heart. There will be difficult behaviour in meetings and in the office, how do you react to that and turn it to your advantage? Not letting people get away with things, without falling out or getting upset, is crucial. Use your humour and other strategies to deal with office banter. Develop some one liners in advance and win the point.

The same behaviour in men and women is described differently Men are Impressive, women Formidable Men, passionate, women emotional. It is still an issue for women to be ambitious. "Call it" so when I'm told I'm formidable I say "that's very kind but would you please use the word impressive in future"

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Do you believe quotas are a positive development?

Gillian Wilmot

I do not believe that legislation is the answer. In fact I think it has inherent dangers as this is a broader societal issue around the role and expectations of women, who are still held to a higher standard. I would like to see businesses' set targets and objectives but we keep the threat of quotas if they fail to deliver on the targets.

Lord Davies has been rather clever by setting targets. In the UK we must make things happen and just not talk about it. My colleagues on German boards still face challenges but they are putting in place development programmes for women to take Board seats and making things happen. The danger in the UK is warm words and less action.

Here in the UK we are finding that shortlists are being put forward which include one or more women and then nomination committees are making the 'lowest-risk' appointment as they see it and appointing the candidate who most resembles themselves or the previous incumbent. This usually means the male candidate will be appointed.

I have also noted over the years that succession planning within many organisations is not robust, is subject to huge unconscious bias and is not sufficiently focussed upon in the Boardroom.. Many potential future CEOs are identified early on in their careers within an organisation as they have been sponsored as a "mini me" of the current CEO and senior executives - thus making them a comfortable choice. We really must tackle this unconscious bias.

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Any tips or recommendations for other women out there who wish to pursue their career ambitions and aspirations?

Gillian Wilmot

I have several: Get at least one Sponsor who is your advocate, get a Mentor for good advice, network more & do transactional networking like the guys (I will do x for you if you do y for me). Develop resilience; corporate life works for many but not all, consider building your own business if your progression isn't fast enough. Taking calculated risks is important to progression, build your confidence & find an environment that is conducive to this. Finally, perseverance, perseverance, perseverance. Life is a marathon not a sprint.

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Would you have done anything differently?

Gillian Wilmot

I probably should have stayed on to study for my Masters degree and joined a company such as Unilever, who had more female friendly policies and better diversity.

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Can you tell me about your work with Board Mentoring?

Gillian Wilmot

We work with a wide variety of large corporates both UK and International to improve the leadership pipeline as well as mentoring at senior executive and Board level.

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Can you tell me more about the work of International Women's Forum in the UK, and worldwide and your role as Vice-Chair of IWF UK?

Gillian Wilmot

The organisation connects senior women across all fields of leadership in the UK and across countries, continents and sectors. I am really enjoying helping other women.

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What are your plans personally and professionally?

Gillian Wilmot

I would like to see more female chairmen of companies and women in the "Power" Boardroom roles of CEO, FD, Chairman, SID and Committee Chairmen. I will be join one or two more quoted company Boards now one of my public sector Chairmanships is completing.

Personally I enjoy sailing, windsurfing, skiing and snowboarding, which we do as a family so I aim to continue with those.

I am also on the board of the UK government's Industrial Development Advisory Board. We now have 3 female members. We are about to go through another recruitment round so hope to see that number grow.

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Thank you so much Gillian for your time and insight to what is required to become a successful director. We wish you the very best with your future plans.

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