



Ashley Kate
HR & Finance

HR Director Boardroom Summary

March 2025



Chaired by

EVERSHEDS
SUTHERLAND

Speakers:



Simon Rice-Birchall
Partner
Eversheds Sutherland



Iain Lewis
Chief People Officer

Discussing the topic:
*'Busting Gender Myths and
Taking Action to Elevate Women
into Senior Leadership Roles'*

Our recent HR Director Boardroom session sparked an insightful discussion on Busting Gender Myths and Taking Action to Elevate Women into Senior Leadership Roles. Led by Iain Lewis, Chief People Officer, and Simon Rice-Birchall, Partner at Eversheds Sutherland (International) LLP, this session explored the persistent barriers women face in advancing to senior leadership and the tangible actions organisations can take to drive meaningful change.

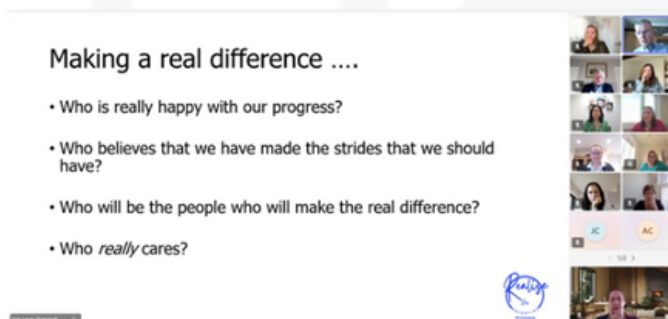
Iain Lewis is an inspiring and accomplished Chief People Officer with over 25 years of experience delivering commercial value and driving transformational change across some of the UK's most prominent organisations. A Fellow of the CIPD, Iain has established himself as a thought leader in the HR field, with a proven track record of creating inclusive cultures, leading HR transformations, and embedding Diversity & Inclusion strategies that deliver measurable results.

Simon is a Partner in Evershed Sutherland's Employment group. Simon has considerable experience in employment tribunal litigation and has a reputation in the marketplace for his discrimination law knowledge. Simon has been responsible for a number of high-profile discrimination cases over the last 20 years and continues to build this area of his practice. In addition, Simon's contentious workload includes unfair dismissal, whistleblowing and executive terminations.

The conversation on women in leadership opened with a reflection on progress, or rather, the lack of significant strides. While there have been incremental improvements, many participants felt that the changes made so far have been more akin to small steps rather than the quantum leap necessary to drive true equity. There was a shared sentiment that while diversity and inclusion are often discussed, meaningful investment and structural transformation remain lacking.

One of the central themes of the discussion was the role of government and corporate leadership in advancing diversity. There was scepticism about whether governmental policies and initiatives, such as gender pay gap reporting, had truly made a tangible difference. While legislative mandates create visibility, their impact on shifting corporate behaviour is debatable. Most CEOs and senior leaders, it was argued, prioritise return on investment, and if they don't see a direct financial benefit from D&I initiatives, they are unlikely to allocate substantial resources. This challenge is intensified by the fact that the business case for diversity, while widely acknowledged, is difficult to quantify in hard financial terms. As a result, HR and D&I professionals often struggle to articulate a compelling ROI that resonates with commercial decision-makers.

The discussion also highlighted the cyclical nature of D&I investment. Over the past five years, external commercial pressures have repeatedly pushed diversity initiatives to the sidelines. In 2019, the uncertainty surrounding Brexit meant that businesses were hesitant to invest in anything beyond core operations. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic brought business priorities into crisis mode, eliminating most D&I discussions altogether. More recently, the challenging economic climate of the last two years has once again deprioritised D&I investment, except



in instances where individuals within organisations have taken it upon themselves to champion these efforts at a local level. While HR professionals continue to drive the agenda because of their belief in making a difference, they often lack the executive sponsorship necessary to create lasting change.

A broader question arose: why are we still having this conversation, and why hasn't D&I progressed to where it needs to be? One outlook offered was that the government do not fully understand the realities of corporate life. Regulatory

requirements like gender pay gap reporting create awareness but do little to drive real action at the top. Without a compelling commercial argument, many leaders see diversity initiatives as discretionary rather than essential. This leads to a frustrating cycle where organisations express support for diversity in principle but fail to integrate it into their strategic planning.

The current landscape

- President Trump halts programmes in federal agencies and government contractors
- Google, Amazon, Walmart, IBM, GM, Disney, Deloitte UK v US, Accenture, Pepsi, JP Morgan Chase, Morgan Stanley and Citigroup, McDonalds v Apple
- Gender Pay Gap reporting – what impact?

The issue of representation at senior levels was another key focus. While companies may claim to have 40% women in leadership roles, the reality is that few women hold critical decision-making positions at the highest levels of influence, such as CEO, CFO, or other board-level roles with commercial authority. Instead, many women in leadership are concentrated in support functions like HR, communications, and compliance, which, while important, do not necessarily shape business strategy in the same way as revenue-driving roles.

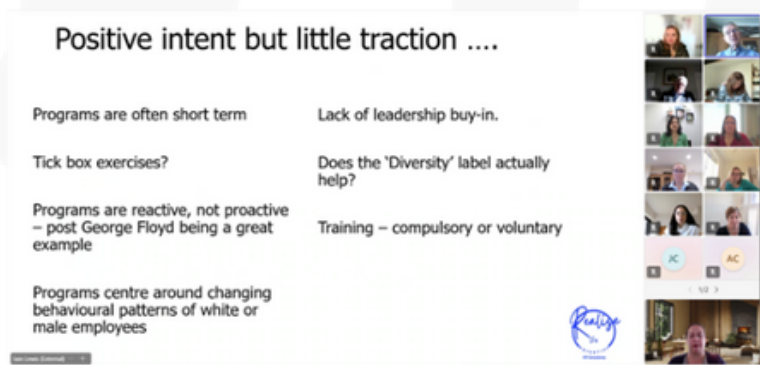
The conversation also explored external influences on corporate D&I efforts, particularly from the United States. The Trump administration's restrictions on diversity initiatives had a ripple effect, causing many large organisations to pull back on their D&I programs. Some companies, like Deloitte in the UK, chose to continue their initiatives despite this political shift, while others, particularly those with federal contracts, faced significant challenges. One delegate shared their experience working for a US-based company where the D&I team had been rebranded as the "Culture and Inclusion" team, and public discussions around diversity, such as posts about International Women's Day, were now prohibited due to potential impacts on government contracts. This shift raised concerns that the UK could follow a similar path, although opinions were divided on whether such a scenario was likely.

The conversation then turned to the broader effectiveness of initiatives like gender pay gap reporting. One delegate pointed out that while their previous organisation had complied with reporting requirements, little action followed beyond publishing the data. Another noted that organisations with a predominantly female workforce often appear to have a significant gender pay gap, not because of unequal pay practices but because a large proportion of women work part-time. This led to a discussion on ethnicity pay gap reporting, which, unlike gender reporting, remains voluntary, raising questions about transparency and accountability.

A recurring theme was the tendency for D&I programs to be reactive rather than strategic. Several delegates shared experiences of organisations launching initiatives in response to high-profile events, such as the murder of George Floyd,

rather than embedding diversity into their long-term business strategy. One example came from the healthcare sector, where a private healthcare provider launched several initiatives in response to external pressures, but the question remained: why should a tragic event be the catalyst for action, rather than a proactive commitment to equity?

The lack of buy-in from senior leadership was identified as a significant barrier. Too often, diversity programs receive initial enthusiasm but fade due to a lack of sustained executive support. One delegate questioned whether the label "diversity and inclusion" itself might be contributing to resistance. Would organisations be more receptive if the focus was framed around "culture and inclusion" instead? Some participants believed that shifting the language away from traditional D&I terminology might encourage greater engagement, as it removes some of the political or performative connotations that can make leaders hesitant to fully commit.




The conversation also touched on management training for underrepresented groups. A common challenge is that when leadership development programs are designed specifically for women or other marginalised groups, existing leaders, often middle-aged white men, push back, asking why they are excluded. However, as one delegate pointed out, these leaders have benefited from years of training and informal networks, whereas underrepresented groups have historically lacked access to the same opportunities. This highlights the tension between established power structures, emerging talent, and the need for equitable access to development opportunities.

Another perspective came from an employee-owned business, where the approach to diversity differs from that of a traditional PLC. Rather than focusing on D&I as a separate initiative, they prioritise creating a workplace where all employees feel included, secure, and supported in their career aspirations. The emphasis was on fostering a culture of accountability, where individuals take ownership of their development rather than relying on labels or corporate policies to dictate inclusion. This approach challenges the conventional wisdom that companies need dedicated D&I programs, perhaps, if inclusion is truly embedded in an organisation's DNA, formal initiatives become unnecessary.

The discussion also explored the role of role models in leadership. Some delegates argued that visible representation is crucial, as seeing people who look like them in leadership positions can inspire others to pursue similar paths. Others, however, felt that personal ambition and determination mattered more than having a direct role model. The consensus was that this is a deeply personal issue, with individuals responding differently depending on their own experiences and circumstances.

As the discussion wrapped up, attention turned to practical solutions. Delegates emphasised the importance of showcasing success stories, ensuring that diverse individuals in leadership are visible and celebrated. There was a call for continuous effort, with generalist professionals making a conscious effort to




keep inclusion on the agenda. Investing in mentoring was highlighted as a particularly effective strategy, as it personalises the experience and helps create meaningful connections.

Recruitment practices were another key area for improvement. Several participants stressed the need to critically assess job specifications to remove unnecessary barriers, such as requiring a degree when it may not be essential for the role. Organisations were encouraged to take a step back during hiring processes and ask whether they were truly reaching diverse talent pools.

Looking ahead, the conversation ended with a reflection on education and early intervention. Businesses should not only focus on hiring diverse talent but also engage with schools, colleges, and universities to help young people see themselves in a wider range of careers. One speaker shared an example from the surveying industry, where a leader recognised the lack of diversity in his field and proactively visited educational institutions to attract a broader range of candidates. This kind of early engagement could be a game-changer in shifting long-term representation across industries.

The overarching message was clear: while progress has been made, it is far from enough. D&I cannot remain a reactive, short-term effort but must be embedded into business strategy with genuine leadership commitment. Without this shift, organisations risk continuing the cycle of performative action rather than achieving true equity.





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