

ON BOARD FOR DIVERSITY

Change for women at highest levels of business comes slowly

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An executive headhunter in Switzerland says it will take a “generational change” to get women at the very top of Swiss companies. In an annual **report on the make-up of companies’ boards, **Guido Schilling** said right now “women are having to play by men’s rules”.**

The annual [Schilling report](#), now

in its tenth year, looked at the management in 120 companies and the board of directors in 90. It assessed how many men and women have come, gone or stayed where they are and the split between foreigners and Swiss nationals in the country's top firms, among other attributes and background details of executives and directors.

And while there was some progress in the number of women sitting on the board of directors among the companies surveyed, women are still few and far between with little change in the top executive ranks.

The most recent edition of the report, published on Thursday, revealed that 15% of seats in the directors' boardrooms were taken by women, a rise from 10% in 2010. Every third vacancy had been filled by a woman over the past year, a figure that was deemed "good progress" by Schilling.

"Swiss boards of directors have an advantage [over executive positions] in terms of gender diversity because they function as a team, a team of different competencies ... and that leads to women being in high demand," he told swissinfo.ch.

However, in executive positions, just 9% of vacancies were filled by women and the overall number of women in these roles changed from

just 4% in 2006 to 6% in 2015, lower than expectations, according to the report.

The quota question

Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga put forward a proposal in 2014 for companies listed on the stock exchange to be legally bound to have 30% of their board made up by women after a ten-year transition period.

Guidelines pointing to the same percentage of women were introduced in 2013 for 29 companies closely linked to the Swiss government such as the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (swissinfo.ch's parent company) and the Post Office. These have until 2020 to act on the recommendations.

But while the number of women taking on top executive positions makes minute gains, those dropping out of these roles keeps their overall numbers low. In 2014, 11 women joined the executive levels at Swiss companies (out of 125 new people overall), but during the same period nine left.

"A culture change at the very top is needed," said Schilling. He added that values he believes women tend to be strong in, such as teamwork, need to be given more value.

Addressing the problem of women leaving jobs in the top echelons of a business, he commented that flexible working had to be an option if companies wanted not just to attract women, but retain them.

Assessing the practicality of a quota system in the top levels of business, Schilling told swissinfo.ch that the problem lay with the lack of women at middle management level who are “ready” to take on a top management job.

“If you have a quota at the top executive level, firms will be recruiting by gender and not by competency,” he said.

In 2014, canton Basel City voted in favour of a 33% gender quota for boardroom members of the public transport, the canton’s utilities and its bank. It was the first canton in the country to do so.

One year on, although the canton has until the legislative period 2017-2021 to meet its target, more than half of the companies and corporations closely linked to the local government have already done so.

The canton says 115 board members have been hired to fulfil the quotas.

Recruiting from abroad

The issue of quotas of a different kind hangs over recruiters and companies which have long looked beyond Swiss borders to find the high-quality candidates that fit the role.

In the past year, 36% of members of the boards of directors and 42% of executives were foreigners. Half of all women in top management jobs are non-Swiss.

How will businesses find the people they need with possible new restrictions to be introduced on immigration after a **public vote on February 9, 2014?**

“If even fewer foreigners come to Switzerland ... it will create enormous pressure to integrate women even better into business life and also to offer attractive working schedules to women, so that they really stay in these top management positions,” Schilling told swissinfo.ch.

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