

At least banks know they have a problem

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Investment banking is not exactly making lots of headway in getting more women into the ranks, but there are important signs of change, according to **Goldman Sachs** senior adviser Laura Liswood.

Many of the banks in Australia and internationally have noticed a decline in the number of women graduates applying for jobs, with law and accounting firms proving more attractive.

"As I look at ourselves, we are really deep diving into this," said Liswood during a visit to Australia from the US last week. "There are lots of challenges. We are taking it seriously and getting to a different stage. We have a number of programs still tackling recruitment. But the fact firms are saying there's a drop in women applying, we don't want to lose the fact they are observing that."

Not so long ago, there would have been no measurement of these trends.

"To me, some of the more positive side is that there is this access to an emerging and increasing pool of the data. I like the fact we are getting much more granular – to be able to know more is very helpful. Twenty years ago, we didn't quite know what was going on and you'd end up with anecdotal stuff. So we have more data and clearly we have skills shortage issues and demographic shifts and skilled women coming out of education."

Much of the work Liswood does these days is providing best practice advice to **Goldman Sachs** clients. She was also asked by the Office of the White House in 2010 to run diversity sessions for all presidential appointees and career executives in the public service.

What they are looking for is a common language to talk about these issues, she says, and move away from the Noah's Ark approach – the idea that bringing two of every kind on board will instantly address the lack of diversity.

"Part of what I've observed around diversity is people say 'I get it but tell me how to do it'. We have to have leaders with diversity skills and have to know how to handle people who are diverse."

On top of a more informed debate about the issue, and the continuing demand for skilled employees, there's been momentum for change from the post-financial crisis focus on corporate governance and risk mitigation.

"As someone once said, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste . . . these [experiences] are all valuable to enhance the conversation and get us thinking."

As well as large-scale research, there's a growing body of case studies on not just why but how to improve workplace diversity.

"I think the examples we are getting to know about help. Google had a process where people would self-nominate to be managers. It was something that was a good process but had unintended consequences. Women may want the job but won't step out there and say it. Google identified that as an issue. It's positive that we are beginning to know these things."

But there's plenty more headwinds to tackle.

"There's still archetypes of what men and women can do. Clearly the household gap hasn't closed, women are still subsidising men's ability to get ahead. Women are over-mentored and under-sponsored."

Despite investment banking's graduate recruitment problems, many businesses are having problems getting women up the ranks.

"Part of the challenge now is that we are moving away from intake problems and into the upgrade problem. Once you rise up in the organisation, the stakes get higher and discretion over who gets chosen gets higher."

A reminder of why these issues were worth tackling never goes astray.

"Homogeneity works, but only under certain circumstances. You have to have three conditions: the problems are simple, the tasks are routine and the environment is not changing. If that is happening, then stick with homogeneity –but who has those conditions?"