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Interviewee: Megan Alexander

Interviewer: Stuart Cameron

Stuart: Hello, and welcome to the Robert Half Podcast Series. While Robert Half's Annual Workplace Survey reveals some positive changes for women working in finance, perceptions of institutional unfairness remain. For this podcast, I spoke with Megan Alexander, Senior Manager with Robert Half New Zealand.

Megan Alexander, Robert Half's Annual Workplace Survey reveals some positive changes for women working in finance, with quite a number of countries reporting an increase in the number of women employed in finance departments; but there are some perceptions of institutional unfairness. Do you think that there are more women looking for jobs in this sector, or do you think that there is now an institutional bias towards hiring women?

Megan: No, I think more women are putting themselves into the position where they're seeking professional careers. They're obviously seeking that, and a lot of women are having families later in life; they need a good job, and career path. And accounting just lends itself pretty well to women. So I think that it's really more of a natural demographic increase, more than anything else.

Stuart: If women are in a workplace, and they believe that men are favoured when it comes to a promotion, what should they do?

Megan: You know, I think women need to approach it really positively. They should find out what they need to do to get the promotion, and we're talking more technical and soft skills, not talking about whether it's a male or female gender bias. They need to get feedback on what will stop them from getting the role, the promotion, from other candidates that might be in line. And they really need to demonstrate and show why they should get the promotion through specific examples, how they're adding value, what they can bring to the role. If they are going to ask about gender, make it a really impersonal question; so more along the lines of talking about the balance of the team in terms of gender, versus females pitting against a male counterpart.

Stuart: What about the reverse situation, if a man believes that his female colleagues are unfairly advantaged? How should he react?

Megan: I think, in exactly the same way. I just think you really have to take away the male / female piece, because I personally don't really think it exists. I think people are now really seeking the value of an individual.

Stuart: Affirmative action programs have been around for nearly 40 years now. Do you think that over that time, that we've seen any shift at all in the employment patterns of women versus men?

Megan: You know, I think women have definitely become more prevalent in the professional careers. I think one of the things that always held them back is that they didn't believe in themselves enough, and I think in a lot of cases, they didn't have enough mentors.

But you know, there are some very successful women in business now; and certainly, if a woman wants to be successful, there should be no obstacles in her way if she sets her mind to it.

Stuart: Globally, 59% of women surveyed believed that men earned more than women to do the same job. If women are in a workplace where they believe that men get paid more for the same work, what should they do?

Megan: You know, I don't see when I'm selling jobs here at Robert Half ... I don't see women getting paid less or more for the same job. What I do see is that women take themselves out of higher-paying jobs because of other choices that they make in their personal lives. So I tend to see this woman aspiring for more senior roles, more stressful roles, because a lot of women take the choice of having a family. So I never, ever get that question about paying more for a male or female; it comes back to specific skill sets, and the value that an individual brings to a role.

Stuart: What about those women who choose to pursue a career rather than a family? For those women, do you see that women are earning lower salaries than men?

Megan: No, I don't see that. I think it comes back to the actual skill set required for a particular job, and I do think that women need to learn to sell themselves better. What I do think is that they sell themselves short in a lot of instances. They don't talk about what they can bring to the role enough. And I think they just need to learn to promote and show what they can do, and women tend to undersell themselves.

Stuart: In a joint survey with the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, women in Singapore felt that they'd only achieve a promotion or salary increase by changing employers. What strategies can you recommend to women who are holding pay raise negotiations or undergoing performance reviews, so that they can improve their chances to get to the salaries or positions that they want?

Megan: It kind-of comes back to what I was just talking about: selling yourself and asking. Asking what you need to do to improve and what you need to do to actually reach the next levels; and I think a lot of women, because they don't go in and ask and don't really self-promote – they tend to hang back – that's when they don't get recognition.

Stuart: What advice can you offer to employers who want to retain their top female employees?

Megan: The biggest thing is communication. Sitting down with your top female employees and actually asking them, and talking pretty candidly about, what their career path and aspirations would look like if they were given their ideal opportunities. I just think we don't spend enough time doing that, and there is a unique component to women obviously with the family piece in there; but there are a lot of people now that are doing both. I think the other thing that employers need to do is make sure the women are getting mentors, appropriate mentors, so that they don't feel that they've been compromising their career aspirations.

Stuart: A perceived lack of work / life balance continues to be the major deterrent against women building a career in finance. What lessons do the results of the latest survey have for managers of finance and accounting workforces?

Megan: I think the lessons are that there's actually a lot of talented women in the accounting and finance sector; and I actually have come across a lot of female accountants that have been hugely successful and chosen to have a family, and they struggle to get back into the workforce, because they only want to work part-time in a lot of instances, and are trying to balance that piece out. I think organisations are really missing out on a huge piece of talent in the market; and I think that they can look at job-sharing, looking at how they can structure roles part-time to take advantage of getting the best talent out there, using technology and things, if they can utilise flexible hours for particular roles – you know, I just think a lot of organisations just instantly just miss a lot of these ideas and say it won't work, but have they really tried?

Stuart: Overall, what lessons can we draw for women wanting to carve out a career and be successful and gain promotion in finance and accounting?

Megan: I just think people need to communicate openly about career paths for women and what their aspirations are. I think women need to learn to sell themselves with confidence, and really have their peers and colleagues and mentors really encourage them to do that. I think women need to remove themselves from thinking about that there could be a gender difference; I think that's detrimental and negative thinking. I think women need to just think that they can do something if they set their sights on it, really. I also think that for women ... you know, I've been in a number of occasions where I was in a boardroom full of men, and I think some women can be a little overcome by that; and I just think it's a time for them to actually sit up and put their opinions across, let their ideas be heard and don't be intimidated by it. And I think it's really important for women to get a mentor above them who actually can understand the balance between looking for advancements in career and family life. The other thing I'd say is if a woman does want a career path, she probably needs to think about not being superwoman, so that she actually has a decent work / life balance and doesn't have to do everything.

Stuart: Should employers be doing more to combat unfairness and perceptions of unfairness in the workplace?

Megan: It's an interesting question. Perception is reality. So an employer never wants to have the brand reputation put into jeopardy. Really, really important that it is perceived that women have the same clear and equal opportunities as men, and vice-versa. So they should be always thinking about making sure that everyone gets a fair go based on their

skill set, about what they bring to the organisation. And I just think it's important that organisations make sure that career progression and promotions are open and effectively communicated at all levels; that it's perceived that everyone's getting a fair go.

Stuart: Megan Alexander, thank-you very much for your time today.

Megan: Thank-you.

Stuart: Thank-you for listening to the Robert Half Podcast Series. For more information on global employment opportunities and career advice, visit www.roberthalf.net.

End of Interview.