



Skillsmart Retail Analysis

The Retail Gender Agenda

January 2010

Executive Summary

UK retailing is a very attractive industry for both men and women to work in. As well as being fast moving and dynamic, it offers innate flexibility to suit lifestyle choices and the potential to develop transferable skills (customer handling, teamworking and problem solving).

Retail employment is fairly consistently split 60:40 between men and women. However, across the two major retail occupation roles:

- Just under two thirds (60%) of women work in customer service roles, whilst 13% work in managerial roles
- Just under half (47%) of men work customer service roles and 25% in managerial positions

Some commentators have described a 'glass ceiling'¹ or even a 'glass cliff'², which is hindering women progressing into more senior retail roles. However, this is not to say that women are not leading some highly successful retail companies, e.g. Kate Swann, CEO at WH Smith and Belinda Earl, CEO at Jaeger and Aquascutum.

Our desk research has identified some potential barriers to career progression in retail including:

- A lack of flexible and affordable childcare facilities
- The way that retail is organised and works
- A lack of female role models
- Recruitment practices
- Opportunities for retail boardroom experience

More positively, we identified specific attributes that women could bring to more senior roles such as:

- Multi-tasking abilities
- Interpersonal / caring / understanding skills
- Intrinsic appreciation of retailing

The retail sector has traditionally been, and still is, a flexible and accessible routeway into employment for women. However, the progression of women into the more senior roles in retail, suggests that it is not as accessible for women compared with their male counterparts.

¹ Glass ceiling: an invisible barrier that determines the level to which a woman or members of a minority to rise within an organisation. CIPD 2007

² Glass cliff: where women have taken on positions of leadership and often have experiences that are different from their male counterparts. More specifically, women are more likely to occupy positions that can be described as precarious and thus have a higher risk of failure - either because they are in organisational units that are in crisis, or because they are not given the resources and support needed for success. CIPD 2007

About Skillsmart Retail's Analysis Series

How we shop and where we shop is the source of countless headlines. Those who are employed in the sector and how they serve us also feature frequently in the UK press.

This series of reports is developed by Skillsmart Retail to provide readers with an in-depth analysis of the main business, employment and skills trends within the retail sector.

Skillsmart Retail is the Sector Skills Council for Retail. Part-funded by Government and led by retailers, it aims to be the recognised authority on retailers' skills needs and priorities. One of its core remits is to develop high quality labour market intelligence for the sector and evidence this work with insights into specific aspects of skills in the retail workforce.

If you would like to comment on any of the issues raised in this report, please contact Phil Mosley, Research Manager at phil.mosley@skillsmartretail.com, or telephone 020 7462 5070.

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1. Introduction

The impact of the 2008 economic downturn continues to be challenging for retailers. Therefore, the retail industry needs to have the right people in the right place to have the vision and leadership to take it through these difficult times so that it is in a good position when the upturn comes. As part of its role to ensure skills utilisation amongst the retail workforce is maximised, Skillsmart Retail has researched the issues behind why the retail shopfloor is traditionally dominated by female employees, but senior management roles in retail are predominantly held by men.

This report analyses the reasons for the disproportionate low representation of women at senior level in retail, and the issues that may be hindering career progression. We have investigated the role and impact of qualifications held; training undertaken; working patterns and occupational differences. Our approach was primarily desk-research using national datasets and included a literature review, as well as Skillsmart Retail's original research carried out in Northern Ireland on female employment (Skillsmart Retail 2006). Additionally, some of the other issues that may need to be considered will be highlighted, as advocated by Helen Alexander, President of the Confederation of British Industry, in a recent BBC interview³.

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8238508.stm>

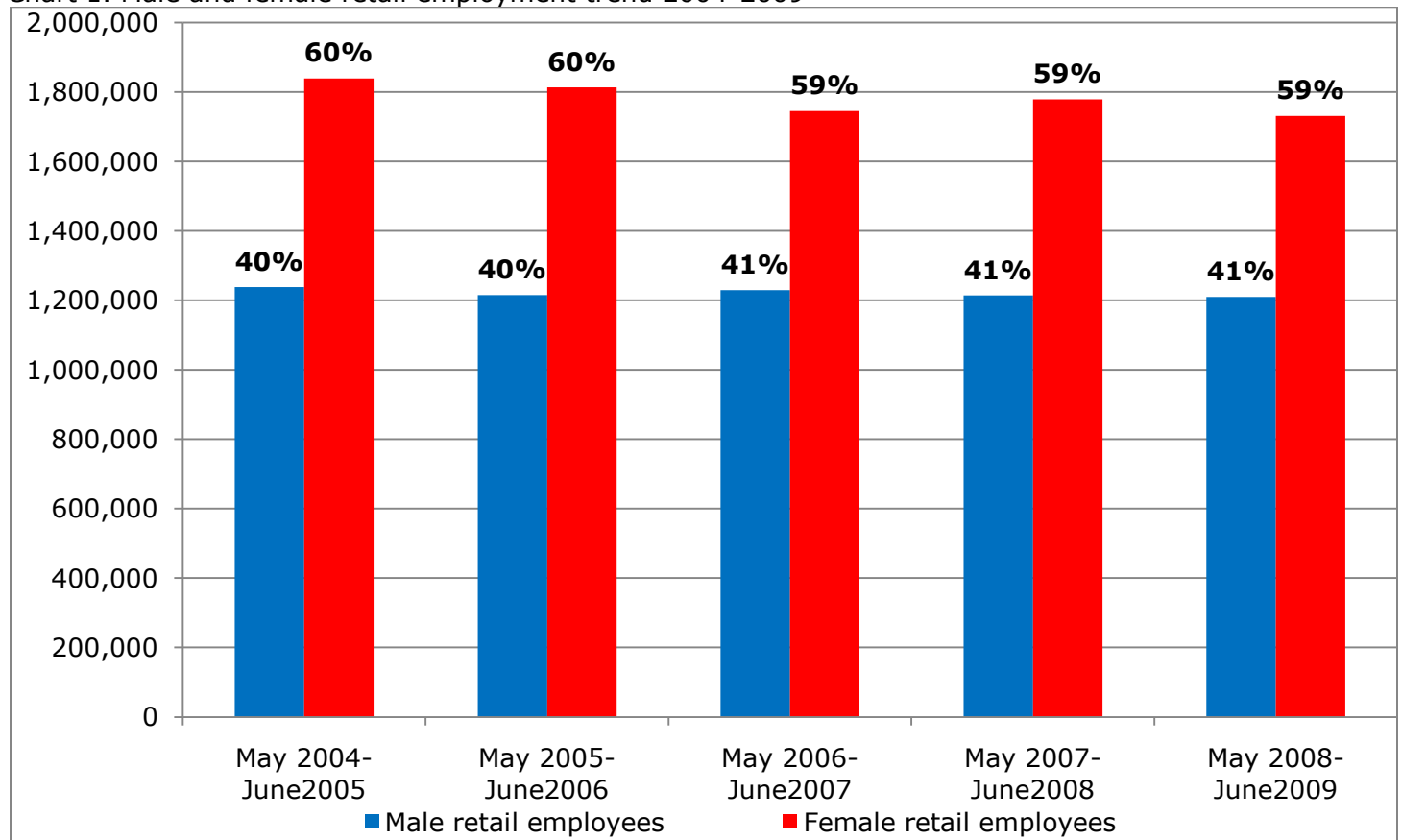
2. Background

The number of women employees working in retail over the past five years has been collected, using Labour Force Survey data published by the Office for National Statistics. The data details the number of women working in retail, the split of male and female employees, the occupations women assume in retail and the proportion of full-time and part-time working women across the UK.

2.1 Retail employee gender details

The overall picture over the past five years of retail employment is of a fairly consistent split between men and women. Chart 1 highlights the split between men and women workers over the past five years.

Chart 1. Male and female retail employment trend 2004-2009



Source: Labour Force Survey 2004-2009

The proportion of female to male workers remains, in this five year period, at approximately 60:40. This numerical division of employees in retail is a recurring theme, established since the 1990s according to the Annual Business Inquiry datasets⁴.

⁴ Annual Business Inquiry data, based on the Inter-Departmental Business Register.

Table 1 shows the proportion of men and women working in the UK nations and the English regions.

Table 1. UK Retail employee by gender 2008-2009

	Male %	Female %	Difference
England	41	59	+18
Wales	45	55	+10
Scotland	43	57	+14
Northern Ireland	42	58	+16
East Midlands	44	56	+12
East of England	44	56	+12
London	51	49	-2
North East	48	52	+6
North West	43	57	+14
South East	46	54	+8
South West	43	57	+14
West Midlands	46	54	+8
Yorkshire and Humberside	46	54	+8

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

The variation in the proportion of retail employees varies from +18% in England to +10% in Wales. The only region that differs from this general retail rule is in London, where male workers outnumber females. Further research may be required to uncover the full reasons behind this, but one possible reason could be the number of retail headquarters based in and around London which may offer greater job opportunities for male senior retail managers.

2.2 Retail employment by gender and occupation

The specific gender disparity within retail appears only when the occupational roles are highlighted, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. UK Retail employment by gender and job role 2008-2009

Occupation role	Male numbers	% male employees of workforce	Female numbers	% female employees of workforce	% Male role	% Female role	Role Difference
Managers and Senior Officials	307,558	25	232,922	13	57	43	-14
Professional occupations	35,350	3	22,720	1	61	39	-22
Associate Professional and Technical	50,967	4	89,192	5	36	64	+28
Administrative and Secretarial	42,916	4	133,902	8	24	76	+50
Skilled Trades Occupations	67,717	6	37,278	2	64	36	-28
Personal Service Occupations	1,632	0	5,250	0	24	76	+50
Sales and Customer Service Occupations	413,801	37	1,041,765	60	28	72	+44
Process Plant and Machine Operatives	81,797	7	15,657	1	84	16	-68
Elementary Occupations	207,705	17	152,328	9	58	42	-16
N/A and Other	445	0	158	0	74	26	-48
Total	1,209,886		1,731,171		41	59	+18

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

Across all of the retail occupation roles, 60% of women work in customer service roles, whilst 13% work in managerial roles. Just under half (47%) of male retail employee roles are within customer service roles and 25% in managerial positions.

When looking at each individual occupation role in retail, the differences by gender are highlighted. In sales and customer service positions, women dominate 3:1 but, although the gap is much smaller, proportionately there are more men than women in senior positions (3:2).

2.3 Retail working patterns by gender and occupation

In the retail sector, 49% of all employees work part-time, which is almost double the UK average. Table 3 shows the differences by gender.

Table 3. UK retail employment by gender and work pattern 2008-2009

	Male	% male	Female	% female	Total	% total
Full-time	826,791	68	674,704	39	1,501,494	51
Part-time	382,399	32	1,055,353	61	1,437,752	49
N/A or DNA	697	0	1,115	0	1,811	0
Total	1,209,886	41	1,731,171	59	2,941,057	

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

Nearly two-thirds of female retail employees work part-time hours, compared with only a third of men employees.

It is interesting to note that only 4% of all retail managers and senior officials work part-time as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. UK retail employment by occupation, gender and employment pattern 2008-2009

	Male Employees			Female Employees			Total Employees		
	Total employees	% working part-time of workforce	% part-time in role	Total employees	% working part-time of workforce	% part-time in role	Total employees	% working part-time of workforce	% part-time in role
Managers and Senior Officials	307,558	4	5	232,922	4	18	540,480	4	11
Professional occupations	35,350	1	8	22,720	1	41	58,070	1	21
Associate Professional and Technical	50,967	3	20	89,192	3	38	140,159	3	32
Administrative and Secretarial	42,916	3	25	133,902	6	48	176,818	5	42
Skilled Trades Occupations	67,717	2	13	37,278	2	52	104,995	2	27
Personal Service Occupations	1,632	0	8	5,250	0	63	6,882	0	50
Sales and Customer Service Occupations	413,801	60	56	1,041,765	73	74	1,455,566	69	68
Process Plant and Machine Operatives	81,797	4	18	15,657	1	62	97,454	2	25
Elementary Occupations	207,705	24	44	152,328	10	70	360,033	14	55
N/A or DNA	445	0	27	603	0	26	1,048	0	26
Total	1,209,886			1,731,616*			2,941,502*		49

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

* Difference in totals from previous tables is due to rounding of data.

The proportion of part-time managers and senior officials is split 5% male and 18% female. This distribution of part-time senior workers may be again related to retail's particular characteristic of flexibility. The highest level of part-time working occurs in sales and customer service roles (69%).

2.4 Retail qualification levels by gender and occupation

Tables 5 and 6 highlight the overall qualification profiles across the two main occupational roles in retail.

Table 5. UK retail managers and senior officials employment by gender and level of qualification

Managers and Senior Officials						
	Male employees	% males	Female employees	% females	Total employees	% total
Above level 2	203,283	72	154,273	72	357,556	72
Below level 2	77,868	28	60,124	28	137,992	28
Total	281,151		214,397		495,548	

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

The results show that nearly three quarters (72%) of retail managers and senior officials are qualified to Level 2 and above, across both genders.

Table 6. UK retail sales and customer service occupations employment by gender and level of qualification

Sales and Customer Service Occupations						
	Male employees	% males	Female employees	% females	Total employees	% total
Above level 2	270,713	71	567,062	59	837,775	63
Below level 2	110,872	29	390,430	41	501,302	37
Total	381,585		957,491		1,339,077	

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

Table 6 shows that in sales and customer service occupations, more male employees are qualified to Level 2 and above (71%), compared with female employees (59%).

It is of interest to note that the comparability in Level 2 qualification levels and above between male and female managers and senior officials is not replicated at the customer service level. Female employees in sales and customer service occupations have lower qualification levels than their male colleagues.

2.5 Training undertaken in the last 13 weeks

Table 7 shows that there is a small positive percentage difference between female managers and senior officials who have received some form of training in the past 13 weeks compared with male counterparts.

Table 7. UK retail managers and senior officials training in the last 13 weeks

Managers and Senior officials						
	Male	% males	Female	% females	Total	% total
Yes	47,500	15	43,589	19	91,089	17
No	259,632	84	188,554	81	448,185	83
N/A DNA	426	0	780	0	1,206	0
Total	307,558		232,922		540,480	

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

Table 8 shows that there is a small positive percentage difference between male sales and customer service staff who have received some form of training in the past 13 weeks compared with female counterparts.

Table 8. UK retail sales and customer service training in the last 13 weeks

	Sales and Customer Service Occupations					
	Male	% males	Female	% females	Total	% total
Yes	80,767	20	177,778	17	258,545	18
No	306,256	74	813,512	78	1,119,768	77
N/A DNA	26,778	6	50,279	5	77,057	5
Total	413,801		1,041,569		1,455,370	

Source: Labour Force Survey 2008-2009

The difference in training received in the past 13 weeks is not statistically significant.

2.6 The reality of retail

In summary, the retail sector can be viewed as a very attractive industry for both men and women to work in with flexibility of working hours to suit lifestyle choices and the ability to learn many transferable skills (customer relationships, team working, selling and health and safety) very quickly.

For a woman's career development, it has been hypothesised that there appears to be a 'glass ceiling' (CIPD 2007) or even a 'glass cliff' (CIPD 2007), which is hindering progression into more senior roles in retail. However, this is not to say that some women are not leading highly successful retail companies in January 2010, e.g. Kate Swann, CEO at WH Smith, Lisa Morgan, CEO at Game Group, Kate Bostock, Executive Director at Marks and Spencer, Belinda Earl, CEO at Jaeger and Aquascutum, Sara Weller, Managing Director at Argos and Angela Ahrendts, CEO at Burberry which has just joined the FTSE 100⁵.

To explore the reality of the gender split in retail in more depth, the 2009 report by Cranfield University School of Management illustrates the domination of men in the most senior roles in all industries. Of the FTSE 100 companies:

- 12% of boardroom seats are taken by women but 24 companies had no female representatives on their executive teams
- Of the FTSE 100 companies, seven listed companies are retailers. These retailers have 60 board positions, of which 22% (13 positions) are held by women.
- Of the 100 women to watch in the future for executive promotions within FTSE companies, nine of the named women currently work in retail.

Further evidence that men dominate the most senior posts in retail comes from Retail Week's 2009 Power List. Of the top 100 retailers in the list, just six are women. Only one woman is a new entrant on the 2009 list, compared with 39 new male entrants. Although not all individuals on the list are pure retailers (the list also includes retail headhunters and the Chancellor of the Exchequer) it does highlight the numerical differences at the most senior level.

Across the retail sector, the reality of the reversal of the gender split from the shopfloor to the boardroom could be viewed as a cause for concern. This is primarily due to the loss of specialist skills that women bring to senior positions. Additionally, there is also a case to be made about the highlighting and the potential dismantling of the barriers that are stopping women progressing to board level positions.

⁵ Jeff Randall interview with Angela Ahrendts. Sky Business Report. 21 September 2009

3. Key Issues

The following section details findings from academic and retail-specific literature on the barriers preventing female career progression. Additionally this section will also address some of the reasons why generic skills that females possess would be advantageous in retail's most senior positions.

An important observation that must be made before addressing these issues is that at no point did we find evidence that the lack of women's career progression within retail was due to overt discriminatory behaviour. Rather it was retail's traditions, culture and circumstances that seemed to make it more difficult for a woman to progress than a male worker, which in itself leads to unintended discrimination.

3.1 Reasons why women are not progressing to senior roles within retail

It can be argued that women have to make more significant and difficult choices than men in pursuing a working career. Issues such as what career to choose are problematic for both men and women, but whether to have a family can have an enormous impact on female career aspirations and lead to a refocusing of priorities (Denis-Jones & Kilgallen 2007).

It is interesting to note that the literature indicates that women in retail do aspire to senior / boardroom positions, but the actual take-up is influenced by the perception of how that new role could impact on their personal life. Thus, the majority of women in retail do not actively pursue these higher positions, even though they are just as qualified, Table 5, and have undertaken similar levels of training, Table 7 and 8, compared to men in retail.

However, some women in retail, Sara Weller being the most publicly documented on the balancing of family life and career (The Independent Business Section 2006), have managed to successfully manage the two factors, but they appear to be a rarity.

The available literature highlights the following points as potential barriers for women in retail moving to the most senior positions:

- Family responsibilities
Some commentators highlighted the issue of a significant lack of affordable childcare facilities that are flexible enough to fit in and around retail working hours. At the same time, the flexibility of a retail career does offer opportunities for optimising childcare arrangements. However, with seven-days working the norm in retail and five day childcare availability in nurseries, significant juggling of priorities is required to ensure the best match is reached (Broadbridge 2007).
- The way that retail is organised and works
The culture of retail is for often long and unsociable hours for employees working on the shopfloor (Broadbridge 2002). This is countered, however, by the amount of flexibility retail can offer to staff seeking to balance childcare, studying and other commitments (Sunderland 2009).

However, the hours associated with working in retail change the higher up the career ladder. Managerial and senior position staff are more office-based and, therefore, the work is more orientated to office hours (Broadbridge 2007). This in turn may bring a different set of challenges for women applying for these positions.

"The way work is organised at senior levels in retailing does not appear to be sympathetic to managers' family responsibilities and nothing is consequently being done to better accommodate family commitments by the working practices operating at senior levels." (Broadbridge 2007)

This suggests that where flexibility is greatest within retail – on the shopfloor – it acts as a major attraction for women. Skillsmart Retail explored this issue further in a qualitative study of employment practices in 41 retailers in Northern Ireland (Skillsmart Retail 2006). Women

interviewed in this research, who worked part-time in retail, indicated that the flexibility offered by retail enhanced their work-life balance. A further observation from the research was that part-time women in general have the personal attributes which provide very good customer care on the shopfloor.

"We only wish we could engage more part-time women, as well as having a natural flair they are hard working and generally more reliable." (Skillsmart Retail 2006)

However, with flexibility reducing on advancement into managerial positions, men start to dominate these positions compared with women.

- Retail culture

Results of some academic research suggests that retail management is an 'old boys club' and senior women can find it very difficult to gain access.

"I think male domination. Even though we don't mean to, we're pretty biased and bigoted in our outlook." male Managing Director (Broadbridge 2007)

An area that is difficult for women is the supposed monopoly that males have on networking opportunities (Broughton & Miller 2009). Women retail managers stress that networking is one of the main ways to keep progressing in a retail career - not what you know but who you know (Broadbridge 2004) but that the opportunities for these networking activities are rare. If opportunities arise for female networking, then they must be maximised at every possible opportunity.

- Female role models

The lack of female retail senior managers, highlighted in the earlier data from the FTSE 100 companies, gives an idea of the paucity of female role models. However, female entrepreneurs exist in retail, such as Michelle Mone founder and co-owner of MJM International Ltd, and Laura Tension founder of the maternity and toddler fashion business JoJo Maman Bébé, and other women can learn from their experiences.

- Recruitment

A common business practice is for managers to employ people in their own perceived image. Within the retail sector it can be hypothesised that employment characteristics have occurred with senior male managers recruiting male applicants (Denis-Jones & Kilgallen 2007, Broughton & Miller 2009, Sunderland 2009). This process of recruitment may make it more difficult for women to gain a foothold on the retail career ladder.

- Boardroom experience

Another common barrier exists for female retailers in the requirement for senior retail positions to have had previous boardroom experience (Sunderland 2009). This leads to a 'Catch 22' situation. Female retailers not on the board in their current employment cannot make the next step up on the career ladder into a board position without this experience. This means that without the resultant board experience, or without a suitable mentor to sponsor such board related activities/experience, then a position on the board may be out of reach. Additional opportunities for female retailers seeking boardroom experience could be gained through the work shadowing of directors, secondments into board positions and potential job sharing opportunities.

Coincidentally, the male domination of the boardroom may also lead aspiring women retailers to be put off by the challenge of working in a very male environment.

"If recruitment decisions sometimes favour men, this isn't going to change unless there are more women on the main boards. But the sheer amount of testosterone in the boardroom is likely to act as a deterrent to women". (Denis-Jones & Kilgallen 2007)

The highlighted barriers to women progressing to senior positions in retail are perhaps best summarised in a quote from Angela Broadbridge's work:

"The male dominance in the organisational hierarchy, lack of female role models and outdated attitudes to women's roles pose significant difficulties in women breaking through the glass ceiling into senior management. Furthermore some company cultures and a reluctance to change were in themselves barriers to women achieving senior management positions in retail".

3.2 Reasons why women should progress to more senior roles within retail

The following points illustrate the author's views on the positive effects that having more women in senior positions can have on retail businesses:

- Multi-tasking
It may sound a stereotypical statement to make about women, but they are typically better at multi-tasking than men. This attribute makes a woman a great asset to have in a retail senior position, where issues have to be quickly resolved on a daily basis.
- Interpersonal / caring / understanding skills
The ability of women to bring to the boardroom 'soft' skills, such as strong interpersonal skills, intuition and a more sensitive and caring approach (Brockbank & Traves 1996), allies itself to the demonstrable male skills of drive, self-belief and ambition. The joining of these skill sets of women and men in the retail boardroom can bring about a strong, focused and caring team.
- Fire-fighting roles
Women are seen, by some, as very good crisis managers due to their inherent multi-tasking, compassion, intuition and leadership skills (CIPD 2007). Therefore, women can use these opportunities to improve their standing within a company and thus increase their accessibility to achieving more senior positions. The following quote from Eleanor Roosevelt concisely portrays these opportunities:

"Women are like teabags: you don't know how strong they are until you put them into hot water".
- Women's retail knowledge
It is widely acknowledged anecdotally, and in the literature (Denis-Jones & Kilgallen 2007), that women love shopping. It can, therefore, be claimed that most women know more about retail than men. This puts women in a very strong position to bring this shopping knowledge and intuition into the boardroom and build this into the company's business intelligence.

The reasons why more women should seek and gain senior positions in retail, as highlighted above, are powerful levers for current retailers. It is vital that the right mix of gender is achieved in the most senior retail positions to maximise the benefits of complementary team skills and to improve the retailers' bottom line.

3.3 Skill issues

Two generic skill requirements can be highlighted as providing female employees with more opportunities for promotion. These are:

- Drive to succeed
The willingness of females working within retail to successfully 'go the extra mile' and 'take on additional duties' evidences drive and endeavour to succeed.
- Commercial acumen
The ability for retailers to learn about retail commercial acumen⁶ is based around the fundamental building blocks of understanding retailing. This involves the core skill areas of communication, customer service, team working and problem solving. However, the ability for a retailer to see an opportunity, grasp it and deliver a profit within the retail environment is almost an intangible training deliverable. It is down to the individual's ability, personality (playing it safe or taking a risk) and the desire to make a profit from the venture, rather than knowledge obtained in any specific training course.

The skill areas highlighted above are supported in new research by Skillsmart Retail (Skillsmart Retail, Autumn 2009). The results showed the top three skills, qualities and attributes currently lacking in store manager roles were:

- Entrepreneurial skills
- Commercial acumen/awareness
- Leadership skills/vision

Therefore, from this research, women retailers also need to have the skills highlighted above to access the more senior positions in retail.

⁶ Linking an insightful assessment of the retail business landscape with the keen awareness of how money can be made - and then executing the strategy to deliver the desired results.

4. Conclusion

This report has highlighted the gender profile of the retail sector in the UK. The retail sector has traditionally been, and still is, a flexible and accessible routeway into employment for women. However, the progression of women into the more senior roles in retail, based on the numbers of men and women in these roles, indicates that it is not as accessible for women compared to their male counterparts.

However, given the attributes and skills that women bring to senior retail positions, the right mix of female and male board members should help maximise business performance and individual fulfilment. But the correct mix of senior women must not be achieved at the cost of not getting the right candidate in the right role, i.e. avoiding positive discrimination, but recognised as a business benefit by embracing the diversity of skills needed at senior levels for best success.

Therefore, for more women to break into the male-dominated retail senior positions, it needs a shift in understanding of the current people in these senior positions. Predominantly male retail senior managers need to promote and / or support female employees with the right skills mix of drive, commercial acumen and ability, to achieve senior positions by pushing through the 'glass ceiling'. This will then demonstrate that with increasing flexibility, professional work and life choices can be equally balanced in retail's most senior boardroom positions.

The way forward

Our research has uncovered, and explored, some of the social, cultural and economic reasons why more females are not progressing to senior positions in retail. Further work may be needed to refine our understanding of what has proved to be a multi-faceted issue.

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