

ANALYSIS

Why is grocery still a boys' club?

There is no retail sector with a worse boardroom imbalance than grocery. **Ben Sillitoe** reports on how the industry can create a climate for change

There has never been a female chief executive or chair at any of the big four grocers.

The vast majority of household purchases are driven by women, yet this customer split is not reflected in the make-up of the major supermarket executive teams.

Last year, a study into gender diversity in retail aimed to understand why in an industry where 60% of the workforce is female and 85% of purchases are made or influenced by women, only 20% of exec teams and 10% of boards are female.

Among the conclusions from the research conducted by Women in Retail and Elixirr was the suggestion that the wrong culture exists in grocery. By developing a culture of inclusivity at the highest level, it said, retailers will inevitably diversify and prosper.

Debbie Robinson bucks the trend and, as managing director of Spar UK for the last six years, has overseen a period of consecutive year-on-year sales and profit growth.

Robinson, an ambassador of Retail Week's Be Inspired campaign, which aims to inspire and develop future female leaders, says "a diverse culture with flexible arrangements" is fundamental to changing the way boardrooms are formed. "There is something about the culture and environment we create that allows individuals to thrive – it's really important," she says.

The numbers don't lie

However, there is a dearth of women running the UK's big four grocers.

Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Asda all have just one woman in their executive team, all of whom are in charge of HR and people.

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The HR directors of Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Asda are the only women on their exec teams

Tesco, a retail partner of Be Inspired, has a trio of women on its executive committee.

Alessandra Bellini, the chief customer officer who was hired by the grocer from Unilever in March 2017, joined chief people officer Alison Horner and group communications director Jane Lawrie on its executive team.

Derya Yildiz, senior analyst at Kantar Retail, says: "The challenge for grocery retail is similar to that of the finance sector: loads of women employed in service roles, not enough women in decision-making roles."

This is a sad indictment for an industry that generally praises itself for its contribution to female employment.

The big four in particular invest in diversity and inclusion schemes such as mentoring programmes, maternity benefits and the promise of equal pay for equal work.

Justine Dinter, head of talent and inclusion at Tesco, says the grocer makes sure women are being considered for top roles and it insists on mixed shortlists from any headhunters when recruiting.

However, she is reluctant to put mandatory quotas in place for gender diversity. "We've chosen not to specifically have targets because it can drive the wrong behaviours."

"It can become just about the number without the sustainability behind it. The



narrative for us is that it's about everyone – whether that is specific characteristics or thinking styles.

"Everyone should be themselves in Tesco and everyone is welcome – it's not trying to call out a specific target on gender, ethnicity or anything else."

Making the breakthrough

If exec boardrooms are to welcome greater numbers of women in the future, logic would dictate that those women need to be progressing through the ranks today.

Dinter says: "We have definitely increased the number of females in the work level below the exec – we have high potential programmes for women coming through."

Examples of that in action at Tesco come in the form of Tracey Clements, who was promoted to managing director for convenience stores last year, Kari Daniels' role as commercial director in food and Claire Lorains, who is chief executive of Tesco Mobile.



Chief executive of Co-op Food Jo Whitfield

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Debbie Robinson, Spar

"I think there is enormous value-add [having female representation] around the whole product formulation, on-trending ingredients, how you package, merchandise and sell the product," Robinson explains.

One major change in grocery over the last decade has been the shift from families conducting one weekly supermarket trip to multiple visits, and a rising demand for convenience and online retailing. Shoppers are now less inclined to stick to one supermarket brand too.

"Shopping in an increasing variety of outlets is very much part of the female psyche of decision making," Robinson argues.

"The coping mechanisms consumers have found during this period of austerity bodes very well for business. I can see how these skills would translate well into the industry."

But for Robinson, the catalyst for change will be grocery decision makers understanding that diverse people and different approaches are crucial to forming the best teams, and consequently maximising profit margins.

"The real, best way to promote women and develop women in business is to put them in senior positions," she notes. "Make sure there is representation at all levels, including board level."

"Those leading in grocery need to be appreciative of different approaches to problems. The more diverse we are, the better results we will get." **RW**



Be Inspired

The Be Inspired annual conference takes place on November 14, and will be the largest Be Inspired gathering to date.

Speakers include Boots senior vice president and managing director Elizabeth Fagan,

Ikea UK and Ireland country manager Gillian Drakeford, Made.com chairperson Suzanne Given and Ao.com founder John Roberts. For more details visit: Beinspired.Retail-Week.com



Asda's Sean Clarke, Morrisons' David Potts, Tesco's Dave Lewis and Sainsbury's Mike Coupe

Meanwhile, Anna Barsby – an ambassador of Be Inspired – has just completed her first year as chief technology director at Morrisons, while the two most senior HR roles there are held by women.

At Asda, Judith McKenna has been touted as a future chief executive, previously holding the dual role of chief financial officer/chief operating officer. She has since become chief operating officer at Walmart US, and perhaps her time to take charge of the UK grocer will come.

Yildiz says: "Career progression remains a problem. There are very few female board members in grocery retail that have climbed the career ladder over the years."

"It seems more common for men to climb the ladder while women change companies to move up – although this is not unique to retail at all."

In July, however, Jo Whitfield made the step up from finance director to chief executive of Co-op Food, sending out a strong signal that there is a route to the top in supermarket retailing for women.

The Co-op is a retail partner of the Be Inspired campaign and Whitfield says it is a business that has many positive role models for female employees.

She says: "At the Co-op we have a great talent pipeline at all levels within the business and so have really good role models that encourage

others to succeed and help share experiences on how to progress."

"Helping individuals to build confidence and be authentic is essential to ensure talents are nurtured and encouraged. Businesses need to ensure a framework to spot great talent is in place and make sure that talent shines through."

Speaking at a recent Retail Week Be Inspired event, Peter Batt, divisional managing director for Co-op in the south of England, argued that "presenteeism" is UK grocery's biggest obstacle to gender balance.

For things to change, he said, there needs to be direction on this from the top. He explained how Whitfield attends her son's assemblies, for example, which paves the way for junior male and female colleagues to establish a similar work-life balance.

Whitfield remarks: "I hope that I can be useful and helpful for other women to step forward."

Customer-centricity

If retailers truly have the ambition to put the customer at the heart of their business, as many say they do, given that the majority of shoppers are women, logic would dictate there should be far more female representation in decision-making roles within retail.