

Emphasis on gender counterproductive to diversity: survey of company directors

BY **TATE PAPWORTH** ON 12 JANUARY 2016 4 MIN READ



The current notion of board diversity is too simplistic and may be stifling the search for talented directors, a study by Blenheim Partners and Macquarie University has claimed.

In a 72-page report of the challenges of attaining growth, the authors argue that the current diversity lens implemented by many organisations isn't achieving maximum diversity in thought and contribution due to the common backgrounds, experiences and education of directors, regardless of gender.

The authors found that many participants in the study said the discussion surrounding the diversity of boards is too focused on gender rather than employee background, with one director claiming the emphasis on gender was counterproductive to assembling a diverse group of people. For example, an accountant is an accountant and, whether a man or a woman, will have a similar background and education.

“We are obsessed with gender in this country, we need diversity of background, walks of life and geographies. This overemphasis on gender balance can lead boards away from what truly matters in terms of diversity,” the director said.

One participant went a step further, claiming that the push for gender balance on boards does nothing for ‘real’ diversity but instead maintains the homogeneity of boards, because those employed in similar fields tend to have the same, or very similar, backgrounds.

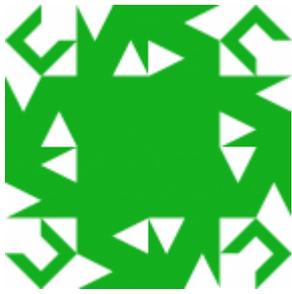
However, some participants argued that a gender balance was beneficial to creative thought and growth, with one senior chairperson and director suggesting that having at least two women on a board vastly changes the thinking process.

“Gender is an important part because I think it does, in my experience, change the conversation when you have at least two women on the board,” the chairperson said.

The study ultimately found that considering ideas, technology and perspective employees from a growth perspective will broaden the diversity debate from one fixated on gender, to one of opportunity for mass growth.

The study surveyed 80 CEOs, directors and chairpersons. According to [recent data](#) from the Australian Institute of Company Directors, the sample was therefore probably 80% male. All three authors of the study were male.

In the report’s foreword, David Gonski AC writes that, “even though boards are beginning to look to gender diversity it is important that they not only do that but also look for diversity of background generally. Such diversity is suggested to enhance the contribution of boards to the growth agenda of Australian companies.”



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