

# Mentoring: still the way ahead

Penny Avis, Deloitte partner turned author, looks at the future for women in accountancy based on her 20 years' experience in the profession

I started my career in the profession straight from university in 1989 and like many others, joined a Big Four firm as an accountancy trainee in audit. Back then there were no computers, internet, mobile phones or women partners in my office. I don't even remember any women wearing trousers to work. The intake in my year was a 50/50 split between men and women.

Today, we can dictate letters direct to computers using voice recognition software, make video calls on our mobile phones, find out anything about anyone in a few strokes of the keyboard and in most professional services firms, between 10% and 20% of the partners are women. The graduate intake is still a 50/50 split between men and women.

How have things changed for women in the profession over those 20 years? My view is they have changed hugely. I can distinctly remember the first day I wore trousers to the office. It was 1995 and I had just started my career in transaction services as a manager. There has also been the recognition of the need to provide coaching and mentoring specifically tailored to women, creation of all important women's networks and opportunities for flexible working.

## DIFFERENT TIMES, SAME CHALLENGES

Yet, in many ways, the challenges that women face are exactly the same as 20 years ago. Although I know the experience of others has been different, I have never felt discriminated against either by the firm or by my clients. To me the challenge has always been about whether what I wanted from life was actually possible. The classic 'Can I have it all?' dilemma is still, in my mind, the biggest challenge. I wanted a career and a family, without compromising either. And sometimes that felt about as likely as me becoming an astronaut in the next NASA space programme. We have had 20 years of equal recruitment between men and women and yet the representation of women at senior levels is below where most firms want it to be. I believe it is because too many women look at the lifestyles of those above them and simply say 'no thank you'. Having it all just doesn't seem possible to many people. Yes, there will be role models in most firms –

## Penny Avis

Until May 2009 Penny Avis was a corporate finance partner at Deloitte, where she qualified as a professional accountant. She spent two years on the Deloitte UK board and was the youngest partner to manage a FTSE 100 client account. She was also the communication partner for the Corporate Finance division and a lead partner in the Deloitte Women's Network.

Avis is currently taking a career break from Deloitte and is now co-author of the fiction book series *Never Mind the Botox*, about four professional women – a lawyer, accountant, doctor and banker – all working on the sale of a cosmetic surgery business.



In the *Never Mind the Botox* series, Avis says the story of corporate financier Rachel Altman is the closest to her real-life career.

women who successfully manage a career and a family. But in my experience, just being in the firm was not enough. I needed to know them personally, be able to hear their stories and ask their advice. I needed a personal connection with them, to be inspired by them, for it to make a difference. I was lucky enough to be close to some of those types of role models. They taught me how to promote myself, plan my career, guided me through having children and made me believe that I could have a career and a sensible work/life balance. And they were right. They gave me a vision that it was possible.

Not enough women in the profession today have that vision. All the courses, training and flexible working options in the world will never replace the impact of being mentored by a woman who has been there before. This places a huge responsibility and burden on senior women. And this is much more than simply being 'held out' as a good case study for others to aspire to. In my view, unless you have a personal relationship, your influence on the career choices of others will be minimal and this is where the majority of the diversity effort needs to be focused. Yes, it's a huge ask. Yes, the senior women might be spread pretty thinly, but it will yield the best results. So what does the future hold? The support and opportunities for women will continue to advance and ever more creative flexible working opportunities will evolve, supported by mind-boggling technological advancements. But real change will, in the end, be driven by wise women sharing their experiences with those coming up behind them, as it has been since the days of the cave man.