



**Kinks in the hosepipe: A case study of managing gender equality in an SME**

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## Kinks in the hosepipe: A case study of managing gender equality in an SME

### Abstract

<b>Purpose</b>	This paper explores the real life examples made by a single SME to address organisational inequalities and develop a more inclusive culture.
<b>Design / Approach</b>	This paper considers the approach taken by Punter Southall Aspire to manage their gender balance through a case study of documents, policies, and interviews.
<b>Findings</b>	There is still plenty of work to do, but the multiple actions taken by the leadership have been positive, well-received, and importantly progressive. By taking a focused approach to manage gender equality within an SME, the outcome has been far reaching.
<b>Originality / Value</b>	By showcasing the leadership and positive action within a single SME we hope other organisations are able to take inspiration to make their own changes.
<b>Keywords</b>	Gender Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, SDG 10, Leadership
<b>Paper type</b>	Case study

### Introduction

The *HM Government's Gender equality at every stage: a roadmap for change report* (GEO.GOV.UK, 2020), positioned the argument for gender equality as an imperative for shaping a shared future together for economic growth and prosperity. In recognising life outside of work, particularly focusing on the balancing of caring responsibilities, alongside the aspiration of a rewarding career gave way to understanding the implications of this from a gender perspective. The under representation of women across the workplace holds back talent that can provide diversity of thought and skills for enhancement in the workplace. It needs to be recognised that despite performing higher than men in education (DfE, 2018), a woman is three times more likely to be in a part-time role than a man (ONS, 2019). This acts as both a direct contributor to them experiencing reduced career progression; and settling for occupations in sectors that pay lower wages (Costa Dias et al., 2018). The accumulative result is that women are being paid less than men and with lower pensions wealth (ONS, 2019).

The status in UK PLC reflects all industries UK Gender Pay Gap at 15.4% ranking 23<sup>rd</sup> (WEF, 2021), with neighbours such as Germany, France, and Ireland ahead of it. The UK financial and insurance industry has the largest gap however at 30% (STATISTA, 2021). The Government supported the independent, voluntary, and business-led Hampton-Alexander Review to increase the representation of women in senior leadership positions and on boards of FTSE 350 Companies, from 2016-2020. From 2011 to 2021, a rise from 9% to 34% of women now serve on FTSE 350 boards with a further 30% of women holding leadership roles (FWLR, 2021).

While great strides have been made in the corporate world, the SME sector, which accounts for 99.9% of the business population and three-fifths of the UK business employment overall (DfBEIS, 2021), has

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3 demonstrated lower business dynamism in the lead up to the pandemic than before the Great  
4 Financial Crisis (ERC, 2020).  
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6 Managing equality in the workplace has often been likened to taking the kinks out of a hosepipe so  
7 the water runs freely. If the workplace is going to progress, they need to attract, recruit, train,  
8 promote, include, ally and champion women so their route to the top is frictionless and consistent  
9 with men's experience. This can align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 concerning the  
10 reduction of inequalities in society, specifically targeting 10.2: "By 2030, empower and promote the  
11 social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin,  
12 religion or economic or other status" (UN SDGs, n.d.). The case study here focuses on gender  
13 inequality in particular and heightens how leadership in the investment and savings industry is working  
14 to promote more inclusive cultures (Butler and Smith, 2021).  
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### 17 **Company**

18 This paper provides a deep dive case study into Punter Southall Aspire an SME in the investment and  
19 savings industry. The business is made up of 150 people based across six office in the UK who provide  
20 employee benefit consulting and retirement advice for employees to over 1000 corporate clients. The  
21 business has a 50/50 gender split, although the senior management and client facing roles are male  
22 dominated. It could be argued that this is reflective of the sector in which it operates which has  
23 historically been dominated by white, privately educated, males (Mercer, 2017). However, over the  
24 last three years the business leadership has made a conscious effort to change, and this case study is  
25 a snapshot of its position on that journey.  
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### 30 **Management Structure**

31 One of the most significant challenges the company faced was tackling the under-representation of  
32 female employees in the leadership/ management structure (Stefanovic and Barjaktarovic, 2021). To  
33 address this, in 2019 they replaced the existing executive committee of eight senior male managers  
34 with seven operational committees that included representatives from across the business. This led  
35 to more diverse, multigenerational teams contributing to the leadership and business strategy,  
36 reduced risk (Cumming et al., 2015) and participation from women at management-level operational  
37 committee meetings increased from 0% to 38%. Women taking part in the new style of management  
38 meetings said that having their voices heard and valued has opened a door. Many have fed back that  
39 being involved in these meetings has increased their confidence and participating in decision-making  
40 has broadened their horizons.  
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### 44 **Senior Managers**

45 Despite the change in management structure, the senior managers are all males. To manage this issue  
46 on the short term the business set up a reverse mentoring scheme (Gadomska-Lila, 2020) for senior  
47 male managers and more junior female employees. The idea was for them to learn from each other  
48 by gaining insight into a different generation/culture and finding out more about practices or ideas  
49 from someone outside their typical circle. The pairs met virtually, every four to six weeks, and came  
50 together once a year for all participants to review their experience and set the objectives for further  
51 programmes.  
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55 Reflecting on the experience, senior managers stated they learnt from their female mentor about  
56 things that their customers and employees might be experiencing, feeling, believing, or liking which  
57 significantly influence their approach to management. In the mentor role, women participants stated  
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3 that they gained visibility into the issues the senior management team faced, providing them with  
4 valuable knowledge to help progress their own careers.  
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7 At the same time as the reverse mentoring, the business recalibrated the senior manager bonus  
8 structure so that 30% of their potential bonus would be dependent on achieving diversity and inclusion  
9 objectives. Historically, their discretionary annual bonus had been solely linked to revenue and profit  
10 targets. By adding these objectives, it forced managers to think harder about how they were going to  
11 achieve them and encouraged them to act sooner.  
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14 An example objective: *Have a one-to-one meeting with every female employee benefits consultant in*  
15 *the division to discuss their medium-term career ambitions and implement a learning and development*  
16 *plan for realising those ambitions.* This objective has not only elevated the importance of women's  
17 career choices but has also created a formal platform for female employees to raise their profile with  
18 their senior manager, further helping their career. This balanced the fact that men had historically  
19 used their networking time in the pub or social situations to connect with senior managers, providing  
20 them with an unseen advantage.  
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### 23 **Middle Managers**

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25 Although the gender split of the middle managers was 50/50, the business experience was that middle  
26 managers often inadvertently become a blocker to change, usually through lack of knowledge or not  
27 understanding how their actions are perceived. To address this, they implemented monthly manager  
28 networks to discuss and agree best practice around management techniques through a D&I lens. The  
29 previous month they discussed menopause, collectively watching videos about the challenges of  
30 menopause in workplace and discussing best practice about how they could support employees going  
31 through the menopause (CIPD, 2021). They concluded the need to keep an open mind and avoid  
32 making assumptions about someone's condition or how it may be affecting their ability to do their  
33 job.  
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### 36 **Meetings**

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38 To create a more inclusive environment, the business implement a change to management and project  
39 meetings (Mroz et al., 2018), they begin with a sign in where each attendee takes a minute or two to  
40 update the others on what's happening in their life, particularly their personal development and  
41 wellbeing. Although there was some hesitance at first, everyone has fully embraced the approach, not  
42 least because it signals that the priority of the business is the welfare of the people. Participants felt  
43 that starting the meeting with a personal reflection broke down any reserve and set the tone for the  
44 meeting, when they reached the business section, colleagues were much more transparent and  
45 responsive, and the meetings were far more productive. Both men and women stated that it has  
46 broken down the macho approach that's so common in finance businesses, where sales and profit are  
47 the beginning, middle and end of meetings.  
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### 50 **Company Event**

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52 During the national lockdown, as an alternative to a physical staff conference the business hosted a  
53 daily one hour online event over the course of a week attended by the whole business. The objective  
54 was to open the conversation about all aspects of diversity and inclusion, with each day focused on a  
55 different element of diversity awareness including mental health, gender, disability, ethnicity, and age.  
56 Each hour included a pre-recorded video of someone's own lived experience, a presentation about  
57 the challenges and issues they have faced, and a panel discussion about how different challenges can  
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3 be overcome. The week was entirely hosted by staff from within the business involving 30 different  
4 employees over the week. Despite the restrictions of COVID the event brought the whole business  
5 closer together. Collectively hearing the unedited personal lived experiences of colleagues from a  
6 broad cross section of the group meant employees all felt the intimacy of their stories and could not  
7 fail to empathise with everyone involved.  
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10 Feedback from the week included many individuals stating how proud they felt working for a company  
11 willing to have these open conversations, how connected they felt to their colleagues and a real  
12 passion to embrace an inclusive culture. Participants appreciated the opportunity to have a platform  
13 to share their stories and receive acknowledgement from their colleagues about the challenges they  
14 have faced. It has established a culture of inclusion within the business where staff are much more  
15 willing to celebrate difference and challenge historical ways of working.  
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### 18 **Flexible working**

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20 Some line managers had historically resisted flexibility; however, the COVID crisis proved employees  
21 can operate remotely and the business has adopted a hybrid working philosophy which would have a  
22 positive effect on women in the business (Krausz and Freibach, 1983). The approach included:  
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- 25 - The CEO championing flexible working, setting the vision that 100% of employee will have  
26 implemented flexible working arrangement by end of 2021.
- 27 - Flexible working arrangements considered to be reason neutral.
- 28 - Line managers designing flexibility into jobs as standard.
- 29 - Managers networks supporting managers to build their capabilities to manage flexible and  
30 dispersed teams.
- 31 - Current flexible arrangements being reviewed in 2022 to ensure they are still working and  
32 appropriate for individuals.
- 33 - The London office being redesigned as a hybrid working space as a 12 month trial to support  
34 flexible working practices.  
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38 Early on in the national lockdown, the manager network meeting discussed the potential bias that an  
39 ordinary worker is a man (Hari, 2017). Managers agreed that they need to encourage staff to agree a  
40 daily agenda with their partners that allows childcare shifts to be agreed around work. In addition  
41 times of the day identified with their manager that an employee is not available, with managers  
42 focussing on productivity rather than number of hours worked. This approach has continued post  
43 lockdown.  
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### 46 **Recruitment & Promotion**

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48 Historically, the lack of structure and HR policies has meant that everyday business practices have  
49 perpetuated the limited ability for women to be recruited and promoted within the business. The  
50 company has now redesigned and implemented a complete role grading, title and profile framework  
51 providing everyone with the opportunity to understand career paths throughout the business and  
52 have the opportunity to change paths as appropriate roles become available. All roles are advertised  
53 internally before any external recruitment starts.  
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### 56 **Conclusion**

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59 The case study focus here highlights a real-life example of attempts to address organisational  
60 inequalities (and thus contributing towards the achievement of SDG 10.2). It has not been easy and

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3 there is still plenty of work to do, but actions have been generally positive, well-received, and  
4 importantly progressive. By taking a focused approach to lead and manage gender equality within an  
5 SME, the outcome can be far reaching. The inspirational leadership approach has progressed to a  
6 holistic creation of HR processes and a renewed culture. This highlights that, with the ability to activate  
7 senior leaders within the business and the empowerment of managers with a renewed sense of focus,  
8 transformational change can happen within all levels of the business and can further impact industry  
9 level change. We hope other organisations and industries can take inspiration from such an SME  
10 example of practice.  
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