The Boardwalk Women on Boards report examines attitudes to Board recruitment and retention six months after the Davies report. The 500 women included in this survey were drawn from a wide cross section of industrial sectors and profiles of business. This is one of the few surveys incorporating responses from the private, public and third sector as well as large PLCs and smaller enterprises. Respondents were approached through generic and industry specific networks; the representation of sectors in the sample demonstrates where women felt this survey was an important contribution to the Board diversity discussion.

43% of respondents came from SMEs and 48% were employed in larger businesses, with the remaining from micro enterprises. Respondents came from a broad section of sectors; 35% from the charity and social enterprise sector, 33% worked for the public sector 28% were self-employed and 6% from family firms. 36% of respondents had previously applied for a board position, with just under half of that number having been rejected, 39% had previously held a board position. Even within this diverse range of respondents, this research demonstrates the lack of access to board positions for women across sectors and business types.

Why women don’t apply for Board position
Ambition does not hold women back from Board positions, but confidence and perceived lack of support is a problem. 68% said they lacked confidence their applications would be seriously considered and did not apply for Board roles and 48% cited lack of support (personal and professional). Women have skills that are valuable to Boards, but because they are not packaged in a readily accessible manner this creates barriers to appointments. On the other side perhaps boards lack the creativity to recognise how to tap into the diverse skills held by women.

The views towards Board diversity indicated an overwhelming divide between capabilities and opportunities.
Attitudes towards Board diversity

72% of respondents felt there was not a clear route to board positions for women and 83% felt there was a need to change organisational culture to create a more conducive environment for female progression. Despite holding sufficient experience and qualifications, 79% of respondents felt women needed to be more assertive when approaching Board positions. The majority of women have a contradictory response to the issue of women on boards, there is not a clear route and the culture needs to adapt, but an equal number of women recognise they can be catalysts and are responsible for initiating change by being more assertive. So what’s holding them up?

Barriers to women being appointed onto Boards

71% described a lack of champion at Board level inhibiting appointments, and 53% cited having an insufficiently high profile. The portfolio of a woman’s career as a result of ongoing flexibility is beneficial to the diversity agenda, but this appears to limit their attractiveness during board recruitment. One major strand emphasised the lack of succession planning, this needs to happen for women at the middle management level. 68% of respondents did not have a mentor supporting their board aspirations. Furthermore, the high profile women are not creating opportunities or taking enough action on championing other women and resulting in a very limited talent pool.

Aspirations for leadership

How do women want to lead? The overwhelming response to the question about personal leadership aspiration, demonstrated a commitment to the growth and health of their organisations. They are committed to finding new models for promotion and profitability. They are committed to succession planning through mentoring and opportunities to create visibility for women.

Our recommendations

It is critical to connect Board aspiration with Board opportunity.

- Leadership Board training needs to focus on succession planning:
  - The time line should focus on getting middle management onto leadership training programmes.
  - Leadership development training needs to focus on motivating high visibility women in their mentoring of others.
- We need to encourage inter-disciplinary mentoring schemes involving highly visible women supporting women in other sectors.
- Invest in Board diversity initiatives with a focus on board ready training and behaviour change for Boardroom culture.
- More awareness and knowledge share on across sectors of how successful companies utilise performance assessment tools to assess the impact of Board diversity.