

Women Breaking Into Corporate Boys' Club

By [Rachel Nielsen](#)

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Getting in the door: A lack of experience among Russian businesswomen, outright discrimination and other factors make the ranks of women small indeed at the top echelons of Russian business. **Andrei Makhonin**

When Coleman Services fills a top executive position for one of its clients, the recruitment firm sometimes gets a special request: Don't give us a woman.

If the firm knows of women qualified for the post, "we often try to persuade our clients to consider females," Olga Bantsekina, head of Coleman Services in Russia, said in a recent interview. "But often we hear, 'No, we don't want to.'"

With outright rejection of female corner-office seekers, a lack of big-business acumen among women, a Russian belief in male and female jobs and time lost for childbirth and childcare — to name just a few factors — it is no surprise that the number of women in the top ranks of Russian business is slim.

Interviews with executive headhunters and female executives suggest that the Russian boardroom is a boys' club that is just beginning to open to the girls. Yet, some trends are beginning to work in women's favor.

When it comes to the representation of Russian women in corporate leadership, the numbers speak for themselves. Among 50 major Russian public companies, men hold 93 percent of the board seats, according to a February 2011 analysis by Board Solutions, a Moscow-based executive placement firm. That compares with men holding roughly 84 percent of board seats in the United States, 84 percent in Britain and 75 percent in Sweden, according to September 2011 figures reported earlier this year in *The Economist*.

Board Solutions managing partner Yaroslav Glazunov said companies in Russia and elsewhere aren't opposed to appointing women to board seats. "The key problem is that there's a deficit of qualified women," he said in an interview.

In addition to board spots, the positions of chief executive and its Russian-business equivalent, general director, are rarely held by women. The same goes for presidents, managing directors, members of supervisory boards and deputy directors here. This is the case at both domestic companies and Russian divisions of foreign firms.

"In Russia, women who are CEOs are extremely, extremely few," Glazunov said.

In a telling example, the Russian chapter of the Young Presidents' Organization, a global association for corporate chiefs under age 45, has just over 40 members here, all of them are male, noted Glazunov, who himself is a member.

The group is trying to increase the number of women in its ranks, Glazunov said, but "it is very hard to find a woman who has experience in CEO positions."

Getting in the Door

Winning an interview for a top spot, of course, is a critical part of competing for such a job. The heads of two large recruitment firms interviewed for this article said companies sometimes openly indicate that they don't want their top job filled by a female.

Those recruitment chiefs said they have witnessed such situations firsthand, as well as secondhand from their recruiters.

Staffwell chief executive Teri Lindeberg said companies have told her that a vacant executive spot should be filled by a man.

"I've definitely heard at meetings, 'Oh, we really think a man would be best for this job,'" she said.

"But there's obviously a subliminal thing they are telling us there, which is probably that they see a man going into that role," she said.

Even Western companies in Russia have made such comments, she said. It might be politically incorrect in the home country, but "they can get away with it here," she added.

Lindeberg believes that only “a minority” of companies excludes potential employees by gender.

Coleman Services’ Bantsekina estimates that up to half of the firm’s client companies seeking a high-level executive — general directors, their deputies, board seats and similar roles — say they don’t want a female in that spot.

“But it doesn’t mean that the other 50 [percent] will take a woman,” Bantsekina added. A company might not state a preference by gender, but “they keep it behind a curtain,” she said. The rejection of qualified candidates because they are women happens at foreign divisions and Russian-owned companies.

Both Lindeberg and Bantsekina said their hands are tied if such companies — clients who are paying them fees to find executives meeting their internal corporate criteria — refuse to interview female candidates.

In some cases, Lindeberg said, if there are many accomplished women in the company’s sector, the Staffwell recruiters might make a case to the client about the solid candidates it is overlooking.

Only “rarely” does a company turning away women interview or hire a woman, Bantsekina said.

In some cases, companies have kept a position open rather than consider the capable, but female, applicants that Coleman had found.

It Depends

In sharp contrast, Glazunov said that, in the past three or so years, he hasn’t had a company reject female candidates or hint at wanting only men. “Businesses need practical value,” he said.

There might be a few factors that preclude Glazunov’s clients from rejecting female job-seekers. He said 80 percent to 90 percent of the top managers he proposes to clients are male. In turn, he attributes those figures to far fewer female top executives in the market. Glazunov also said his firm places extremely high-level executives.

He believes that the higher-powered corporations focus on merit, not gender. For example, IBS, a major Russian IT company, named Svetlana Balanova general director earlier this year.

Many other firms recruit a range of levels: Staffwell places middle- to high-ranking professionals, and Coleman Services recruits and places staffers in a range of support jobs.

However, the heads of the other firms have ample experience: Bantsekina has worked in human resources for about 15 years and is the chairman of the human resources committee for the Association of European Businesses, and Lindeberg has about 15 years in recruiting.

Research has pointed to a general bias, as well. Vedomosti reported last year, citing the Higher School of Economics, that for nine out of 10 vacancies, managers know ahead of time what gender an employee for a particular job “should be.”

Cultural Factor

Russian cultural beliefs about the strengths and weaknesses of each gender also factor in.

“In Russia, the mentality is that it’s easier for men to conduct business with men,” Wilhelmina Shavshina, legal director for global law firm DLA Piper in Russia, said in an interview.

Olga Gadetskaya, a physics graduate of Moscow State University, worked her way up from receptionist to one of the top human resources managers for PepsiCo in Russia.

In 2005, she joined Henkel — the maker of Persil laundry detergent and Schwarzkopf shampoo — where she is human resources director for Henkel’s Russian unit and its 2,500 employees.

She said in an interview that Russian women are “strong, tough and pretty much able to replace men in all positions,” a reflection of Russia’s war-torn history.

She believes that men climb the career ladder more easily, however, because they are “more rational, more ready to fight” than women. That is probably the main reason that men dominate top business positions here, she said.

Biology Barriers

Yet Gadetskaya said “we never consider gender as the deciding factor” at Henkel Russia, not even for jobs with a mostly male talent pool, such as plant manager or chief engineer.

She also noted that women dominate some fields, such as human resources. When The Moscow Times asked if any of her HR employees are men, she replied, “I had one, and he somehow disappeared.”

In the climb to the uppermost corporate rungs, childcare can also be a barrier.

A number of people interviewed for this article emphasized that top-performing women limit the amount of time they take for maternity leave.

Some women avoid having children in order to avoid interrupting their careers, while others have their children at the earliest stages of their careers or at a later point when they have more job security and higher salaries.

Bantsekina said many of the top-ranking businesswomen she knows “either gave birth to their children very early or very late” in life.

As Russian companies become more global in their practices, however, the barriers for women seeking presidencies and other top spots could begin to fall.

With some Russian businesses striving toward global standards to attract foreign investors and capital, the emphasis on merit bodes well for women, as does the use of generous retention practices.

At Henkel, for example, the company covers the difference between the Russian government's payment for maternity leave — it reimburses salaries up to about \$1,000 a month — and the employee's salary from Henkel.

Next Rung

In addition, both the government and Henkel allow 140 days of paid maternity leave and let employees take up to three years away from work. Henkel's Russian employees typically use one year or less, Gadetskaya said.

DLA Piper's Shavshina said mothers working at her firm receive a lot of support. "A company of our level helps and even stimulates the development of your career," she said.

Glazunov thinks there is "an evolution" happening for women.

"The situation is completely changing," he said, pointing to female CEOs at U.S. companies Hewlett-Packard, PepsiCo and DuPont. He also noted Russian companies such as investment firm UralSib, where two of the seven board directors are women, and airline Transaero, whose general director is a woman.

Glazunov said it is possible for women to win more executive positions in the next 10 or 20 years — "if women show initiative, take risks and get out of their comfort zones."

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